

Blended Learning: The Balancing Act

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Abstract

Blended learning (a combination of in-class and online learning) is growing as a popular form of education, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this style of education presents many issues for educators and students, related to teacher preparation, mental health, and technological expectations. Although these issues are frustrating at times, there are various ways to work around them. By finding solutions to these issues, educators will cultivate stronger learning experiences for students in the future. Blended learning promises to remain a part of society, and we must learn how to balance it in our lives.

March 2020 marked a jump into uncertainty in the world of education. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, governments and teachers were looking for innovative ways to continue educating students successfully. School closures and variable attendance, both stemming from uncontrollable factors, forced education to shift to embrace online platforms. It was during this time of great uncertainty that most schools shifted to the blended learning model to meet the needs of students both at home and at school. Blended learning involves in-class learning along with online components as well. It became clear that success in blended learning would require a balancing act for the teachers as well as students (McKenna et al., 2019). Many issues arose during blended learning implementation, and solutions needed to be found for it to be successful. Three of these issues were teacher preparation, mental health, and technological expectations. By understanding these various issues, and posing solutions, educators can move forward and incorporate blended learning effectively in the future.

Teacher Preparation

One of the major hurdles to executing blended learning was the lack of preparation regarding instructional strategies provided to educators so as to make this shift in a short period. This presented a challenge to teachers because, in addition to their regular duties, they also had to adapt to implementing said strategies as they encountered various issues (Barnwell, 2020). Teachers also needed to understand a wide variety of platforms to create a collaborative online community that would facilitate student learning (Vaughan et al., 2019). Collaboration would be essential in these matters, and schools needed to be clear on what their specific definition of blended learning entailed. Due to differing views or definitions of what blended learning required, many organizations failed to achieve one of the most important aspects of successful implementation, which is to be clear in their expectations for both teachers and learners (McKenna et al., 2019). Additionally, educators who found themselves teaching various subject areas, such as ESL, needed to have not only a solid understanding of their content area, but also a strong understanding of technology and language barriers with their students (Xu et al., 2020). Though many teachers successfully adapted to the implementation of instructional strategies throughout the pandemic, this was still a major cause for concern for Manitoba's educators.

Three solutions for issues in teacher preparation include building comfort in content area, professional development opportunities, and clear messaging from administrators. The first solution to solve the issue of teacher preparation is building comfort in teachers' content area. Teachers need the knowledge to create resources that will support them to be successful in designing assessments for their students, regardless of the delivery model (Panisoara et al.,

2020). If teachers are not comfortable in their abilities, or knowledge on a subject, they will not produce quality learning opportunities for their students. Though it is clear that teachers must have a level of subject matter knowledge (SMK) to effectively teach a course, it is becoming more evident that teachers need to master the content they are expecting their students to learn, and to diversify their explanations and learning strategies (Nixon et al., 2019). Comfort and knowledge in the teacher's subject area will ensure that when an opportunity for blended learning arises, teachers are not having to expend additional energy on learning materials, but instead can focus their efforts on preparing to use the online platform. This mastery of knowledge can come from additional coursework, mentor-teachers, or professional development opportunities.

Another solution that will assist teachers in their preparation for blended learning is an increase in professional development relating both to content areas and technology. Efficacy in blended learning requires a different skillset than in-person learning. However, these skills can be taught, especially those pertaining to technology. When it comes to technology, educators need to be trained properly in best practice, because this preparation will be the only way to create comfortable online learning experiences for both educators and their students (Egan & Crotty, 2020). Topics such as using computer programs, computer literacy, and digital citizenship are all relevant issues that teachers need to be familiar with and ready to incorporate when the opportunity for blended learning arises.

In addition to familiarity with technology, teachers would also benefit from clear messaging from their school administrators regarding which online platforms will be used. Using multiple platforms not only adds stress to educators, but also overwhelms students (Barnwell, 2020). In Mountain View School Division, grades 6-12 were required to use Microsoft Teams early in the technological transition. Teachers had to familiarize themselves with this app, and determine how best to engage their students online. Though Mountain View has returned to in-person learning, many teachers have continued to use Microsoft Teams, not only to retain their own knowledge, but also to continue to communicate with students, in case of a switch back to blended learning. The world of technology is ever changing, and it is imperative that educators are informed.

Mental Health

With the increased level of expectation, in addition to the constant state of worry that COVID-19 necessitated, mental health issues in relation to education became more prominent throughout blended learning. A lack of socialization, increased workloads, or simply the isolation of quarantine, plagued students and educators alike. Restrictions on physical distancing and limited social gatherings left a lasting impact on individuals, because they lacked basic human connection (Manitoba, 2021). Through experiences with blended learning, it became clear that mental health must be taken care of before meaningful education can take place during this time of unknowns (Barnwell, 2020). If educators failed to attain the care they needed during this time, the quality of education suffered. Further resources were required to equip educators and students with the skills, and the opportunities, to learn and speak about mental health during this crisis.

Some ways to address issues with mental health and blended learning during COVID-19 are focusing on relationships with students, relationships with coworkers, and feeling supported by administrators. To begin to solve the mental health issues that arise with blended learning, it is critical to prioritize relationships. Of all of the relationships, those between educators and their students are arguably the most important. Blended learning presents a unique challenge, because it removes the face-to-face environment that teachers and students have grown accustomed to. Evidence has shown that if teachers are experiencing mental health issues, such as teacher burnout, their students' academic success may be hindered (Panisoara et al., 2020). To avoid these issues, teachers can work to build relationships with their students

through blended learning, by attempting to maintain classroom routines and opportunities for students and their teachers to get to know each other (Schoolology, 2020). Providing students with a safe place to communicate and interact on online platforms gives relationships the opportunity to flourish (Egan & Crotty, 2020). This sense of normalcy will not only put students at ease, but also help to reduce emotional stress for teachers as well.

Relationships with coworkers is another important solution to focus on in regards to mental health during blended learning. Studies have shown that reduced levels of human interaction have contributed to teacher burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic (Panisoara et al., 2020). To remedy this issue, school teams can incorporate icebreakers and other activities that promote communal engagement, while still adhering to social-distancing policies. This can take place during school hours or can include socializing outside school. Even taking the time to schedule group meetings for teachers to interact is important online and offline (Zadok-Gurman et al., 2021). Teachers need the opportunity to realize that they are not alone in their feelings, frustrations, and mental health issues. This realization greatly reduces the chances of teacher burnout (Burke, 2017).

Lastly, to avoid mental health issues during blended learning, teachers need to feel supported by their school administrators. When addressing school environment, teachers are less likely to experience feelings of teacher burnout when they have a positive relationship with their administrative team (Panisoara et al., 2020). This relationship can flourish from regular check-ins, demonstrations of trust and loyalty, and a commitment to creating a school environment that values its educators. Especially in times of uncertainty, such as blended learning, teachers need to feel that their administrators would back them on any potential issues that could arise.

Technology

To implement blended learning and meet the technological expectations set by the provincial government, schools needed to prepare students with an understanding of how to use technology, and to guarantee access to a technological device at their home (McKenna et al., 2019). In Manitoba, government expectations often changed, and at times even communicating these changes to students and their families became difficult. It was expected that educators would jump from blended learning to full remote or in-class at any time that the pandemic required it (Manitoba, 2021). In rural communities, having adequate funds to supply technology to students was incredibly challenging. Financial privations affected funding not only for schools, but for local families as well. Families were lucky to receive one device to share, and because different ages required different online platforms, this issue quickly became frustrating. Moreover, even if families had access to a device, many did not have adequate internet access to complete online tasks. This internet access was all in addition to the basic need of merely keeping students engaged in learning and communicating with others (Barnwell, 2020). Though there was a great deal of adversity throughout the pandemic, access to technology was arguably the most frustrating, because it was a key component to student success outside the classroom.

Creating affordable laptop loan programs and providing Wi-Fi hot spots for student use are essential to blended learning success. When planning how to solve issues with technology during blended learning, it is important to consider students from low-income families and technology in rural areas. Government decisions may be out of educational control, but in terms of technology issues regarding blended learning, there are many solutions schools can pursue. The first of these is access to technology. Students and parents from low-income houses have not had the same access to technology, and therefore cannot expect to get the same education from teachers (Lake & Makori, 2020). School systems can solve this issue by providing technological devices to students coming from a low socio-economic background. Studies have shown that lending mobile devices such as laptops would be beneficial to families that could not

afford it (Lake & Makori, 2020). This type of program was implemented at the Dauphin Regional Comprehensive Secondary School during the pandemic, and it was very well utilized. Not only did many families sign up, but through surveys parents expressed that this program reduced the financial burden that blended learning would have otherwise incurred on their household.

In addition to providing technology to the students, rural areas have to deal with the growing concern of having limited to no internet access. Without internet access, the technology provided to the students would be useless, because they would not be able to access online classrooms or assignments. To combat this problem, schools could offer Wi-Fi hotspots that students would be able to access close to their rural areas (Lake & Makori, 2020). Schools could open up their Wi-Fi in the surrounding area of the building so that students with no internet access would be able to come to the parking lot, or nearby parks, and work on assignments for their classes. This way, they would be able to interact with their teachers and peers, and not fall behind in their assignments. It may be difficult to reach all unique student populations (Lake & Makori, 2020), but free Wi-Fi access may provide the majority of students the opportunity to continue their education during difficult times.

Conclusion

Blended learning has become the face of the future, and has been viewed as the new model of education (Um et al., 2021). However, no matter how effectively a new form can be implemented, there will always be areas in need of improvement. Three issues that needed to be addressed during the pandemic were teacher preparation, mental health, and technological expectations. Fortunately, all of these issues have tangible solutions. Teacher preparation is solved through incorporating more resources, increasing familiarity and comfort with technology, and providing teachers and support staff with clear directions set by administrators. Mental health issues can be improved by strengthening relationships and by building trust with school administrators. Technological expectations can be resolved by creating technology loan programs, and by increasing Wi-Fi hot spots for student use. These solutions will address the problems with blended learning, and allow this educational model to become a beneficial option for teachers in the future. With all of this in mind, one must remember that the incorporation of blended learning requires a balancing act. When balancing personal needs and professional needs, blended learning can become the future of education.

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