EDTC 813: ADVANCED USING INTEGRATED SOFTWARE

Project 3

Field Manual for Blended Learning Environment

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Introduction

Blended learning has become an innovative way of learning combining digital media with traditional classroom methods. It combines the elements of online education and face-to-face instructional environments, allowing for a variety of blended flavors suitable for the specific needs. The blended framework employs innovation while joining traditional and modern attributes of the educational process. To be successfully implemented, the nature of the blended learning needs to be recognized and attributed. Strong collaboration based on the established communications are foundational pillars for the blended learning model. This paper can serve as a manual for teachers and administrators for developing and maintaining a blended learning environment.

Understanding Blended Learning

Blended learning is the process of integrating technological innovations into traditional learning environments to enhance student learning outcomes. Christensen, Horn, & Staker (2013) state that online learning might disrupt the traditional classroom. The hybrid solution of blended-learning schools will likely be the dominant model of schooling in the United States in the future (Christensen, Horn, & Staker, 2013, p.25). The authors categorize four components of blended learning programs emerging across the K-12 school system. The first model is the Rotation model, in which students rotate on a fixed schedule and include activities such as "small-group or full-class instruction, group projects, individual tutoring, and pencil-and-paper assignments" (Christensen, Horn, & Staker, 2013, p.26; Horn & Staker, 2015). The Rotation model has four sub-models: Station Rotation, Lab Rotation, Flipped Classroom, and Individual Rotation. The second model is the Flex model, whose online foundation is used by the students

even when working offline. The third model is A La Carte model, in which students take a course entirely online. The fourth model is the Enriched Virtual model, based on "whole-school experience in which within each course (e.g., math), students divide their time between attending a brick-and-mortar campus and learning remotely using online delivery of content and instruction" (Christensen, Horn, & Staker, 2013, p.26; Horn & Staker, 2015).

Such variety of flavors within blended learning design allows for customizable solutions and original interpretations. Applying the lens of comparative education (Arnove, Torres & Franz, 2013), blended learning approach provides for consideration of unique settings and environmental differences. As opposed to the fixed factory-based model of education, disregarding the variety of learning scenarios, the blended learning approach employs the student-centered model and shifts the focus onto access, equity and personalization (Horn & Staker, 2014, p.286).

Grasping the Complexity of Blended Learning Design

The blended learning design is both complex and agile. Thanks to its inclusive nature providing a variety of flavors, driven by ever-growing innovations, there is no single cookie-cutter blended learning model, but rather a collection of best practices and approaches (Horn & Staker, 2014, p.282). Selecting, adapting or creating a unique model suitable for the individual needs of a class, school or a district is a process that requires time and planning.

While a variety of approaches exists, one unifying factor in grasping the complexity of these approaches is the collaboration and support among all parties involved: teachers, administrators, parents, students. No blended learning model can succeed without faculty innovators sharing their challenges and success stories with their peers. No blended learning

model can expand beyond a single classroom without support and openmindedness of administration (Stein & Graham, 2014). Facilitating opportunities for faculty professional development and establishing necessary technological infrastructure are the prerogatives of the supporting administration, which recognizes and appraises innovation (Horn & Staker, 2014, p.283). Families, school boards, and local officials also play a significant role in embracing blended learning models. Involving parents into innovative approaches to their children education helps with advocating for further support and additional budget (Horn & Staker, 2014, p.284), which proves that the model of successfully implemented blended learning is scalable. Last but not least, the students play a vital role in the successful implementation of the model. Not only do they benefit from the innovation-oriented learning, but can also become peer tutors in helping others to do the same (Horn & Staker, 2014, p.285).

As digital and online learning process continues to grow and successfully blends with the traditional approach, certain attributes of a learner become critically important. Crews, Sheth, & Horne (2014) used the Illinois Online Network (ION) to highlight eight characteristics of a successful online student. They list (1) being open-minded about sharing personal and professional experiences online; (2) having good written communication skills; (3) using proactive communication; (4) being self-motivated and self-disciplined; (5) having a commitment to learning; (6) having critical thinking and decision-making skills; (7) believing that quality learning can take place in an online environment; and (8) being spontaneous (Crews, Sheth, & Horne, 2014). Blended learning format promotes corresponding learner's attributes and behaviors, vital for success.

Communication as a required component of Blended Learning Implementation

Communication is the cornerstone in building a successful blended learning environment. It provides an adequate foundation for the curriculum-related activities and presents a channel for collaboration and teamwork. Blended learning allows students to work single-handedly or as a group on online assignments, projects, and presentations anywhere. Also, they [students] may only meet with instructors periodically to analyze their learning progress, deliberate about their assignments, ask questions, and get help with difficult concepts. Furthermore, students can spend a day or a week in a traditional learning environment, followed by the online learning for the rest of the term. Therefore, instructors should communicate with students in a manner that facilitates learning in class and online. Without proper communication, students tend to distance themselves and be discouraged from online setting, which can affect the overall enrollment and, possibly, decrease the state funding (in case of a public institution).

Defining and Understanding Communication within Blended Design Framework

Communication is the interchange of verbal and non-verbal information between two settings. Communication is defined as, "The process of interchanging thoughts, opinions or information by using technologies. When the mechanisms for supporting communication are established, it is possible to envision ways of using technology to connect with others. New developments in social media promote new ways of communication" (Berg, 2012, p.12). Technology allows children to communicate, ease social interaction, and build powerful language and literacy development (Bers, 2012, p.103). A successful communication process is achieved through understanding. Technology supports students in developing their communication skills in various ways. For instance, using smartphones, Blackboard discussion

and Messenger, Google Docs, Google Hangouts, Whatsapp, Skype, Video Conference, emails, and texting helps with completing classroom assignments.

Student Perspective on Communication and Feedback

Students use the blended learning process to communicate, interact, and receive feedback from their teachers. According to Horn and Staker (2015), "giving students rapid feedback and data about their performance would be a critical experience for them to accomplish their job of felling successful" (Horn & Staker, 2015, p.149). Students feel like they belong in the class when they know that the communication between them and their teacher is strong and positive. Without receiving any feedback from their teachers, students would not know how they are doing in the classroom and what they need to do to be successful. Proper and appropriate feedback allows students to understand their progress in the class and improve their performance.

Teacher's Role on Online Communication

Teachers play a huge role in the success of online and blended learning. Teachers should have good communication with students, especially responding to students questions via discussion posts or messages. They should also be flexible, give good feedback when necessary, and should be non-judgmental. According to Crews, Sheth, and Horne (2014), teachers will have a better understanding of students once they grasp "students' personality traits and learning styles," so that they can be more successful in online instructions (Crews, Sheth, & Horne, 2014). Furthermore, teachers can effectively communicate with students and build activities when they understand students' personality traits and learning styles. Students become comfortable with teachers' and approach them in a learning environment with eagerness. The

main key strategies that teachers need to implement in the online environment, according to Crews, Sheth, & Horne (2014), are good communication with students, being flexible, and giving constant feedback, and developing a sense of community (Crews, Sheth, & Horne, 2014). At the beginning of the semester, teachers should always inform students on how they can be contacted. A teacher should make a way to respond to students and give constructive feedback quickly.

Conclusion

All educational constituencies collaborate and jointly participate in the development and implementation of the blended learning model, suited for a specific scenario. A winning combination of strong collaboration and communication practices contribute towards the successful flow of the process. Due to its agile nature and underlying fluency, the blended learning environment is under continuous evaluation and customization.

References

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