

BLENDED LEARNING: THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION IN THE POST PANDEMIC ERA

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ABSTRACT

The pandemic Covid-19 came as havoc for developing countries like India. It has significantly disrupted the education sector which is a critical determinant of a country's economic future. It has compelled the human society to maintain social distancing. Students and teachers were made to sit at home and the same led to mental stress and suspicion of what's coming next. During that period of lockdown, on line teaching learning was the best solution to meet the challenges of education. Every challenge comes with an opportunity. These challenges thrown by Covid-19 like situation have also created opportunities for the educational institutes to strengthen their technological knowledge, infrastructure etc. Indian education system was acquainted with face to face or physical teaching learning process. Most of educators and learners were not equipped with use of technology in education and there was also lack of practice and motivation towards use of technology in education which created more challenges during pandemics. Post corona virus, class rooms have been replaced by homes, seminars are morphing into webinars, and meetings are no more physical. A really digital life is emerging though the issues related to equitable access to the tools exist. The academic content delivered through a passive one-way communication does not engage a student's curious mind, although learning can lead to improved cognitive outcome. The physical presence of a teacher is indispensable in the entire teaching learning process. Blended learning i.e. combining online and in-person instruction can deliver good teaching-learning outcomes. Therefore the teachers must be trained in the technology enabled active learning pedagogy. So, in this paper researchers will discuss about blended mode of learning.

Keywords: Education during Covid-19, On-line Learning, Offline Learning, Blended Learning.

Introduction

Blended Learning is a way of learning, combining the traditional way of face-to-face classroom instruction and teaching with the help of digital learning platforms and tools. The term has been popular in recent years, with more educators leveraging the technology to improve learning through technology based teaching methods. This mode of learning is also well-known as Hybrid Learning, as it integrates technology and digital media with the conventional teacher dominant classroom activities, providing more flexibility and freedom for students to tailor their learning experience. The power of blended learning methods lies in their ability to improve the student experience. For teachers, the in-person and online elements of the teaching complement each other to create a richer learning experience. For students, it helped in improving knowledge acquisition, reducing failure rates, and improve engagement. A report from 2016 identified blended learning as one of the major trends in education change. The pandemic has brought many existing patterns and trends to the surface. It has also potentially disclosed many weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the system, these include an accentuation of inequality, risks that follow from the digitalization of education, and just how unprepared educational communities across the

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world were, for a enormous shift to digital and distance learning. On the other hand, some positive features within the communities have become progressively more visible. Digital modes of teaching and learning have been used in a blended mode to assist students with more and less availability of ICT resources. There has been an increase in resourcefulness, commitment, and originality for many teachers, families, and students who are collaboratively and cooperatively building remarkable learning experiences. The distressed situation has also created an understanding of the multiple roles that schools can play in providing the overall welfare of the children and youth and the importance of the presence of the children in the schools. The situation has also made all of us feel the critical role education and teacher plays in every one's life. UNESCO also has pointed out interrupted teaching learning among the most harmful effects of Covid-19. In India a large number of children suffered because of learning gaps much like most of the students across the world. Of course as the schools were preparing to open up after the pandemic the utmost priority was to make students and their parents feel safe and produce students to face any kind of challenges and opportunities irrespective of the hurdles or the circumstances. Availability of the infrastructure both hardware and software for online and offline teaching will remain one of the top priorities regarding the flexibility of the entire education system. Technology can help in introducing responsive ways of delivering education services, by leaving no one behind and efficiently using resources. Thus, a paradigm shift from offline mode of learning to blended mode of learning becomes need of the hour.

Blended Learning as an Instruction Model

As the schools were closed for almost two academic years during the pandemic and the same lead to interrupted teaching learning, increased number of dropout students and that for sure affected the most helpless students. Children had to miss out on their learning, social interaction, and, playtime which is essential to their overall development and well-being. In one its reports UNESCO mentioned that human interaction and well-being must be given main concern in the post-pandemic period. With the help of vaccination drives across the country and low covid-19 infection rates, India had welcomed the move of gradual opening of the schools, to prevent further learning loss and lessen some of the psychological burden and stress children are going through. In the past few years India's efforts regarding the steps taken to launch various digital platforms in the teaching learning process and to make the availability of various learning softwares helped the students and teachers to handle learning failures of the students. This solution ranges from interactive live online classes to digital content pooled and shared over WhatsApp to the distribution of textbooks and calendars with home-based assignments. The COVID-19 pandemic has also exposed large inequalities in access to technology and various digital infrastructures widening the gaps between those with the opportunity to learn. This suggests having a balanced way out to bring our children safely to the schools and optimize ICT tools and platforms to accelerate the learning process. In a blended learning environment, offline learning is meant to complement the-person classroom learning through additional resources through various digital platforms to create an enriching learning experience. The approach is not to replace the physical presence of the classroom environment but to bring more flexibility in the classroom experience for both the students and the teachers. Given the emergence of digital technologies and the rising importance of technology for teaching-learning at all levels from school to higher education, the NEP 2020 recommends for use of blended and hybrid models of learning. As per NEP 2020 guidelines as we talk about e- learning the value of face-to-face learning is fully recognized. In blended learning the teachers or facilitators gets ample time for face-to-face interactions in class as some of the topics or concepts can be delivered online. In higher education, it holds a great consequence in reaching out to a larger number of students. Along with the learning and knowledge acquisition it teaches the students many indispensable life skills also.

Main Advantages of Blended Mode of Learning

Blended mode of learning holds a huge potential for the future of the Education sector. Especially in the post-pandemic phase when access to learning for all students is so crucial. This mode of learning has been a popular approach across the global educational community due to the various opportunities it offers and a few are discussed below.

Opportunity for Collaboration

A blended learning environment fosters and supports collaboration in any form. Studies have shown that peer-to-peer learning is fun and engaging for students, especially when it comes in the form of digital game-based learning. Collaboration also aids to develop a social support system for children and establishes a positive learning atmosphere, which leads to higher output in terms of knowledge acquisition. Digital platforms can help to be in touch with anyone from anywhere.

Tracking Learning

Post pandemic, the learning levels among students are likely to be even more diverse than before. Technology will help the students to diagnose their learning mistake and accordingly the expert's can help them. There are various individualised learning tracking software available which can be put into use. This sort of tracking intervention will prove important for slow learners. With the help of low-cost tech-based software, tracking of the number of students coming back to the schools, keeping a special track of girls dropping out of the school can help to reduce the overall dropout rates.

Greater Access to Learning

With this hybrid and blended mode of learning access to learning widens. With enlarged access to learning students sitting at varied locations like difficult terrain can be benefitted and also the students with diverse streams or disciplines can take the advantage. Especially for higher education, the option for remote education within blended learning opens up learning's from across the world. Digitalization will make education field more inclusive and impartial by addressing the needs of the specially-able learners. It empowers teachers by providing additional tools and training platforms to upgrade their knowledge and skills. Educators can draw on a wide range to provide educational resources across different contexts. By creating online resources, they can focus more on tailoring their face-to-face class time to the need of their students. Students also have options to accelerate their learning and the freedom to take the initiative with their studies. Teachers can motivate the students with projects that involve going beyond the confines of the classroom and learning by doing.

Better Communication

Pandemic has presented everyone with various kinds of misinformation and inculcated some level of fear and anxiety. Digital devices like radio and television have also shown the potential to support the persistence of students' academic learning during the school closure. They reminded us of the magnitude of such platforms for education, culture, general knowledge, mainly for children who lack access to online materials, smart devices and infrastructure. Such low-cost tools can be utilized more in the future to continue the communication channels smoothly among the all concerned. The importance of continuity of learning needs to be communicated to the parents/caregivers, to raise awareness of the learning programs being rolled out and how to access them. Online platforms like Microsoft Team, Google Classroom, Canvas, and Blackboard to participate in various educational forums and collective communities have been welcomed.

Preparing Students for a Tech-Oriented World

Almost all aspects of our lives have been revolutionized by technology. This makes it crucial for our students to adapt themselves according to the fast-changing world. By integrating technology in the teaching process, teachers can better equip students for their careers and professional lives. Blended learning can help students build desirable skill sets for the future. It also helps them navigate themselves through the virtual world of information carefully. Blended learning gives scope for learners to experience new software and hardware, discovering how to use such technology can prepare them for future endeavours. A technology-driven classroom environment helps students to adapt to the fast-changing world and handle unpredictability. A combination of expert-led on-demand technology-driven communications and teaching methodology creates engaging and interactive learning.

All these factors combine to make blended mode learning more personalized, more engaging, and more collaborative.

Blended Learning Models

- **Face-to-Face:** This model has many elements as of a conventional classroom teaching learning process. This model generally means that not everyone in the class will take additional online training, as it mainly targets the individual needs of those learners who are working or trying to acquire different levels of skill, ability or piece of knowledge. For instance in case a student needs assistance in any particular topic, he or she is lagging behind, and then to such student online additional help can be provided by the teacher.
- **Online Driver Model:** This model is the opposite of face-to-face model of blended learning. Here the learners rely solely on online teaching strategies. It combines both synchronous training (live webinars, online lectures, seminars, online peer tutoring sessions, etc.) and asynchronous training (self-paced study of e-courses). With the online driver model, there's generally no need for offline face-to-face meetings, but they can be arranged if required.

Students participate and learn from remote locations and receive instruction and assignments via online digital platforms. Educators act as facilitators and guide as he gives students the opportunity learns by using various digital recourses. This model is for learners with chronic illnesses, students those who want to work and learn at their own pace regarding knowledge acquisition, or students or those children who want to work at a faster speed as compared to conventional classrooms.

- **Rotation Model:** This model includes breaking a group of learners into smaller groups to learn different types of tasks at different levels in turns. Some activities are online and some can be taught by face to face interaction. This allows learners with different types of learning styles or capabilities to get the maximum advantage from the instruction.
- **Flipped Classroom:** In this model online learning takes place where as the learned principles are applied offline. In a flipped teaching learning environment, lectures and practical homework assignments are flipped between home and classroom. Learners study new content at home before the class, and in-class time is devoted to active construction of knowledge and application of newly learned skills and concepts. This can be accomplished in the form of group discussions, case studies, project work, seminars, question answer sessions.
- **Flex Model:** In this model of blended learning the learner learns at their own respective pace or schedule. The Flex model allows learners to take charge of their learning. Students or employees can move from one activity to another according to their needs. Learning can be both through online and offline mode. Teachers or instructors are always on-line to deliver instructions and help students for further assistance.
- **Individual Rotation Model:** According to this model learner's move from one station to another, but the teacher sets an individual path according to the need, capability of the individual learner. All learners don't need to visit all the stations, only the children that are on their schedule as planned by the instructor.

Purposed Steps of Blended Learning

- **Step One: Finalise Goals:** Write the goals and objectives you anticipate achieving with blended learning. For example, you might want learners to become more active members of their respective knowledge construction process and independent in their education. Or you might wish to provide more collaborative and cooperative opportunities for students or learners to develop their social skills or emotional skills.
- **Step Two: Select a Blended Learning Model:** Based on the goals you lay down, select the blended learning model that best fits as per the finalised goals. You can use more than one model, but be equipped to maintain all of them further on. Note down that diverse models might require a range of tools and classroom designs.
- **Step Three: Use the Right Tools to Create and Deliver Instructions:** To launch the online part of blended learning, you'll need particular software or programs. Every educational institution has its specific needs, but minimum two tools will be required for any of them: an authoring tool to generate online content and a learning management system to deliver it and access learner progress.
- **Step Four: Redesign your Teaching Learning Environment:** Based on the blended learning model you decide, you may need to redesign your classroom. Besides, make certain that the overall classroom outlook will motivate students to actively participate in learning and keep them positive.
- **Step Five: Launch Blended Learning Model and be Consistent:** Now, your job is to organize, administer and facilitate the learning process. And be patient and consistent. It will take few weeks for blended learning to show results.

Conclusion

With the priority of reopening the schools and bringing the students back to the classrooms in a safe manner, blended learning is seen as a fundamental part of the future of education. School Closures have led to the loss of children's learning, nutrition, mental health, and overall development. To overcome these challenges, there is a need to support the educational communities with better design and implementation plans in supporting children's education, health, psycho-social well-being, and other

needs. The role of technology is envisioned to be crucial from now onwards in accelerating and revamping the systems and processes with the various Ed Tech tools and platforms. Thus, making a blended mode of learning as a way forward to the future of Education. And the same will require participation by all of us to cooperatively and collaboratively mobilize the assets and resources. Thus, making it important that any digital transition is not just an endeavour pushed by respective companies but the teachers, students, governments, civil society representatives and privacy advocates are also represented and shape these transformations.

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