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## **Blended Learning: Need of the Hour**

Dr. Mandeep Kaur\*

\*Assistant Professor , Gujranwala Guru Nanak Khalsa College  
Affiliated to Panjab University, Chandigarh (India)

Covid- 19 Pandemic has presented completely unprecedented circumstances and has affected all spheres of life. Life has come to a standstill. There is no other event in the recent history that had such a profound and pervasive impact. People are compelled to stay indoors. Serious threats have been imposed, globally. This pandemic has made us aware of our physical fragility, crippled our economic stability, turns the daily routines upside down, ravaged all our plans and segregated us from our friends and neighbours. It has widely influenced our way of thinking. In the wake of the present situation, education can also be halted if we do not adopt any other technique. Blended learning is need of the hour to meet the challenges of the present times. It is a mixture of learning methods that incorporates both e- learning and face to face learning. It is an innovative and constructive mode of learning. The reason, I advocate blended learning over virtual teaching is that blended learning incorporates features of both face to face and virtual learning. It must be understood that virtual learning is just a technique that we are employing in times of need having no other alternative; it cannot be seen as a substitute for traditional or face to face learning. Although blended learning has both pros and cons but looking into the present situation it must be adopted. This paper is an attempt to analyze the scope of blended learning in detail.

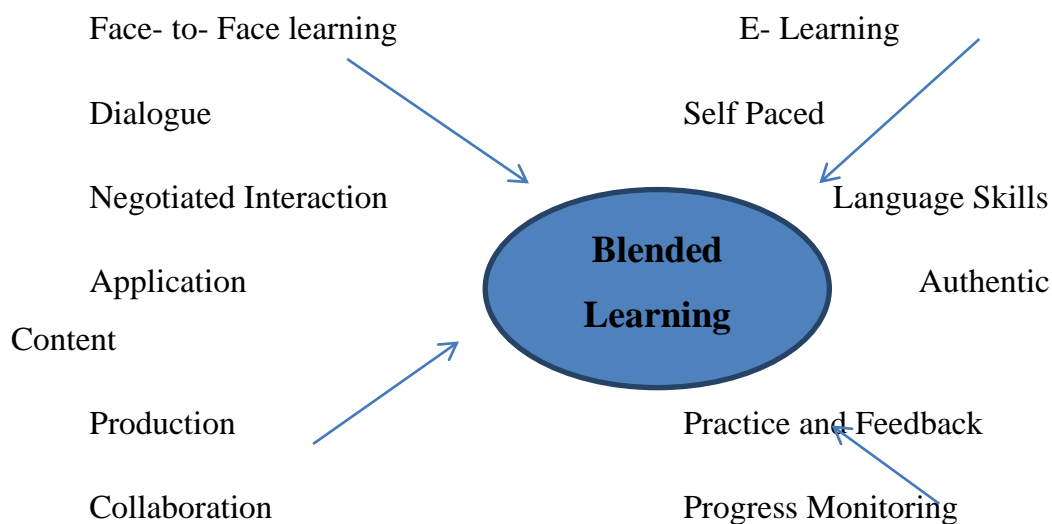
Blended Learning is also called hybrid or mixed mode of learning. In a *Guide to Blended Learning* it is defined as:

A term applied to the practice of providing instruction and learning experiences through some combination of both face-to face

and technology- mediated learning. During the technology-mediated components of these learning experiences, students are not required to be physically together in one place but may be connected digitally through online communities. (02)

For example, during blended learning, one course can involve students who are attending the classes physically in traditional classrooms and they are completing the remaining components of the course through an online platform, outside the classroom. Al Fiky also states in *Blended Learning: Educational Design, Multi- media, Creative Thinking* that it contains features that help in moving from lecturing to student centered learning, increasing teacher- student and student- student interactions, integrating novel evaluation methods and providing the information and resources to students. According to Heinze and Procter, “Blended learning is learning that is facilitated by the effective combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning and founded on transparent communication amongst all parties involved with a course” (247).

It can be completely understood with the help of following points that clearly states what blended learning actually includes.



It is a flexible and integrated approach that combines both synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication. It includes both direct and indirect instructions, collaborative and individualized teaching. As the figure shows it includes:

a) Face to face teaching- Blended learning does not exclude all elements of traditional classroom learning. Here students find plenty of opportunities to interact with their facilitator. Face to face interaction proves helpful in synchronous communication because both students and teachers get immediate feedback.

b) Availability of Course Content- Printed material is provided to students keeping in view the traditional mode of teaching and necessary guidance is provided through ICT mediated learning. That course content can be made to understand with the help of video lectures.

c) Group Discussions- Group discussions helps in increasing the confidence of the students and it also gives birth to some innovative ideas that can be further explored and discussed.

d) E-Library- In order to meet the cognitive objectives, e- libraries provides ample scope. Digital libraries help in bringing all the knowledge to the comfortable places of the students and thus help in widens their outlook.

e) Virtual classrooms- Virtual class rooms make distance learning easy. It surpasses all geographical boundaries and helps in creating a global village where everything is possible. It also provides multicultural experience to students by giving them opportunity to interact with the fellow learners and facilitators from other countries and cultures.

f) Online assessment- It makes the evaluation easy. Feedback and evaluation are important to know the progress of learning. It also makes clear where the improvement is needed. This system makes the evaluation fast, formative and transparent. Learning also becomes reliable and objective with this.

g) Webinars- A kind of virtual seminar that helps the students in participating and presenting their ideas in front of numerous virtual audiences. There are several platforms for this like Zoom, Google meet, Skype etc.

h) Expert lectures in Youtube- It has become a trending way of learning and teaching now a day where experts record their lectures and students can access them anytime. Belonging to different fields, these lectures by renowned personalities help a great deal in learning new things.

So in blended learning students have the option of both the modes- traditional and modern. It also helps the teachers in becoming techno savvy and well versed with new techniques thus proving the fact that knowledge is dynamic. Thus, use of technology has widens the scope both for the students and teachers and has helped them in acquiring new opportunities globally. It is helpful for the holistic development of learners as well as trainers. Blended learning helps in making the learning process child centered. All the contents, materials, aids are used to cater to the needs of the learners. It is a way that constructs knowledge and helps the students in being innovative, inquisitive and adaptive rather than just being a passive consumer. Only a certain amount of information can be stored by human mind in a limited period. Curious students constantly seek new information and blended learning provides a good alternative to them by bringing the classrooms to their doorsteps. Online quizzes, assignments are fine modes of evaluation.

In the present scenario, education system is running through transitional stage. There is a severe need of adopting new technologies and exploring new paths in order to impart education. No doubt face to face education has its own benefits but in the present times blended learning seems to be the only possible option. Face-to face or traditional learning seems to be impossible now a day. Even in future it can be done only with staggered planning. It will require a lot of precautionary measures like staggering the starting and closing time of the institution, holding classes in shifts in order to reduce the class size, maintaining proper hygiene, social distancing, cleanliness and many more things. Keeping in view the density of population in India, Indian system requires blended learning the most so that everybody can avail the benefits. India has many challenges to face. It can help in imparting free education to each and every one. As the material is available to students, this easy accessibility motivates them. As Wingard says about students:

They like to have the ability to access course materials anytime, anyplace, and are positive about the convenience and flexibility this provides them. Because blended learning courses help in providing them with the flexibility they need to juggle jobs, school and family (27).

It is a way that remodels the educational system. Marsh also advocated blended learning as it provides individualized learning experience to students because teachers can send different tasks to all the students keeping in view their potentials and capabilities. Main feature of blended learning is flexibility. It gives both the student and the teacher opportunity to customize class according to their convenience and requirement. This flexibility automatically widens its scope. Most importantly, it is a time saving mode.

There are several challenges that blended learning faced in its way of successful implementation like ensuring learners' knowledge of technology, changing facilitators' attitude towards effectiveness of this mode, administering and evaluating the progress of the learner and choosing best method to deliver the necessary content. Besides this many technical glitches can be faced by both learner and moderator. However, blended learning has various advantages but it also has several prerequisites. Implementing blended learning is not a facile task. It needs well trained teachers who should be well versed with latest technology. It is not easy to blend both traditional and modern ways of teaching. Teaching material must be digitalized so that everyone can have an access to that. Teachers must know how to use different platforms based on the convenience of the students. Problem solving skills and scientific attitude is required for this. Trainers must be good observers who could see through the responses of the students even while sitting far away from them. The success of any new technique depends upon the positive attitude towards that.

Teachers must be flexible enough to adopt new things and ready to be innovative and dynamic. It requires well-furnished labs, internet connectivity and computers. On the other hand, students must also have patience and good listening skills. Equal cooperation is required from the parents of the students. They must provide an environment to their children in which they can study. Blended learning requires even more frequent evaluative system. Student must be ready for this. This method has several disadvantages too like many marginalized and poverty stricken students cannot benefit because of the lack of necessary resources like internet connectivity, laptop, computer or supportive environment. Keeping the students

engaged and maintaining their interest is also a challenge. We are not ignoring these shortcomings and challenges but the advantages of this technique will surely outweigh the disadvantages if this method will be implemented with right attitude and planning. These challenges and hindrances listed above are not so that cannot be overcome. By using well equipped infra- structure, building proper learning environment, and clarity of tools, blended learning has a long way to go.

Covid- 19 pandemic has highlighted the need of disseminating knowledge and it is possible only through blended learning that opens new ways of learning even when ordinary life has come to a standstill. Based on the above discussion, we can say that in the present time when life has changed dramatically, e- learning is the only mode that can keep the education on going. The effectiveness of this mode varies amongst different age groups. Pandemic has given birth to a technology enabled learning that can happen at three levels namely institutional level, programme level and course level. While some courses require only face to face guidance and others can be taught either through blended learning method or entirely through online mode. Simpson and Anderson investigated the effectiveness of blended learning and in their results; they stated that blended learning can led to an improved education system. It can also increase the inclination of students towards learning as it caters to their interests and comforts.

So blended learning is a flexible, efficient, accessible and interactive way of learning. The success of this approach lies in the adoption of new technology and proper use of it. Implementing blended leaning approach would reduce isolation of students and encourage active learning. It also helps in learning team efforts, cooperation, time management and professional spirit. We can say that, blended learning is a valuable solution to the problems prevailing in education system, only if it is implemented in a well-planned and organized way taking the right steps and with positive attitude.

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