

Tips for Effective Blended Learning

Five steps to help teachers reach the delicate balance of blended instruction.

By Amy E. Baeder

For the first two years of my eldest daughter's life, we lived more than 2,000 miles from family, so when we visited, it was a special occasion. We now have two daughters and live closer to my parents. From dance class drop-offs to weeknight dinners, my daughters have an integrated experience with their extended family rather than a special-occasion relationship.

This integrated relationship is analogous to the experience students should have in a blended learning setting. Whether they know it or not, every teacher has a relationship with blended learning along a spectrum—a nonexistent relationship, a shallow relationship, or a special-occasion relationship—and, if teachers are to embrace this approach, they should move toward an integrated experience.

First, let me clarify what blended learning is. According to the website of Michael Horn, co-author of *Blended: Using Disruptive Innovation to Improve Schools* and a co-founder of the Clayton Christensen Institute, blended learning uses the Internet to “afford each student a more personalized learning experience, including increased student control over the time, place, path, and/or pace of learning.” Brilliant strategies, however,

can fall flat when adopted in name only. If we embrace the Internet part of blended learning but leave behind personalization, or if we disconnect technology from the other aspects of the curriculum, then we have hollowed out blended learning's purpose.

Fortunately, intentional planning can lead to a more integrated experience. First, ensure that teachers have the resources they need to implement blended learning, from devices and reliable Wi-Fi to capacity-building resources such as time and training. It's also critical to research which models of blended learning to use, pilot blended learning with willing teachers, and establish an implementation plan before a whole-school rollout.





Create an Experience

Expert teachers create structures and strategies to ensure all students are benefiting from blended learning. It's a delicate balance between creating scaffolds for success and releasing control to maximize learning. Here are five tips for teachers.

1 Develop a reason. Students need a compelling reason to be online or they get distracted. Design units so students are going online for authentic, mysterious, or compelling reasons. For example, have them track data in a national database as citizen scientists. Project-based learning units, when crafted artfully, do this well by providing “need-to-knows.”

2 Teach digital literacy and citizenship. Teach students to be online researchers, critical consumers of information, and courteous digital citizens. Model creating search terms and keywords and identifying credible online sources. Set norms for online discussion boards. Show students how to access expert help and communicate courteously online.

3 Provide literacy scaffolds and extensions. Have an entry point for online readings, such as anticipation guides or graphic organizers. If there are multiple Lexile levels represented in a class, send students to articles that provide equivalent content at varied reading levels, or link to an audio recording. Facilitate transitions and create a seamless experience between online and face-to-face work by having students discuss what they read, did, or experienced.

4 Start smart. Start small with a two- to three-week unit. Do preliminary research to anticipate resources and roadblocks students might encounter. Organize your online materials using a learning management system, Google Classroom, or a Google Doc with a few links and instructions.

5 Prepare for takeoff. Blended learning teachers—especially in project-based classes—learn to release some control because students will learn some digital skills more quickly than teachers. Students will ask their teachers questions to which teachers don't know the answers, so teachers should practice saying, “I don't know—let's find out.”

Blended learning is about more than simply having students use devices in the classroom. It's a strategy to enhance motivation, broaden the students' classroom experience, and provide a personalized learning experience while leveraging the power of both face-to-face communication and digital resources. With careful planning, we can ensure that blended learning is seamlessly and successfully implemented to provide an integrated learning experience for our students. **P**

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