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What Blended Learning Looks Like

| By Ron Kordyban and Shelley Kinash |

When painting a landscape, artists have a wide variety of hues and colours on their palette from which to mix and blend until the perfect combination is discovered to capture the meadow's deep green and the lake's shimmering blue. Educators have a metaphorical palette of technologies to best capture the ever changing educational landscape of the 21st Century. There are wider selections of teaching models, methods, modes and tools than ever before.

Blended learning is about such a selection and combination, as teachers balance tried and true pedagogies with new and exciting digital approaches. The concept of blended learning has been an elusive term to define and is often accompanied by sweeping generalisations, fear, resistance and technological determinism (a dubious belief in cause and effect). Perhaps misunderstandings are heightened because there are so many different elements that can be blended and in a non-linear, chaotic manner.

This article addresses a gap in the literature by defining blended learning and describing concrete, practical examples that are taking place in universities today.

Blended learning is the combining of face-to-face and online education in an aligned and interdependent manner. Digital videos, lecture streaming, eAssessment, ePortfolios, serious games and podcasts are not blended learning. Lecturing, student break-out groups, seminars, blogs and discussion forums are not blended learning. However, when these tools and approaches are thoughtfully selected, designed and combined to promote student learning outcomes, engage students and contribute to the overall student learning experience, blended learning has been achieved. Blended learning is the process, outcome and result of what modern students and academics do with learning objects in the mutually interdependent contexts of online and face-to-face modalities. Blended learning involves aligning teaching methods, learning activities and other elements – such as assessment, timing and content – appropriately, depending on the learning mode and the diverse contexts and needs of the students.

It is a sunny Thursday and a student walks to her first year Chemistry class at Bond University listening to a podcast on her iPod which she downloaded from her subject's online site after reviewing this week's digital resources. The eight-minute recording, which her professor made, is just the perfect length for her walk from home, if she walks by the river. By the time she arrives to class, her *homework* is complete and she is ready to actively participate in the class discussions.

In this example of entry-level blended learning, the face-to-face and online contexts are integrated in such a way that they work together to enhance and enrich the learning process. Without listening to the podcast or reviewing the other resources online, the student would be less able to meaningfully contribute to the in-class discussions with her peers, or participate in the related experiments. Yet without those discussions and experiments, the theory given out in the podcast would not be reinforced or applied. An interdependent synergy of integrating the online with the in-class teaching has allowed for better and more meaningful learning.

Across the campus, a Law professor facilitates a virtual classroom for class on mediation using Blackboard Collaborate, an online platform which allows student interaction, voice-to-voice same-time communication and sharing. As well as engaging in instant text messaging, giving presentations and sharing documents and applications, the professor directs the students to break out into virtual small group rooms where they role play the opposing sides of a dispute as well as practice playing the role of mediator. The various concepts and principles studied that week in the face-to-face lecture and tutorials are tested and applied in an online simulation of an actual mediation. The professor moves about the virtual group rooms, listening and providing feedback where needed. In addition, the Collaborate sessions are recorded which allows for self and peer reflection, revision and review.

Here we can see the interdependence of the online and face-to-face elements, as well as how the professor aligned the teaching activities to the choice of venue. In this example, the choice of delivering lectures in the on-campus classes and tutorials allowed for a personal and interactive Socratic exchange, while the choice of an online virtual learning platform for the application allowed for setting-up quick and private group rooms and seamless teacher monitoring which would not have been possible in a traditional lecture hall with fixed forward facing seating and a plenary based layout.

Inside his dorm room, a student types passionately on his laptop. He is participating in an online discussion board about the ethics of euthanasia for his third year Philosophy subject. This asynchronous forum has attracted numerous students whose posts have reached an exciting and vigorous level of academic debate. This online discussion supplements the face-to-face communication which will occur later in the week in the small tutorial of 10 students. Some students participate more actively in the online than the face-to-face discussion, while others prefer the smaller tutorial exchanges.

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The online forum seems to attract a greater diversity of student personality and a more thoughtful, rigorous argument since there is more time to research and reflect. Many international students, and particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds, gravitate towards the online discussion.

In this example, we see how blended learning can cater to learning diversity as well as offer more equal opportunities for active participation to a wide spectrum of different learner types. The described activities involved a degree of interdependence, not only in levelling the participation playing field for diverse learners, but also in terms of providing both academic depth more typical of asynchronous forums with the energy and vitality of a face-to-face debate.

Behind the sandstone walls of a large lecture theatre, a professor conducts a lecture on Digital Technologies. Students actively participate in the real time Twitter feed, tweeting comments, questions, adding resources and links and in general contributing to the pulse of the learning lifeblood. Whether it be a hand raised in class, or a tweet posted under a colourful pseudonym, the energy and student-centred learning makes the class both successful and popular. The conversations and student engagement continue through the term, taking on various forms both face-to-face and online, including tutorial discussion and debates, in-class questions, student created podcasts and blogs, or an e-class held in a virtually created Bond University campus in *Mindcraft* (Bond virtual campus created by this professor and his students through the Massive Multiplayer Online Game – Minecraft).

The students of this course have come to appreciate the blended approach which enables them to take advantage of, and co-construct, the design and benefits of face-to-face as well as online learning. It allows and enables a mobile friendly, dynamic and multitasking way for students to get the best of both worlds, real and virtual.

In a smaller class across campus, students participate in a tutorial for their Communication subject using interactive polls. There are a number of student response systems available, some using hand held clickers and others with apps or software which uses the internet and whichever devices students bring themselves. The results of the polls are instantly displayed, projected to the front of the class for further reflection and discussion, both in class and later upon further reflection on the subject's Blackboard Learning Management System (LMS) site. The students enjoy the diversity of learning typified by guest speakers invited into the lecture, an abundance of online class resources, small group presentations, the convenience of being able to view weekly tutorial questions on the internet before tutorials, and retrieving marks and feedback from the LMS rather than having to wait until the date of the next lecture.

The effective integration of computer mediated and online learning with conventional face-to-face education has enabled and empowered students and teachers in many ways. The fostering of a new generation of mobile multi-taskers and the opening of doors for previously disadvantaged students such as full-time workers or remote learners are but two examples.

There are three primary reasons for proceeding with blended learning. The first is that there is clear evidence that the merger of interdependent face-to-face and online education improves student learning, engagement and the overall student experience. Technology, particularly when it is connected, networked and social, enables and enhances learning. However, technology on its own is not sufficient. The presence of an informed and caring teacher and peers with whom to actively engage, heighten the development of knowledge, skills and attributes. University students benefit from the on-campus experience, including innovative and flexible learning spaces. Combining these online and face-to-face modalities is a recipe for success for students.

The second reason for moving ahead with blended learning is one of student expectations and transition. Secondary schools have adopted many *technology* enhanced and enabled approaches to learning, such that students do not classify what they do with laptops and tablets at schools as any kind of technology. Until universities close ground on this digital divide, incoming students are going to be surprised, disappointed and frustrated by moving backwards to the inefficiencies of redundant pedagogies.

The final reason why some universities are putting additional resources into blended learning is explained by the university as a marketplace and the concept of knowledge management. Some universities are developing innovative approaches to blended learning as key elements of distinctive profiles. In an era where many universities are offering purely online options through such delivery as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), others are choosing another path. One which features blended learning with the advantages of connected technologies, mutually interdependent with on-campus small class size pedagogies and teachers who know student names and care about their individual goals and progress. **ETS**

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