BLENDED APPROACH TO LEARNING -
ITS CHALLENGES AND FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has brought the trend of e-learning in education sector and one of the tools to implement this concept is through Blended Learning. Blended learning is defined an approach to education which combines online educational materials and opportunities for interaction online with traditional place-based classroom methods This paper gives the overview of the concept of Blended Learning. In higher education system blended learning has been not a new term, but it has intensively attached the importance owing to rapid development of available digital and social media that have been utilized for adequate learning environments. Besides this, the paper also reveals the dimensions of the blended learning approach i.e., blending offline and online learning, self-paced blending and live blending, collaborative learning, and blending structured and unstructured learning. This paper also describes the areas where this technique is beneficial, along with the challenges faced by this technique such as technical Challenges, organizational challenges and instructional design challenges. Then the Blended Learning process is described in terms of its various advantages. Factors that promote successful blended learning are also mentioned in this paper.

Introduction:

Blended Learning is provided by the effective combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning which are exercised in an interactively meaningful learning environment. Blended Learning courses combine online and classroom learning activities and uses resources in an optimal way in order to improve student learning outcomes and to address important institutional issues (Garrison, 2004). Blended Learning can be defined as the organic integration of thoughtfully selected and complementary face-to-face and online approaches and technologies (Graham, 2006). In general terms, blended learning combines the online delivery of educational content with the best features of classroom interaction and live instruction in such a way as to personalize learning, allow thoughtful reflection, and differentiate instruction from student to student across a diverse group of learners (Watson). Blended learning introduces and utilizes new information and communication technologies for the development of innovative learning environment to transform and improve learning. The benefits of traditional and distributed environment have been combined and re-evaluated again and again to achieve optimal learning results. The information and communication technologies are not just a supplement, they don't simply replace traditional learning system; they become an active part of novel one.

Features of Blended Learning:

Blended learning makes learning more fun as there is better involvement on the part of students. It also has a number of advantages over other methods of teaching. Blended learning gives the learner more control over what they learn and how much time they need to learn it well.

1. Blended learning is flexible: There is immense possibility in presenting content. Complex topics can be covered in the classroom and since a chunk of the content is available online, students can work on learning the subject within a given timeline.

2. Blended learning is efficient: With a well-planned blended learning strategy, you can efficiently and quickly deliver training to a broad audience. Also, digital content like videos, recordings and e-books can be reused, which is an added advantage.

3. Blended learning has extended reach: Creating a blended learning strategy reduces classroom teaching time and, by digitizing the expertise of talented instructors or subject-matter experts, you can teach more students with world-

class content. Blended learning enables collaboration: Online assignments, course commenting and discussion boards naturally encourage student collaboration. Therefore, both online and offline teamwork opportunities are more.

4. Blended learning supports personalized learning: Each person learns in a unique way and blended learning supports it. For example, you can assign reading comprehension passages according to the comprehension level of each student which can prevent unnecessary burdening for students who need to work harder.

5. Blended learning enables tracking and reporting: One of the greatest benefits of online learning, especially through an LMS, is data tracking and reporting. LMSs have the ability to track each step the student takes throughout the course, including logins, time tracking and grading. This brings online learning full circle, allowing you to better engage with your students and provide personalized materials based on what the data says.

Blended Learning in Higher Education:

The challenges of blended learning in higher education are numerous and their emergence is encouraged permanently based upon the innovative technological developments and interaction through traditional learning environments, which emphasizes blended learning transformational force. For higher education courses blended learning has become the reality characterized by continuous investigation and debates of the benefits, potential and effectiveness to transform and improve the learning process. New, highly interactive, meaningful and student-centered blended learning environments have been developed fostered by the current and advanced technologies. The convergence of traditional face-to-face and distributed learning environment that were sharply separated in the past has been in progress by developing blended learning environment. Different media/method combinations and the needs of different audiences have enabled the approach of face-to-face practiced in a lecturer-centered environment and person-to-person classroom activities, and distance learning system based on self-paced learning.

Challenges of Blended Learning:

1 Technical Challenges:

The technical challenges are not about getting technology to work on networks. Rather, they consist of ensuring the success of the programme by utilizing and supporting appropriate technologies. Technical challenges include- Ensuring participants can successfully use the technology, Resisting the urge to use technology simply because it is available. (Hofmann, 2011)

2. Organizational challenges:

Management often agrees that blended learning is the correct direction for training initiatives, but it fails to understand that this is a complex process that needs thought beyond an individual programme. Organizational challenges include - Overcoming the idea that blended learning is not as effective as traditional classroom training, redefining the role of the facilitator and managing and monitoring participant progress (Hofmann, 2011)

3. Instructional design challenges:

When learning technologies are introduced, attention is often paid to the technology implementation, while the design of the actual appropriate content is left with too little time and budget to create a successful programme. Instructional design challenges include- Looking at how to teach, not just what to teach, matching the best delivery medium to the performance objectives ,keeping online offerings interactive rather than just "talking at" participants.

Advantages of blended learning:

It represents a switch from passive learning to active learning. The focus of the classroom shifts from a presentational format to one of active learning. This involves putting learners in situations which compel them to read, speak, listen and think. It offers learners the opportunity to be either together or apart. The model of blended learning emphasizes bringing together the online and face-to-face classroom components. In addition, a blended delivery system allows students to learn and access material in a variety of modes—an important feature since students often have very different learning styles. In fact, research indicates that blended learning increases students' chances of meeting course outcomes compared with fully online and even fully face-to-face courses, by decreasing dropout rates, increasing test scores and increasing motivation on the part of students. It adds a human touch to the teaching. The interactive content enables the instructor to create a high level of interest, accountability, and real assessment. It enhances

individualization, personalization and relevance. It lets the instructor tailor learning content to the unique needs of different audience segments. The model offers students the best of both worlds because instructors and students have greater flexibility and accessibility without sacrificing face-to-face contact. A blended learning approach is an effective and low-risk strategy aimed at meeting the challenge of the transformational changes that technological developments bring to higher education. (Hancock & Wong, 2012)

Conclusion and Future Recommendations:

The strength of blended learning built in its basic and mostly used definitions comes out of the combined face-to-face and online teaching methods into one integrated instructional approach. Numerous benefits of blended learning have been reported based on its possibility to take advantage of certain environment strength and to avoid less effective elements. The blended learning is more insights into the factors and approaches which can improve connections between the virtual and physical elements of blended courses within universities, Comparative research into the strengths and weaknesses of different ICTs, especially the new technologies integrated with face-to-face environments, to investigate the characteristics of optimal blends for learning, Pedagogical frameworks to support blended learning for teachers and students and more investigation into successful models of professional development and support for instructors who adopt this new mode of teaching. The achieved benefits of blended learning model and its impact on the learning effectiveness improvement, depend on how are facto-face and computer mediated instructions blended, i.e., how successfully the peculiarities of actual environment through which blended learning is developed are taken into consideration.

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