What is meant by 'blended' delivery and how does it work in higher education?

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Introduction

This chapter will explore the distinctive characteristics of Blended Learning (bL), how it complements other modes of delivery and replicates the modern workplace.

As outlined in Chapter 1 by Emeritus Professor Whateley, "hybrid delivery is a simultaneous activity requiring no more preparation or time than F2F teaching…teaching would be available in both modes simultaneously (online and F2F) and the student would decide on the mode – and this could be altered along the journey." Hybrid delivery is therefore synchronous, allowing the student the opportunity to choose their mode or switch between the two depending on their preference during the individual unit or the whole program.

Chapter 3 by Associate Professor Chanda provides details of online, which is fully online with no F2F delivery. bL is a mix of both online and F2F, not simultaneous. With the mode of delivery determined by the designer and lecturer, to maximise pedagogical and curriculum outcomes for the student.

Blended Learning framework and practical application over time

The term blended learning (bL) has been used in the education sphere since the 1960s as computers and information technology first had an impact on all levels of education. However, it was not until the early 2000s that definitional and conceptual research into BL started to take hold.

This initial research can be divided into three main foci. There is the emphasis on the delivery media or how the instructional modalities are combined;[1] Secondly, looking at the combination of the methods and curriculum design as a form of bL; [2] and the third focus is on the instruction and how these are combined across online and F2F[3].

It was not until 2006, with Bonk and Graham's[4] Handbook of Blended Learning that the term became more clearly defined and a framework of its use was explored. Bonk and Graham took the term bL, which had been applied to a wide variety of pedagogies and technologies in a range of combinations and provided a framework for the term. Their definition being "blended learning systems" as learning systems that "combine face-to-face (F2F) instruction with computer mediated instruction."[5]

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[1] Orey, M (2002). One year of online blended learning: Lessons learned. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Educational Research Association, Sarasota, FL

[2] Driscoll, M (2002). Blended Learning: Let's get beyond the hype. eLearning, 54.

[3] Reay, J (2001). Blended learning - a fusion for the future. Knowledge Management Review, 4(3), 6.

[4] Bonk, C and Graham, C (Eds.). (2006). Handbook of blended learning: Global Perspectives, local designs. San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer Publishing.

[5] Bonk, C and Graham, C (Eds.). (2006). Handbook of blended learning: Global Perspectives, local designs. San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer Publishing.

Blended Learning Accelerated By Web 2.0

The growth in the practical application of bL coincides with developments in digital technologies, namely Web 2.0. The first of the Web 2.0 recognised platforms emerged from 2004-2006. Web 2.0 enables users to collaborate and interact with the provider and with each other through social media as authors of their own user generated content that is shared in virtual communities. Prior to Web 2.0, viewers of web content were limited to viewing the content in a passive manner, with no interaction.

Many of these Web 2.0 sites and features are common today including social media sites Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Redditt, which all use Web 2.0 computer language and attributes. These allow user generated content through blogs, wikis, tagging keywords, likes, shares, hosted services, web applications (apps) and mashup applications.

Consumer evaluation and opinion sites such as Amazon, eBay and TripAdvisor are all built on Web 2.0. News and media have been changed forever through comments and shares on news sites. Twitter has also allowed political and industry voices to bypass traditional media to go straight to their constituents without editorial oversight and filtering to great effect.

These Web 2.0 features are applied in bL to allow the full richness of collaborative learning to occur. Where there is a move from didactic chalk and talk instruction from the master lecturer to servant students. To a more collaborative shared learning and understanding of a topic, with the teacher becoming more of a facilitator and enabler of knowledge.

Through the use of Web2.0, the education experience is heightened. The characteristics of Web 2.0 that are used in the media and consumer facets of society, equally apply to education.

Blended Learning Models

As blended learning has developed over the last 15 years, distinct models if BL have emerged. By understanding these different models, BL pedagogy and learning design is maximised. The diagram below provides a framework for how F2F bricks and mortar learning along with online learning has led to four models[6]. The four models are on a continuum, from the rotation model that is the most F2F focussed, through to the enriched virtual model, which has the highest level of online learning.

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[6] Horn, M and Staker. H (2014) Blended: Using Disruptive Innovation to Improve Schools. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2014.
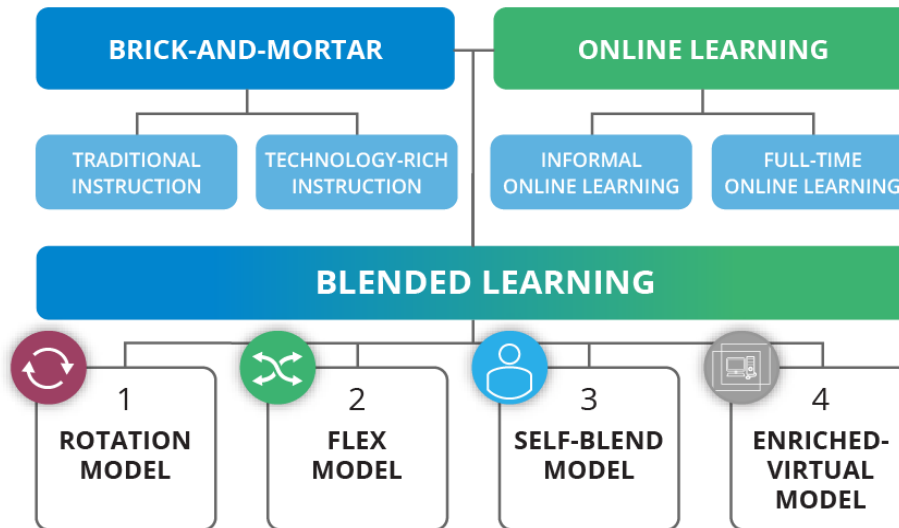
1) **Rotation Model:** students rotate between different learning activities within a single class, where at least one of the activities is completed online. Some examples of these rotation activities may include instructor led session, group activities, one-on-one with the instructor and independent study time. In this form of bL, students learn mostly F2F with the instructor, and most of the time is spent F2F.

2) For the **Flex Model**, students primarily learn in F2F, but the foundational work is done online. Online activities are available both before and after the F2F instruction. This allows students to learn at their own pace online, working through a structured curriculum that underpins the F2F learning. When students are in F2F mode, the instructor focusses on the more challenging aspects of the curriculum. It also allows this time to focus on particular topics and go deeper to enrich the learning in that topic. The instructor becomes a facilitator, with the F2F learning time spent in small group activities, project and case study based learning, or one-on-one instructional support.

3) The **Self-Blend Model** allows students to choose the modules or micro courses to take online to supplement the F2F instruction. This is often taken from a structured curriculum to take elective topics within a subject or elective subjects within a course. Constructive alignment and designed assessment of the modules ensures that all course level learning outcomes are met.

4) In the **Enriched Virtual Model** the student spends most of their time online, with minimal guidance and F2F time from the instructor. This is different to the fully online study mode as there is still a component of F2F, with meeting instructors on a regular basis and allowing students to experience campus life or coming together with their peers to discuss and network F2F.

At UBSS, the **flex model** is applied in the Executive Delivery MBA program. Most of the study period students participate in self-directed, structured online learning. Once this base knowledge has been achieved, they come together for a block intensive with other students and the lecturer, who guides the intense deep learning of the material.

This promotes a collaborative and shared learning experience for the students. The F2F room design is cabaret style desk placement to promote interaction between students. This enables them to share their life learned experience, to contextualise and embed the theories and concepts of the curriculum.

Blended Learning Replicates the Post COVID Workplace

In recent times, there is more of a focus of higher education graduate capabilities on the behaviours, attributes and attitudes students require to work in today's organisations. These include digital literacy, remote work, virtual teamwork and collaboration, virtual project management, time management, goal orientation to name a few. For recruiters taking on new employees and human resource departments evaluating promotion, these are the workplace attributes they look for in candidates.

COVID-19 has been an accelerator of social and technological trends. One of these is the move to virtual work, working from home and a hybrid model of some remote work and some time in the workplace. It is estimated that 56% of work undertaken in developed economies can be completed partially at home[7].This increases significantly for digital, management and professional services work.

This is most pronounced in IT based companies, where many global tech giants have announced a new workplace policy of Work from Anywhere (WFA). Spotify with 6,500 employees across 73 countries has a WFA policy. This is also the case for Atlassian, Salesforce and Dropbox[8]. As more of the workforce is tech based and traditional industries embed more digital literate employees, this trend will continue after the impact of COVID-19 has passed.

Blended Learning replicates the WFH and WFA work environment. By having learning material available digitally, using Web 2.0 platforms for co-learning and sharing student created content with peers and the instructor, then come together F2F for instruction and collaboration, this is in line with the WFH environment.

It is by providing the higher education learning environment that imitates the work place, that students are able to develop the graduate capabilities, skills and attributes that place them in the best position in the workforce. Blended Learning provides this learning environment.

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[7] McCann, J (2020) Is A Blended Office Model The Future Of Work?
https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2020/10/20/is-a-blended-office-model-the-future-of-work/?sh=1621091002ea

[8] Johnson E (2021) Digital learning is real-world learning. That's why blended on-campus and online study is best, https://theconversation.com/digital-learning-is-real-world-learning-thats-why-blended-on-campus-and-online-study-is-best-163002