



Evolution of Blended Learning: Analyzing Historical Developments, Present Innovations, and Future Trajectories

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ABSTRACT

This scholarly paper investigates the progression of blended learning from its inception to its present form, and envisages its future trajectories. Blended learning, an integrative educational approach combining conventional classroom teaching with online elements, has substantially altered teaching methodologies and educational achievements. The study articulates a precise definition of blended learning, underscores its significance, and delves into its historical evolution, emphasizing the role of technological advancements and pedagogical innovations in its development. It scrutinizes various blended learning frameworks, including rotation, flex, à la carte, and enriched virtual models, and explores the incorporation of cutting-edge technologies like artificial intelligence and virtual reality in enriching these educational environments.

The research identifies prevailing obstacles in blended learning implementation, such as technological infrastructure deficits, the need for professional development, and resistance to change, proposing actionable solutions and best practices. It anticipates the influence of nascent technologies on facilitating more customized and adaptive learning experiences, with an eye toward meeting global and cross-cultural educational demands. In conclusion, the paper encapsulates its findings, recommends directions for future inquiry, and highlights the transformative potential of blended learning in redefining educational paradigms. By offering a thorough analysis, this paper contributes to the academic discourse on the symbiosis of technology and education, delineating the evolution of blended learning as a crucial factor in sculpting future educational frameworks and outcomes.

Keywords: Blended Learning Evolution; Educational Technology Integration; Adaptive Learning Technologies; Pedagogical Shifts

Introduction:

Blended learning, a term that has garnered substantial attention in educational circles, refers to an instructional approach that combines traditional face-to-face classroom methods with online learning activities. This hybrid model aims to provide learners with a more flexible and personalized learning experience, leveraging the strengths of both digital and physical teaching environments. As technology continues to permeate every facet of society, education has not remained untouched. The advent of the internet and digital devices has revolutionized the way information is accessed, consumed, and shared, paving the way for innovative educational methodologies such as blended learning.

The evolution of blended learning is not a sudden phenomenon but a gradual transformation that reflects broader technological advancements and pedagogical shifts. Early instances of blended learning can be traced back to correspondence courses, which utilized mail-based materials supplemented by occasional in-person meetings. However, the rapid development of internet technology and multimedia resources in the late 20th and early 21st centuries significantly accelerated the adoption and sophistication of blended learning models. This research paper seeks to explore the journey of blended learning from its initial development to its present implementations and future potential. By examining the various models of blended learning that have emerged, the paper highlights how this approach to education has evolved in response to changing technological landscapes and educational needs. Furthermore, it addresses the current challenges faced by educators and

institutions in implementing blended learning and proposes solutions to overcome these hurdles. Lastly, the paper looks forward to the impact of emerging technologies on blended learning, suggesting that this evolving instructional approach holds promising potential for transforming educational practices and outcomes on a global scale.

1 Historical Context and Development:

Early Forms of Blended Learning:

Blended learning, which combines traditional classroom teaching with digital and online methods, has gained significant attention in the field of education (Mishra and Khan Lodi 2021). Though the term itself is fairly new, the practice has deep historical roots, stretching back to distance education and correspondence courses from the 19th century. This exploration looks into how scholars view the genesis of blended learning, linking its beginnings to distance learning where students interacted with course material remotely, often via mail. Scholars like Moore and Kearsley (1996) highlight that these early forms of distance education, which occasionally incorporated in-person sessions, served as the foundation for what would evolve into today's blended learning approaches, merging various modes of educational delivery (Moore and Kearsley 1996). Saettler (1990) contends that the emergence of radio and television marked the inception of blended learning in distance education, expanding reach and integrating broadcasts with conventional teaching and correspondence materials, thereby enriching the educational landscape through interactive, multimodal approaches (Paxton and Marcus 2018). The advent of personal computing and the Internet markedly transformed blended learning landscapes, as Graham (2006) notes, integrating digital tools with traditional methods for enhanced learning experiences (Graham 2006). Garrison and Kanuka (2004) posited that blending face-to-face with online learning, as a transformative approach, enhances educational outcomes beyond solely traditional or online methods by synergistically integrating both modalities (Garrison and Kanuka 2004).

Nevertheless, the perception of blended learning's evolution is not uniformly favorable among academics. Oliver and Trigwell (2005) warned that merely integrating online with traditional methodologies does not inherently improve learning results. They contend that blended learning's efficacy hinges on the educational strategy and the congruence between learning activities and outcomes (Oliver and Trigwell 2005).

The progression of blended learning, from rudimentary stages to present forms, signifies a nuanced interaction between technological progress and educational methodologies (Mishra and Khan Lodi 2019). Academic views diverge, acknowledging blended learning's transformative potential and noting design and execution hurdles. The transition from mail-based courses to advanced digital platforms epitomizes an ongoing endeavor to utilize technology for educational enhancement, not mere supplementation. Blended learning's evolution persists as a central theme in debates concerning optimal integration of technology within education, ensuring pedagogical validity and alignment with educational goals.

Technological Advancements:

The integration of internet technology, multimedia resources, and digital communication tools has been pivotal in shaping the contemporary landscape of blended learning. Scholars across educational technology and pedagogy have extensively explored the impact of these technological advancements on the growth of blended learning.

The advent of the internet has been a cornerstone in the evolution of blended learning, offering unprecedented access to information and learning resources. Anderson (2008) emphasizes the role of the internet in democratizing education, suggesting that the wide availability of online resources and learning platforms has made education more accessible to a global audience. The internet has enabled the creation of virtual learning environments that complement traditional classroom settings, providing a flexible and dynamic learning experience (Anderson 2008).

The use of multimedia resources in education has transformed the way content is delivered and consumed. Mayer (2009) has contributed significantly to understanding how multimedia can enhance learning. According to Mayer, the integration of text, images, audio, and video caters to different learning styles and helps retain and apply knowledge. Multimedia resources in blended learning environments offer a rich, engaging experience that can make complex concepts more understandable and memorable (Mayer 2009).

Digital communication tools have played a crucial role in facilitating interaction within blended learning environments. Bonk and Zhang (2008) highlight the importance of synchronous and asynchronous communication tools, such as discussion forums, emails, chats, and video conferencing, in creating a sense of community among learners. These tools enable continuous collaboration and feedback, which are essential for effective learning. Bonk and Zhang (2008) argue that digital communication tools bridge the gap between traditional and online learning and enhance the learner's experience by fostering a supportive and interactive learning environment (Bonk and Zhang 2008).

The development and adoption of Learning Management Systems (LMS) have been instrumental in the growth of blended learning. Dalsgaard (2006) discusses how LMS platforms, such as Moodle, Blackboard, and Canvas, provide a structured framework for blending online and face-to-face learning. These systems offer a centralized

platform for distributing course materials, conducting assessments, and facilitating communication among students and instructors. Dalsgaard (2006) points out that LMS platforms have significantly reduced the barriers to implementing blended learning by providing educators with the tools to create, manage, and evaluate blended learning experiences (Dalsgaard 2006).

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and adaptive learning technologies into blended learning environments is a developing area of interest. The author explore how AI can personalize learning experiences by adapting content and assessments to the individual learner's needs and pace. Adaptive learning technologies have the potential to enhance blended learning by providing personalized pathways through course materials, thereby improving learning outcomes (Murtaza et al. 2022).

Scholars agree that these technological developments have not only made learning more accessible and engaging but also opened new possibilities for personalized and interactive learning experiences. As technology continues to evolve, blended learning is anticipated to further adapt, offering more sophisticated and effective educational solutions.

Pedagogical Shifts:

The adoption and development of blended learning have been significantly influenced by various pedagogical theories and practices over the years. Among these, constructivism, social learning theory, and the flipped classroom model stand out for their contributions to shaping the educational landscape toward a more interactive and learner-centered approach. Each of these theories has provided a theoretical foundation for integrating technology into education in ways that enhance learning outcomes.

Constructivism posits that learners construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. Jonassen, Peck, and Wilson (1999) explain that constructivism encourages active learning, where learners are encouraged to explore, discuss, and meaningfully construct concepts and relationships in contexts that involve real-world problems and scenarios. In the context of blended learning, constructivist approaches support the use of technology to create interactive learning environments where learners can engage with content, collaborate with others, and apply their knowledge in practical, real-world situations (Jonassen, Peck, and Wilson 1999). This theory underpins many blended learning designs that emphasize learner autonomy, interactive learning experiences, and the application of knowledge in practical settings.

Social learning theory emphasizes the importance of observing, modeling, and imitating the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Bandura's work highlights the significance of social interaction in learning, suggesting that people can learn new information and behaviors by watching other people. In the context of blended learning, social learning theory supports the use of digital communication tools and online platforms to facilitate social interaction and collaboration among learners. Technologies such as discussion forums, social media, and collaborative projects enable learners to observe, interact with, and learn from their peers and instructors, even when they are not physically co-located (Bandura and Walters 1977).

The flipped classroom inverts conventional pedagogy by delivering content online for outside-class study, enabling the utilization of class time for interactive activities traditionally assigned as homework. This method, enhancing active learning through technology, is rooted in constructivist theories, emphasizing hands-on engagement and collaborative knowledge application (Bergmann and Sams 2012).

Evolving pedagogical theories, such as constructivism, social learning, and the flipped classroom, crucially underpin blended learning's adoption and evolution, fostering a learner-centered, interactive, real-world anchored educational paradigm.

2 The Current State of Blended Learning:

Diverse Models:

Horn and Staker (2011) delineate four predominant blended learning models—Rotation, Flex, À La Carte, Enriched Virtual—in "The Rise of K-12 Blended Learning," integrating digital and traditional pedagogies to address varied educational needs and objectives. (Horn and Staker 2011).

The Rotation model, encompassing Station Rotation, Lab Rotation, Flipped Classroom, and Individual Rotation variants, centralizes the concept of students cyclically engaging with diverse learning modalities, either on a predetermined timetable or at the educator's discretion. Key features include a blend of online learning with interactive components such as group projects and individual tutoring. Notably, the Flipped Classroom sub-model emphasizes pre-class online content engagement, complemented by in-class, experiential activities to enhance content comprehension (Horn and Staker 2011).

In the Flex model, online learning is the backbone of student instruction, with teachers providing support and guidance on a flexible, as-needed basis in a physical classroom setting. This model allows for a highly personalized learning experience, where students progress through course material at their own pace, and face-to-face support is available when students need additional help or instruction (Horn and Staker 2011).

The À La Carte model enables students to take online courses that are unavailable or do not fit with the schedule at their physical school, while still enrolled in traditional courses. This model offers students the flexibility to tailor their education according to their interests, needs, and schedule constraints. It is particularly useful for

expanding course offerings without the need for schools to hire additional specialized instructors (Horn and Staker 2011).

An Enriched Virtual model is a whole-school experience where students divide their time between attending a brick-and-mortar campus and learning online from home or another location. Unlike the full-time online school, students have required face-to-face learning sessions with their instructors, which can enrich the learning experience through direct interaction. This model provides flexibility in scheduling and the potential for a more personalized learning pace, making it an appealing option for students seeking an alternative to the traditional school schedule (Horn and Staker 2011).

These blended learning models reflect the diversity and adaptability of blended learning strategies to meet various educational needs. By leveraging the strengths of both online and face-to-face instruction, these models aim to provide personalized, flexible, and engaging learning experiences for students.

Integration of Advanced Technologies:

The incorporation of sophisticated technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR), and adaptive learning systems, into blended learning frameworks substantially augments educational experiences. These advancements revolutionize content delivery and consumption modalities as well as learner-content interactions, facilitating highly personalized, immersive, and engaging educational encounters.

The deployment of AI in blended learning enhances personalization and support, enabling the creation of individualized learning pathways, automation of assessment processes, and provision of immediate feedback, thereby cultivating a tailored learning environment. AI technologies analyze extensive data on student learning behaviors and achievements to identify challenges and tailor educational content accordingly (Chen, Chen, and Lin 2020).

Furthermore, the integration of natural language processing, chatbots, and virtual tutors extends support beyond traditional educational confines, thus elevating the learning milieu's efficacy and efficiency. Concurrently, VR technology introduces unmatched immersive experiences within blended learning, enabling experiential learning that bolsters comprehension and memory through simulation of real-life scenarios or fantastical environments. Radianti et al. (2020) highlight VR's potential in providing practical experience within safe, controlled settings, beneficial across various disciplines (Radianti et al. 2020). Adaptive learning technologies further customize learning experiences by adjusting content complexity and delivery based on individual learner analytics, as noted by Alevan et al. (2016), enhancing educational equity and efficiency (Alevan et al. 2016).

The synthesis of AI, VR, and adaptive technologies within blended learning signifies a transformative shift towards more customized, immersive, and dynamic educational experiences, promising significant impacts on educational outcomes as these technologies advance and proliferate.

Impact on Teaching and Learning:

Contemporary research into blended learning highlights its capacity to significantly improve student engagement, academic achievement, and the provision of tailored learning experiences. This efficacy stems from its adaptability, enabling a seamless integration of traditional and digital pedagogies to meet the distinct needs of individual learners.

Enhanced student engagement in blended learning environments is notably effective, as digital resources and interactive content surpass traditional textbooks in stimulating student interest. This approach, as discussed by Smith and Hill (2019), promotes active participation and cognitive engagement by allowing students to access materials and engage in learning activities online (Smith and Hill 2019). Furthermore, a meta-analysis by Means et al. (2013) underscores the positive impact of blended learning on academic performance, with students in such environments outperforming those receiving solely face-to-face instruction. The personalized nature of blended learning, accommodating individual learning paces and addressing complex concepts, is crucial for improving academic outcomes. This combination of online and in-person instruction enriches the learning experience, facilitating knowledge retention and application (Means et al. 2009).

Blended learning also excels in providing personalized learning experiences. Adaptive technologies and data analytics enable educators to customize instructional content, as shown in the study by Xie et al. (2019). This approach adjusts learning paths based on student progress, delivering content that matches individual skill levels and learning styles, thereby enhancing overall learning efficacy (Xie, Heddy, and Greene 2019).

However, the successful implementation of blended learning models demands careful planning and consideration of challenges such as equitable access to technology, adequate support for educators and students, and maintaining the quality of online interactions (Graham 2021). The evolving role of the teacher in blended environments necessitates professional development to equip educators with the necessary skills for effective design and facilitation of blended learning experiences.

3 Challenges and Solutions:

The advent of blended learning methodologies in educational contexts introduces multifaceted challenges, yet strategic interventions can facilitate their effective integration. Central to these challenges are the deficiencies

in technological infrastructure, the imperative for comprehensive professional development, and the prevalent resistance to change among educational personnel. Addressing these concerns through meticulous strategic planning, tailored professional development initiatives, and robust stakeholder engagement is critical for the successful incorporation of blended learning frameworks.

Technological infrastructure serves as the cornerstone for the deployment of blended learning, necessitating reliable internet connectivity and equitable access to digital tools. The integration of heterogeneous digital platforms into a cohesive learning management system is indispensable for the fluid execution of blended learning (Graham 2021). The role of educators in this paradigm shift is pivotal, necessitating not only proficiency in digital tools but also in pedagogical strategies that cater to the amalgamation of online and traditional learning environments. This dual competency is often lacking, highlighting the need for targeted professional development (Porter et al. 2014). Furthermore, resistance to change, stemming from an adherence to traditional instructional methods, presents a significant impediment. Concerns over potential workload increases, the effectiveness of online learning, and the perceived devaluation of face-to-face interactions exacerbate this resistance (Ertmer et al. 2012).

Strategic planning is paramount, encompassing a thorough evaluation of the current technological landscape, the articulation of clear objectives for blended learning initiatives, and the formulation of a cohesive implementation strategy. This planning must engage all stakeholders, ensuring alignment with broader institutional goals and preemptive mitigation of potential apprehensions (Bonk and Graham 2012).

Stakeholder engagement extends beyond faculty and administration to include students and parents, necessitating transparent communication about the benefits of blended learning and strategies for addressing concerns. Active participation in decision-making processes and the demonstration of successful blended learning implementations can further mitigate resistance (Ertmer et al. 2012). Addressing the digital divide is crucial to ensuring that all students have access to the necessary technological resources, thereby enabling equitable participation in blended learning experiences (Graham 2021).

Lastly, the establishment of mechanisms for the continuous evaluation of blended learning programs and the adaptation to emergent challenges through feedback and strategic refinements are essential for sustaining the efficacy and relevance of blended learning initiatives (Porter et al. 2014).

In sum, the strategic orchestration of technological, pedagogical, and engagement strategies, underpinned by continuous evaluation and adaptation, is essential for overcoming the challenges associated with the integration of blended learning in educational institutions, thereby enhancing educational outcomes.

4 Future Directions of Blended Learning:

The integration of blockchain and Internet of Things (IoT) technologies is poised to fundamentally transform blended learning, offering unprecedented levels of security, personalization, and interactivity. Blockchain technology promises to revolutionize the management and verification of educational achievements by providing secure, immutable records of student credentials and learning outcomes. This innovation facilitates a more personalized, transparent, and easily verifiable educational experience, significantly mitigating fraud and enhancing graduate employability and mobility on a global scale (Panagiotidis 2022).

Simultaneously, IoT technology is set to redefine educational environments by creating responsive, interactive spaces. Through the use of interconnected devices and sensors, IoT tailors learning experiences in real-time based on student engagement and environmental data, thereby enhancing motivation and creating a more adaptable educational atmosphere (Nyaga 2023).

Further, advancements in data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI) herald a new era in personalized and adaptive learning. These technologies analyze vast amounts of data to customize educational content, adjust difficulty levels, and offer targeted feedback, optimizing learning pathways for individual learners. AI-driven systems also enable the early identification of at-risk students, facilitating timely, personalized interventions (Zawacki-Richter et al. 2019).

Moreover, blended learning's flexibility accommodates diverse learning styles and backgrounds, particularly in language acquisition and intercultural skills development. It incorporates real-time translation, language apps, and varied cultural content, fostering inclusivity and accessibility (O'Dowd 2018). Global collaboration is enhanced through synchronous and asynchronous tools, enabling students to develop intercultural skills via cross-cultural projects (Godwin-Jones 2014). Personalized learning pathways, tailored to each learner's language proficiency and cultural knowledge, are facilitated by AI and adaptive learning technologies, rendering education more relevant and effective (Zawacki-Richter et al. 2019). As such, blended learning's evolution continues to play a pivotal role in bridging linguistic and cultural divides, equipping global learners with essential skills for effective communication and collaboration in an increasingly interconnected world.

5 Conclusion:

The exploration of blended learning methods reveals important findings, showing its potential to transform educational delivery and outcomes. Blended learning combines several approaches, including rotation, flex, a la carte, and enriched virtual models, integrating online and traditional classroom settings. This approach

meets various learners' needs, offering personalized learning opportunities. Learners benefit from progressing at their own pace and in a way that suits their individual learning styles. Advances in technology, such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and adaptive learning platforms, enhance blended learning's efficiency by providing customized learning paths, immersive virtual environments, and real-time content adjustment, leading to improved student engagement and achievement. However, challenges like technological infrastructure, educator training, and resistance to new methods must be addressed. Strategic planning, comprehensive teacher training, and stakeholder involvement are crucial for successful implementation. Future research should focus on blended learning's long-term impact on student performance, effectiveness of specific models across different educational settings, and the role of new technologies in advancing blended learning. It's also important to ensure equal access to these innovative educational approaches, particularly for underserved communities. Blended learning holds promise for reshaping education with diverse, customizable, and interactive experiences, necessitating ongoing research and innovation to maximize its potential.

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