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Blended Learning: Future of Indian Education

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Abstract

As the name suggests, blended learning is the technique where face-to-face and electronic and media methods are mixed together. The debate around the quality of higher education in India has been gaining momentum which lays emphasis on skill development, employability and digitisation of the education process. While many educators have adopted this unique form of learning, one hopes that in a decade's time, blended learning becomes the norm rather than the exception. Transitioning from the traditional classroom method of teaching to newer methods requires immense effort from teachers. Teachers often try to supplement their teaching in the classroom with digital content. Blended learning is a formal educational programme that combines classroom teaching with computer based/online training. This method ensures multichannel teaching which brings in the best of classroom teaching and digital content. Students can access digital content at home and they are encouraged to watch educational videos, play games and complete assignments in the classroom.

The techniques rely on technologies such as Google apps, Android and iOS devices, video, learning management systems (LMSs), and open-source tools such as Word Press to promote sharing and collaboration.

Keywords: Blended learning, advantages, implementation, learning, new ways

Introduction

While India is making headway in digitising the learning process, world over, universities are disrupting and innovating teaching and learning. The country has a long tradition of face-to-face learning; the teacher or *guru* cannot be replaced overnight with an unseen, technological entity. However, it is pertinent to note that the gap between what students are taught in classrooms and what the industry is demanding of its prospective employees is growing every day. The rate of change in technology has, and will continue to, outpace the change in university curriculum, the fastest of which takes place once a year. It is not uncommon to see students spending more than 20 years in the education system and saddled with unattractive job prospects. The government announced a slew of measures, including 'Swayam', an online learning portal; revamp of the National Education Policy (NEP); the Higher Education Empowerment Regulation Agency (HEERA) as a single higher education regulator; and the University Grants Commission (UGC) mandate to educational institutions to develop massive open online courses (MOOCs).

The solution lies in 'blended learning', a concept that is fast gaining pace in the Indian context. In simple terms, it is a hybrid form of teaching and learning which involves both classroom and online learning. The approach mixes concept building and enquiry-based learning which retains human interaction in education and allows students to combine traditional classroom methods with online-digital mediums. Blended learning strives to create a balance between prescriptive learning and learning at one's own pace. It is important to note here that blended learning is not equivalent to technology-rich teaching; the core of blended learning is giving the student greater autonomy over his or her education growth path, using technology only as an enabler.

Simply put, it is a win-win situation for students and teachers. The emphasis is on development of the learner's capacity and capability with the goal of preparing him or her for the complexities of today's changing workplace. Since every individual assimilates information differently, online learning aims to bring greater and better choice of learning with specific interests. Teachers will not be burdened with the mundane task of imparting education through information overload; instead, they will be focusing on higher value-added

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instruction that synchronises technology with face-to-face learning. The automated and personalised system will allow teachers to turn into mentors, free from the pressures of formal education.

For students, a major advantage is the ability to dip into a knowledge pool that doesn't end with classroom instruction. Blended learning incorporates information via online courses, developed by experts from different fields, and helping students access globally developed and industry relevant course material. Blended learning creates the possibility of practical, experiential learning, where students can learn at their own pace – both in terms of speed and complexity of information. It is only fair that the education process be flipped to become increasingly learner-driven than prescriptive in nature.

Data analytics from online learning platforms can help educators develop a targeted approach towards teaching a particular individual, harnessing data over time to help students learn better. This will provide teachers more accurate and specific insights into a particular student's pain points, where he/she is doing well, areas they find most challenging etc. This can help teachers, and by extension colleges and universities, to understand student behaviour better and provide vastly effective learning interventions.

The natural affinity Millennials have to technology, their sense of entitlement to drive their own education, and the fast-paced and fast-changing work environments they are likely to be a part of, all point in one direction — online or computer-based education could well replace brick-and-mortar education in coming years.

Technology also enables students to access a global network of education and knowledge exchange. For instance Anant Agarwal, the CEO of Harvard and MIT's online-learning platform edX, graduated with a degree from IIT Madras before pursuing a highly successful global career. Blended learning offers a window to a global world for students who might otherwise struggle to access traditional professional education programmes and supplements the wider work of universities, colleges and learning providers. In short, blended learning aims to solve problems that plague policymakers, administrators and students. While many educators have adopted this unique form of learning, one hopes that in a decade's time, blended learning becomes the norm rather than the exception. To its credit, the Government of India is formalising the online education space, ensuring regulatory recognition for online courses and encouraging universities to develop their own online curricula. The blended classroom of the future can leverage the power of online courses and free up classroom time for interactive collaboration and discussion, testing and problem-solving, redefining how education is administered, while at the same retaining the ethos of India's traditional classroom system.

Advantages

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 (Fig1.).

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

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

5. Blended learning supports personalised 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.

6. 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 personalised materials based on what the data says.

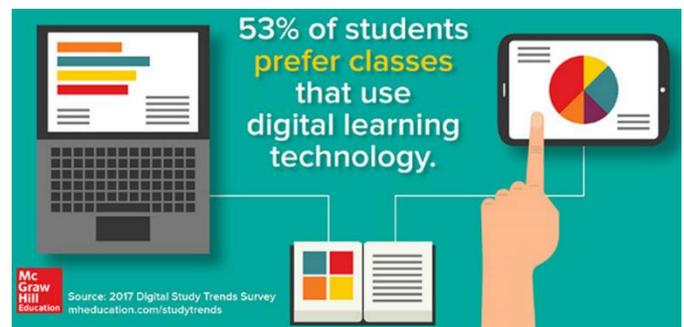


Fig 1: Depicting the preference of students.

Ways to implement Blended Learning in classrooms

1. Lab Rotation: In the lab rotation model, students fulfill the online learning part of instruction in a computer lab. This model requires adequate access to a computer lab. By using this model, you can free up classroom space for other activities within the rotation model. However, the teacher needs to plan the timings and lessons to include all classes.

2. Station Rotation: This model is another very popular approach already in place in many classrooms, especially in the elementary classroom. In station rotation, students rotate through modalities within a classroom or a set of classrooms.

In part, students learn using software or other online-based coursework on classroom computers. Students can do a

variety of activities, including but not limited to previewing, completing, or reviewing skill lessons, reading stories, or taking computer-administered assessments. Through these kinds of tech-based activities, students have opportunities to work independently and privately, free from concerns about how they will perform in front of their peers.

For the offline part of their learning, students receive direct instruction from a teacher, followed up by a variety of activities, which could include modeled and independent reading, workbook pages or other pencil-and-paper tasks, one-on-one tutoring, small-group work, projects, games, flash cards—the list of possibilities is nearly endless.

3. Flipped classroom: Flipped classrooms are very popular today. In this set-up, instructional content is delivered online, outside the classroom. It even moves homework into the classroom. Students are encouraged to watch online lectures, collaborate online discussions and carry out research at home while engaging in concepts in the classroom with the guidance of a mentor. Students can then take notes and jot down questions that this new concept provokes.

4. A La carte: When you wish to offer courses for which you don't have a teacher, you can offer the students to take an online course with an online teacher of record.

5. Enriched virtual: This method encourages majority of the instruction to be delivered online. There is face to face learning with a teacher but majority of the coursework is completed in a virtual environment outside the classroom. This method is beneficial for students who need flexibility in their schedules.

Challenges

A basic knowledge of technology is mandatory to convert a classroom into a blended classroom. If all the students are not tech-savvy, they may start to lose interest. IT literacy among teachers is also a must. The image below might help to understand the trend further (Fig2.)

Even if students are tech-savvy, the institute needs to implement a large infrastructure to include online learning.

The online content given for learning needs to be properly sourced. If not, there can be plagiarism and lack of credibility. It can result in students learning false information which is very wrong.

Blended learning requires a lot of planning on the part of the teacher. Often, students also need to be motivated to keep up with the pace of teaching. This can prove to be an added pressure on the teachers.

Conclusion

Any new method comes with its own set of advantages and disadvantages. It is important to check what your requirement is and see if the pros outweigh the cons. It is important to take student feedback and try and improve on the method even if it is implemented. With good quality course content, proper planning, best in class technology and good relations between the student group and the teacher, blended learning can be implemented in schools with great success.

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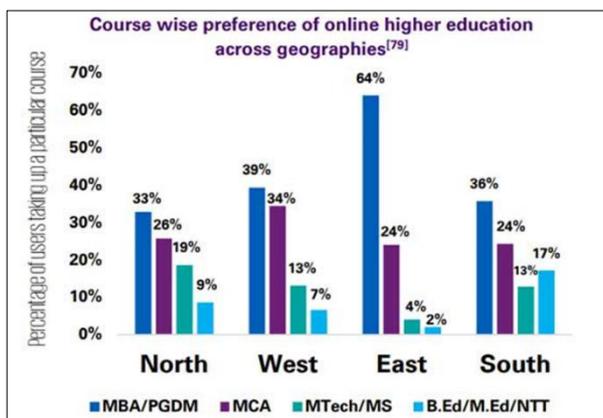


Fig 2: How popular is online learning format in various regions.