Element 13

Online and Blended Learning Experiences

In a world of mobility, learning is no longer confined to a static time and place. Face-to-face or online learning are now equally suitable choices. A learning paradigm that designs and delivers online learning options must be as vibrant, relevant, agile and as personal as face-to-face learning.

Online & Blended Learning Experiences

In a mobile world, learning is no longer confined to a static time and place. Face-to-face and online learning, or a blend of the two, are now equally suitable choices. The goal should be for quality learning in either contexts. The focus needs to be to create a unique online learning environment that suits the needs of the learners, not an online replica of face-to-face school. There are a couple of key challenges. The first is to ensure that any online and blended pedagogy is potentially stronger than a real time learning experience. The second is to ensure that online learning occurs in highly relational, collaborative contexts. No learner should ever feel alone in cyberspace.

What does this mean for learning?
The rapidly expanding potential of information in a digital age provides opportunities to support unique student passion and purpose and to cultivate lifelong learning pathways. As a result, learning can become very personal.

Blended learning modifies learning beyond what was previously conceivable because students can experience 'the best of both worlds'. Optimal learning conditions might involve components of online learning mixed with face-to-face, real-life experiences. This could occur in specific learning communities or career-focused learning experiences in workplaces or other institutions.

Then	Now
• Teacher delivered content	• Learner chooses content
• Prescribed curriculum	• Unlimited knowledge opportunities
• Restricted in time and place	• Learning anytime, anyplace

Starting Questions

1. Why do you want to develop remote learning opportunities? Do you have a clear goal?
2. Does your learning community or institution have a clear vision statement for online and blended learning?
3. How might you achieve consistency of online learning opportunities across your learning community or institution?
4. Should you have a shared platform and software tools for online learning?
5. Are online and face-to-face learning experiences enabling learners to apply key skills to content?
6. Are you providing opportunities for learners to develop the skills that support online and blended learning?

Key Initial Actions

1. A dedicated team for online and blended learning.
2. A shared vision statement for the use and development of online and blended learning.
3. Conducted research of online and blended learning options and best practices.
4. Decision-making around online platforms and software and whether they should be; synchronous or asynchronous; agnostic or prescribed.

5. Clear and distributed leadership.
6. Co-opted external expertise as necessary.

On-going Actions

1. Permit time for collaborative planning of online learning experiences.
2. Co-create learning opportunities with students.
3. Ensure skills and competency development is catered for in all learning experiences and track the process.
4. Develop clear strategies for high level online interaction between learning guides/teachers and the learners/students.
5. Ensure learning experiences are collaborative and social.
6. Be aware that it is very easy for someone to feel alone in 'cyberspace' and adopt strategies to address this.
7. Target professional development to develop capacity to design and deliver personal learning experiences online.
8. Consider new roles: e.g. online pedagogy coach; online community worker.
9. Avoid allowing software to dictate learning direction and goals.

Further Reading

Online Learning

[Aurora Institute](#)

[Aurora Institute: Fast Facts about Online Learning](#)

[Aurora Institute: National Standards for Quality Online Teaching](#)

[A "Modern" Classroom Model, Designed By Teachers, Helps Students Stay Engaged And Connected](#)

Blended Learning

[What is blended learning?](#)

[Aurora Institute: Blending Learning: The Evolution of Online and Face-to-Face Education from 2008–2015](#)

[Blended learning: what's in it for the learner?](#)

[Introducing 5 Domains of Blended Learning Teaching](#)

[Blended Learning Won't Work Without a Strong Culture to Support It](#)

[Blended Learning: At the core of children learning](#)

[Four Essential Principles of Blended Learning](#)

Watch

[What is Blended Learning?](#)

[Benefits of Blended Learning](#)

Open-sourced online learning

[Alison](#)

[Coursera](#)

[The OpenUniversity](#)

[Eneza Education](#)

The Modern Classrooms Project

M-Shule

eLimu

Arifu

Future Ready School

Find out More

One of the most gratifying feedback comments I ever received was the thanks from a parent for making continuous learning available for their 17 year old daughter. That single comment justified years of work dedicated to facilitating her learning.

The context? …
Linda (pseudonym) had developed chronic fatigue syndrome during her mid-teen years. Progressively she had to sacrifice spending time with her friends while handling the embarrassment of having to regularly lie down on campus, as well as a rising anxiety about delaying her learning. Over the years, Linda became more and more confined to home. Eventually the decision was made that she would no longer attend school.

With no real consideration for specifically helping the 'Lindas' of this world, we had worked as a team for over a decade to develop teacher capacity in using online learning spaces to match the physical space. The goal was for every learner to have the choice to move in and out of online or physical spaces as part of any learning experience. Over time, this built the capacity to offer fully online versions of learning programmes in at least 15 subjects.

Linda took the online learning opportunity to work from home and complete her studies. Not that outcomes should dictate success, but if one used the common measure to assess final school performance, Linda was at the very top band of outcomes compared with the wider state. For me, all the effort of the prior decade was worth it, even for just one 'Linda'.

Ask someone a question today and they might suggest you Google it.

Living in an information age provides opportunities to learn whatever we want. As a result, the goalposts for learning have shifted. An emerging narrative highlights that learning no longer requires the memorisation and regurgitation of information because the internet stores all the knowledge we need. The potential now exists to apply critical skills to content.

Today, increasing numbers of apathetic teenagers disengage from traditional education models. A common utterance, 'what is the point in learning this if I can look it up?' or 'am I actually going to need to know or use this in the future?' is not surprising in an age where information is just a couple of clicks away. A learning revolution, in part catalysed by the internet and disengaged youth[1], is being led by educational disruptors who realise the potential for transformation by blending online and face-to-face learning.

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[1] Almost half of Australian school students bored or struggling, says Grattan Institute

Key Ideas

1. The roadmap for learning has changed as a result of the potential that online learning presents.

2. Blended learning has reimagined how learning can be designed and delivered.

3. Blended learning is most effective when it empowers learners to decide on how they want to learn.

4. An optimal learning model could enable students to select online or face-to-face approaches as it suits their immediate learning needs.

5. If blended and online learning opportunities are properly embedded, the potential for learning is both unique and rewarding.

In the context of the global pandemic brought about by Covid-19 in 2020, the world of face-to-face schooling has been upended in the space of just days, not even weeks. Previous dialogue around blended, online or other models of learning that can leverage new technologies, has been superseded by conversations about how to maximise learning in the enforced remote context. This wider context provides the perfect impetus to initially;

- introduce online learning possibilities into the general teaching and learning experiences;

- consider how to balance the more intensive synchronous online sessions with more independent asynchronous learning in remote learning contexts, and;

- consider how to best use blended learning and fully online learning methodologies in the longer term, once the pandemic crisis abates.

Questions

- In an information age, should online learning opportunities be as important as face-to-face to adequately prepare students for their future?

- How might the digital age we live in reshape the future of education?

- How can online learning help restructure the role of educators?

- Is the world of education ready to empower students to structure their own learning using blended learning to support them?

1. The roadmap for learning has changed as a result of the unique potential of an information age.

Learning no longer needs delivered the traditional way, with lone educators taking centre stage during content-heavy lessons. They can facilitate 'deeper' learning experiences and design lessons around skills acquisition, which are crucial for thriving in an ever-changing world. This new way of learning is supported by the digital era in which we live.

A digital age supports the development of unique student passion and purpose, and cultivates lifelong learning pathways. Individuals have opportunities to create their own life-narratives. This is observable in working populations who increasingly use online learning platforms to support career progression. Learning equity can also potentially improve using online platforms by bridging existing educational gaps between the developed and developing world. This supports the potential for education to help narrow global wealth disparities.

2. Blended learning has reimagined how learning can be designed and delivered.

A new style of learning is available today - blended learning. It offers students the choice of face-to-face or online learning options. It empowers students to make their own learning decisions and supports the conditions necessary for acquiring self-determined, lifelong learning skills. It also completely changes the role of the educator.

Below are some of the many benefits of blended learning:

1. It gives students control over the content and pace that suits them.
2. Learning is possible anytime, anywhere, meaning formal environments are no longer even necessary. Online learning essentially provides an on-demand, 24/7 service.
3. Online software that measures learning, can provide instant feedback and guidance for students.
4. Online software that measures learning enables educators to spend non-contact time focusing on providing feedback, planning, designing, communicating and relationship building. It also enables more accurate differentiation and intervention for students who might need support.
5. Online learning support means face-to-face experiences can begin at a deeper, more skills-focused level.
6. Face-to-face learning experiences can focus on developing student competencies, skills and concepts.

7. Students can gain access to any resources that can be made available outside of a formal learning day, which might include access to educators online.

8. Students gain a more realistic way of working, which fosters ownership and responsibility; habits that support career-readiness.

Optimal learning opportunities would have a variable mix of virtual (online) learning experiences and real-life experiences (e.g. applied learning, internships or authentic projects), summarised as follows:

$$\text{online learning} + \text{optimal learning opportunity.} = \text{real-life learning experiences}$$

3. Blended learning is most effective when it empowers learners to decide on how they want to learn.

The strongest versions of blended learning mix mentorship with self-determined learning. One goal for the educator is to empower the student to be highly responsible for their own direction of inquiry and challenges when in the online environment. It would be a mistake to reduce online learning to a sequence of tasks that in some way replicate rote learning. If either online learning or real-life experiences encourage the student to apply their knowledge, the opportunity for accomplishment increases.

Some challenges:

1. What about students who have been progressively conditioned to be over-reliant on their educator?

2. Are students equipped with the skills to continue learning independently?

In the bigger picture, students need to be empowered to take ownership of their own learning needs and directions. In an ideal world, every student would conclude formal education equipped to manage their own learning and cultivate their own lifelong learning paths. This can be achieved if they are given valuable opportunities to acquire the necessary competencies and skills to do so. Blended learning can help advance this goal, but it is necessary to intentionally build the capacity of the student to determine their own learning pathways.

4. An optimal learning model could enable students to select online or face-to-face approaches as it suits their immediate learning needs.

In an optimal learning model, blended learning could offer customisable options. Students should be able to decide on the type of learning which best suits them with full agency to move in and out of face-to-face or online worlds using whichever blend they want at any stage of their learning. Placing responsibility into the hands of the student offers freedom for them to navigate their own process, immediately making learning more authentic, unique and creating pathways towards self-determined, lifelong learning.

In this optimal model, educators support, coach, mentor, observe and provide feedback to their students. With less emphasis on timetables and schedules, educators can be provided with the necessary time to grow their capacity to design learning experiences for both face-to-face and online domains. Online learning needs to be given as much attention in its design and use of diverse methodologies as face-to-face learning.

5. If blended and online learning opportunities are properly embedded, the potential for learning can be unique and rewarding.

Blended learning is fast becoming a universal approach to unite the frontier between the physical and online worlds. Now that information is so widely accessible, real, authentic learning can exist with online learning supporting face-to-face experiences and vice versa. The table below compares the traditional model with the potential new model for learning:

Then	Now
1. Content was decided by the educator.	1. Learners can choose their own content.
2. Information was the 'problem' to be solved, and inferred by communicating understanding through remembering.	2. Learners use content to demonstrate their understanding by applying, analysing, creating and evaluating.
3. Educators (or textbook companies) use content to devise tasks.	3. Learners can create their own tasks based on content they choose.
4. Learners are required to prove known answers or solutions.	4. Learners create solutions to challenges and support their reasons.

With online learning opportunities, educators have a unique opportunity to create learning experiences in ways not previously possible. They can shape a learning culture, shifting it from one largely focused on understanding and remembering, to one where applying, analysing, creating and evaluating are prioritised.

'We need to move beyond the idea that an education is something that is provided for us and toward the idea that an education is something that we create for ourselves.'

Stephen Downes

Act Now

Developing or updating blended learning experiences poses several questions to be addressed at leadership and educator level. Leadership decisions impact the educator, which ultimately filter down to impact student learning. The following questions provide an initial reference point:

1. Does your learning community have a clearly stated vision for blended learning?
2. How might you achieve consistency of digital learning experiences across your community?
3. Would a common platform for managing online learning be useful?
4. Are the online and real-world learning designs enabling learners to go deep into skills-based application of content?
5. Are you providing learners with appropriate opportunities to develop the appropriate skills to support blended learning experiences?

The great variety of online learning platforms available can be somewhat overwhelming. Big decisions must be made then once agreed and implemented, will likely set the course for learning experiences for the foreseeable future. It is vital to choose online learning platforms or software wisely. The sections below focus specifically on actions to be taken at leadership and educator level.

Leadership

1. Create a dedicated team.
This team will form the management and design structure for blended learning. Educators and students must be included in it because a broad representation of stakeholders improves decisions.

2. Decide your purpose.
A shared vision will set the course for decisions on how to best implement blended and online learning experiences.

3. Do the research.

The blended learning team should be continuously gathering information to support all decisions and actions.

4. Call on expertise.

Outside agencies should visit your learning community to hold information sessions around platforms, software, browsers and servers.

Educators

1. Deliver purpose

The purpose for blended and online learning experiences stated in its mission should form the blueprint from which all decisions and actions are made.

2.Commit to effective planning

Planning is crucial for successful blended learning experiences and educators need time to dedicate to design and implementation.

3. Attach skill sets to all learning

Effective use of online platforms and software means moving beyond mimicking rote, face-to-face learning approaches online. Students should be able to decide on their own content with educators steering them towards attaching key skills to their learning.

4. Empower students

Empower students to use online learning experiences to suit their own purpose. Ultimately, content and instruction must shift to the control of the student, which can increase motivation to learn.

5. Monitor learning behaviours

Use online data and records to monitor how students are learning. This can guide decision making to provide useful support for all.

6. Refine, iterate, evaluate

Developing blended and online learning experiences will take time. Be willing to adopt a fail-forward approach and to question the learning culture and its continued relevance in an ever-changing world.

Final points to consider

1. Get technical

Do you want an agnostic platform that can fit a variety of software or servers? Is your blended and online learning programme going to be synchronous or asynchronous?

2. One size does not fit all

There is not a one size fits all solution to choosing an online learning model. Innovation is required to implement it correctly to suit unique needs, resources, constraints, architecture and culture etc.

3. Don't let software dictate learning goals

Online learning should support learning but not become the main driver. The role of the educator is crucial to making sure face-to-face and online learning experiences are equally as strong.

Examples in Action

The global coronavirus health crisis of 2020 has thrown many educational systems into online and remote learning in the space of just a few days. To a degree, this sudden upsurge in the need to provide learning online has provided a myriad examples of online learning in action.

There are a number of organisations around the world who have developed their thinking since the early 2000s and in doing so, influenced many schools and systems. The Aurora Institute (formally iNACOL) has, for the past decade, organised large conferences to advance the capacity of any educator to incorporate online learning into their schools and practice.

iNACOL produced some helpful documentation in 2015 about standards in quality online learning at a time when governments around the world had not paid much attention to the topic: [NACOL National Standards for Quality Online Programs.](#)

The examples included below are schools and organisations using online learning in various ways, all with the overarching goal to improve learning opportunities.

Open-sourced online learning

[Alison](#)
Alison has become a major force in free online education and skills training. Today, with more than 13 million learners in 195 countries, Alison is changing how the world learns and up-skills.

[Coursera](#)
Coursera is an online learning platform where learning is taught by top instructors from the world's best universities and educational institutions. Courses include recorded video lectures, auto-graded and peer-reviewed assignments and community discussion forums.

[The Open University](#)
The Open University is a MOOC platform which offers a range of certificates, diplomas and short courses to undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. It has been operating for more than 50 years.

Digital learning providers

[Eneza Education](#)

Eneza Education is an edtech company that offers revision and learning material via basic feature phones with its mission to make 50 million learners in Africa smarter.

[The Modern Classrooms Project](#)

The vision of the Modern Classrooms Project is to create classrooms where every student has unlimited access to knowledge, learns at their own unique pace and truly masters each skill before moving on to the next.

[eLimu](#)

eLimu is one of the most talked about EdTech companies in Africa and the leading digital educational content provider in East Africa.

[Arifu](#)

Arifu is a personal learning tool you can chat with on any mobile device to learn new skills. Arifu is a chatbot platform for engaging, training, and capturing insights on important and hard-to-reach audiences over basic and smartphones.

[M-Shule](#)

M-Shule is the first adaptive, mobile learning management platform designed to improve performance for millions of primary school students across Kenya and Sub-Saharan Africa. Its artificial intelligence system understands each individual child's competency and delivers the right lesson for them at the right time.

Schools

[Khan Academy](#)

The Khan Academy has become one of the most well known online learning organisations challenging many notions about the nature of deep learning.

[Moringa School](#)

Moringa School is a multi-disciplinary coding school committed to closing the skills gap in Africa's job market by offering high-potential students the necessary technical and professional training to compete in a digital, global economy.

[Palisades Cyber Academy: How One District Implemented a Hybrid Learning Program](#)

Palisades Cyber Academy is an online and hybrid learning program that is fully integrated into the Palisades School District. This program gives the district the ability to offer a range of online courses and scheduling options to better meet the needs of its students who would like to pursue custom and cyber learning opportunities.

Scandinavia

Schools such as [Verzlunarskóli Íslands](#) and the regional [school Fjolbrautaskoli](#) Snaefellinga have been offering online courses for at least a decade and a half. They

saw the opportunity created by online learning to engage many students who would otherwise find accessing learning a challenge. The geographic challenges of living and learning in the remote areas of Iceland, Sweden and Finland led to many examples of creative synchronous and asynchronous online learning experiences.

British Columbia

British Columbia has an education system that has enabled access to online learning for at least fifteen years. There are many providers in their system whose learning, insights and experience in this domain is very useful:

[BC Online School](#)
BC Online School gives students the opportunity to learn at any pace, any place, any time. Students can take courses that meet graduation requirements while still enrolled in your present school.

[Online & Distributed Learning](#)
students can connect with their teacher from anywhere in the world on their own schedule and their own terms. This approach is called distributed learning (DL). Students can choose to complete an entire program via distributed learning or partner it with other learning options like in-person classes, blended classrooms or homeschooling.

Further reading

[A "Modern" classroom model, designed by teachers, helps students stay engaged and connected](#)

[4 skills essential for effective blended teaching](#)

[12 Of The Most Common Types Of Blended Learning](#)

[What is blended learning?](#)

[The Definition Of Blended Learning](#)

[What blended learning is – and isn't](#)

[New Future Ready Schools Guide to Blended Learning](#)

[8 Reasons Why Blended Learning Is Becoming a Trend](#)

[The one mistake everyone makes with blended learning](#)

[Blended learning: what's in it for the learner?](#)

[Introducing 5 Domains of Blended Learning Teaching](#)

[Blended Learning Won't Work Without a Strong Culture to Support It](#)

[The Promise of Blended Learning](#)

Blended Learning: At the core of children learning

Four Essential Principles of Blended Learning

Understanding and supporting blended learning teaching practices

Blended Learning: Strategies for Implementation

Choosing Your Blended Learning Model1

Blended Learning Built on Teacher Expertise

Building capacity for blended learning in further education

9 steps to creating and managing successful blended classrooms

New Future Ready Schools Guide to Blended Learning

Watch

What is Blended Learning?

Benefits of Blended Learning