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Blended Learning: A step into 21ˢᵗ century Education

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Abstract

Given the importance of the use of modern technology to the different sectors of the state, such as to the acquisition of information, enhancement of achievement, improvement of skills, low cost and overcoming obstacles, both the state and organizations alike have a duty to cope with the current technological advancements in order to respond to the needs of their relevant societies. In other words, given the human resources and expertise available to them, the duties of these institutions should extend beyond educating individuals to include the development of the society as a whole to reach international standards. Bearing in mind the current age of globalization, modern technology is becoming increasingly important to improve the education systems of any nation.

So far as the education is concerned, much more is emphasized on how teachers teach in the classroom. Teaching-learning method is a key factor in education system. There are numbers of different teaching methods used in the classroom; at the same time it is a matter of debate in the education field that which method is more powerful in dealing with students. Blended learning, which is a blending of technology and teacher has become a talk of the town after some remarkable educational researches.

The present article focuses on the term of 'Blended learning' and its importance in 21ˢᵗ century.

Once upon a time in India there was a 'Guru-parampara' in which learners would follow their 'Guru' by staying in Ashram which used to be located in the forests. Then, the time introduced some educators who tried to cultivate their learners in amid the society by presenting themselves with some ideals and virtues. Later came the schooling system where teachers teach the students using different teaching tools. The ultimate goal of these all systems was/is 'to teach the life skills and to enable learners to live with the time'. Time is a great transformer. It changes, and with it, changes the world, culture and system too. So, it is the Time which has led education system from Ashram to schools and now from schools to virtual classrooms.

As the time changes, form of education must be changed because education is the root of development. So far 21st century is concerned; learners have different goals, requirements and learning interests to develop the life skills. The last decade in education has shown more changes than the entire century. Educational system is introduced with different approaches and methods in and outside the country. The key factor of the 21st century education has remained 'use of technology'. Technology has proved to be the biggest support to the teachers. Indeed, technology has changed 'teacher' into 'facilitator'. As computer derived, it made teaching-learning process more interactive and alive. Now, it is 'internet' that has enabled the learning virtually possible. Learners are free to learn on their own speed, place and time. It originated the concepts of e-learning. Internet has become the interest of students. Its proper usage in education can bring the effective output. Researches of Carswell et al (2000), Gunnarsson (2001), Al-Mubarak (2004), have proved that e-learning has significant effect on the achievement of learners than the traditional learning. At the same time researchers have found demerits of e-learning in education and attempted to employ 'the blended learning' approach which is talk of the town in recent years. Many researchers like Akkoyuklu & Soylu (2006), Pereira et al (2007), O'Leary (2008) have found the blended learning more effective than the e-learning and the traditional learning.

The blending of technology and teachers can help the modern education to develop the 21st century life skills among the learners. The present paper aims to introduce the blended learning approach and its role in education of the era where information and technology are at the peak.

Key Words: Blended learning, 21st century education

What is Blended learning?

Blended learning is a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through delivery of content and instruction via digital and online media with some elements of student control over time, place path, or pace. While still attending face to face classroom methods are combined with computer-mediated activities. (Wikipedia)

According to Clark and Myer (2007) the definition of blended learning varies from one researcher to another. For example, Thorne (2003) and Gutierrez (2006) point out that blended learning is *the integration between e-learning and face-to-face instruction.* Mayadas & Picciano (2007) on the other hand define blended learning as *a combination of online learning and face-to-face instruction*. In this regard Kerres & De Witt (2003, 101) suggest that ***"blended learning arrangements combine technology based learning with face-to-face learning and have become quite popular in different contexts"***. Moreover, Garham & Kaleta (2002) define

hybrid courses as conventional courses with parts of their instructional activities run online, so that such an arrangement considerably cuts down the time students spend in the traditional classrooms. However, the term blended learning is also used to describe "learning that mixes various event-based activities, including face-to-face classrooms, live e-learning, and self-paced learning" (Valiathan, 2002). According to Driscoll (2002) the term blended learning should include following four concepts:

- *Mixing the different types of instructional technology such as collaborative learning and virtual classroom to achieve instructional goals.*
- *Integrating manifold learning theories such as cognitivism and constructivism to enhance the learning outcome.*
- *Combining any type of instructional technology with face-to-face instruction.*
- *Mixing instructional technology with the practical job tasks.*

Garrison and Kanuka (2004) emphasized that it is important to make a distinction between blended learning and "enhanced classroom or fully online learning experiences". In order to do that, they presented a continuum of e-learning where no sharp boundary could be drawn between online learning and blended learning. They state that

"the real test of blended learning is the effective integration of the two main components (face-to-face and Internet technology) such that we are not just adding on to the existing dominant approach or method. This holds true whether it be a face-to-face or a fully Internet-based learning experience. A blended learning design represents a significant departure from either of these approaches. It represents a fundamental reconceptualization and reorganization of the teaching and learning dynamic, starting with various specific contextual needs and contingencies (e.g., discipline, developmental level, and resources)".

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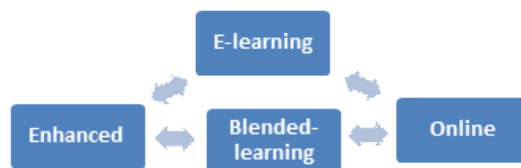
Osguthorpe and Graham (2003, 231) emphasize six aims of designing blended learning, which include "pedagogical richness, access to knowledge, social interaction, personal agency, cost effectiveness, and ease of revision". Some researchers (Gould, 2003; Akkoyunlu & Soylu, 2006) argue that by using blended learning one will be able to benefit from the combined merits of both e-learning and traditional learning. Thus, in the current study, the asynchronous virtual classroom provides accessibility and flexibility in the time and place, the opportunities of moreinteraction (connectivity), efficiency, taking into account the individual differences between learners. In the meantime the traditional classroom ensures social interaction and the development of communication skills among learners. Recently blended learning has become popular in many institutions of higher education, especially in countries that have adopted distance education and elearning as alternative delivery methods in their universities (Lim, \ Morris & Kupritz, 2006; Gutierrez, 2006).

Therefore, blended learning is distinguished from enhanced face to face instruction, as the latter involves constant face to face contact between the students and teacher on the one hand and between the students themselves on the other hand. In addition to that face to face instruction involves the use of modern technology in the classroom including the internet. By contrast blended learning could take the form of face to face learning within either asynchronous learning environment such as e-mail and forum, or synchronous learning environment such as videoconferencing, or could be both of them. However, in either case less face to face contact exists between students and teacher and between the students themselves than in the case of enhanced classroom.

Role of Blended learning in 21st century education

Undoubtedly, technology has remained a key feature of the 21st century classroom and the best support to the teachers and learners. Inventions like 'internet' has opened new door of knowledge and information. The rapid changes of the time have changed the definition of life skills and established new thoughts, ideas, goals and interest among the learners. The time has elapsed from 'teacher centered' to 'learner centered'. The classroom of beliefs has taken off to the wide range of innovative, creative and logical ideas. The University of Houston has listed 21st century life skills in its one of the mass online offering of courses (MOOCs), they are as under:

In 21st Century Learning, students use educational technologies to apply knowledge to new situations, analyze information, collaborate, solve problems, and make decisions. Utilizing emerging technologies to provide expanded learning opportunities is critical to the success of future generations. Improved options and choice for students will help improve student completion and achievement.

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In its 10th Report in 2007, the 'Premiers Technology Council (PTC) identified technology and e-learning as central to addressing future skill shortages in the work force, particularly in rural areas of the province. The PTC described "blended learning" – technology-enhanced learning that is both online and in the classroom– as an effective approach to enhance education. The PTC recommendations are consistent with international initiatives that promote 21st Century Learning and the use of technologies to support student choice and flexibility.

The Premier's Technology Council December 2010 Report, A Vision for 21stCentury Education, describes what a educational system might look like should it be transformed.

One of the driving forces behind the push to infuse 21st Century Skills into education is the Partnership for 21st Century Ski

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