

Fill Up Your Digital Toolbox

A wide array of digital tools and resources is available to supplement blended learning efforts.

By Deborah B. Ford

In blended or flipped learning, students make the best use of face time with the teacher during school hours. Working in live time on collaborative projects with the expert at their side, students have an opportunity to ask questions at the point of need. Outside of the classroom, they watch videos, read informational texts, and gather information to use with their learning community. With a few simple strategies and some powerful (mostly free) digital tools, schools that implement this educational approach can find their transition easier—and cheaper—to manage.





**CONNECT &
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This article is part of a
yearlong series on technology
and innovation.



Evaluate Your Library Program

A Colorado study shows that test scores improved in schools with a full-time librarian, regardless of the socioeconomic background of the school population. From Alaska to North Carolina, more than 60 studies show a clear connection between student achievement and the presence of qualified library staff. Certified media specialists or library teachers are trained not only in education, but also in technology, research, and collaboration. Better use of print and digital resources extends curriculum tools beyond the bricks and mortar. Certified library staff support the curriculum through the training of both students and teachers. The approach is cost effective and assists the community in the achievement of its goals.

Ask yourself:

- Is adequate funding for staffing and print and digital resources used to ensure students have access to the best information on various reading levels and areas of the curriculum?
- Is time allotted for the training and implementation of digital resources for all students by qualified staff?
- If your library schedule is fixed, does your library staff have enough flexible time to allow collaborative teaching in the library in a flipped learning environment?

Discover the Best Instructional Resources

Although using Google may be the most common form of research, many students haven't been trained in analyzing the results of their search. Using the school or district's databases is an obvious choice in easily acquiring vetted resources. Ask yourself:

- Does everyone in my school, including parents, know which databases we have?
- Do they know logins and passwords?

In addition to paid subscription services, other award-winning and vetted websites abound. For example, the Association of Library Service to Children selects "great websites for kids." A committee of librarians vets websites that you can use in all areas of the curriculum. The list of websites is searchable by subject or grade level, and educators can trust that the sites are appropriate for their students.

In the Literature and Languages tab, Spanish websites will assist your English-language learners. From *Engineer Girl*, which is devoted to the encouragement of science training for girls, to *Smithsonian TweenTribune*, featuring current events articles on a variety of subjects, teachers are sure to find content to enrich their flipped learning activities.

The American Association of School Libraries (AASL) annually selects "best websites for teaching and learning." Among them is *My Storybook*, a website and a free app that enables kids to create a book online. It can be shared for free on social media or printed for a \$5 charge. *Bookopolis* is an online community where readers can discuss their favorite books and make suggestions to others. And *Gooru* is a free website that curates lesson plans and other classroom activities. Why reinvent the wheel?

AASL also annually selects "best apps for teaching and learning." A mix of free and inexpensive apps, this year's selections will fill your digital toolbox with great resources. For example, *Kahoot* is a multiplatform app as well as a free website that makes evaluation fun. Teachers set up a survey in advance and students enter the code number on any device and play along. Data can be recorded and used for re-teaching.

With flipped learning, you may have students who forget the assignment. To address this issue, use *Remind*, an app that enables teachers to safely text parents with the assignment, website, or encouragement, while keeping phone numbers private. Text messages also can be set up in advance.

Stretch Your Budget With Free Informational Text

Some curriculum is truly best found online. Current events are no longer new once they become a book. *Newsela* rewrites current events on a daily basis and combines them with an assessment that is just right for every student. When students read the article, they can select their Lexile level—on the same page. It's easy to differentiate the learning with a click of the mouse. Writing prompts and quizzes are provided for most articles. In the pro edition (paid), teachers can monitor student progress, show achievement, and graph performance trends. *Newsela Pro* automatically adjusts reading level for students as teachers guide them toward mastery. Many articles can now be translated into Spanish.

Wonderopolis also provides free informational texts. Every day, it selects a “wonder.” For example, “What’s the Difference between a Prime Minister and a President?” introduces the lesson by asking users which position is elected. Vocabulary words are defined, and quizzes, additional resources, an introductory video, and extension activities are usually included in each wonder. Kids can keep learning on their own in the summer with Camp Wonderopolis.

Many of your teachers may be familiar with ReadWorks.org, but don’t take that for granted. On this free website, educators will find leveled fictional and informational texts with assessments similar to those of the Common Core State Standards. Students build up to open-ended questions on each article. The tool is perfect for blended learning, language arts skills and strategies, novel units, reading passages, and paired texts. Stretch your budget even further by allowing teachers to assign passages to students.

Use Technology for Greater Impact

The purpose of technology is not just to have it. It’s a means to achieve your goal. With resources scattered all over the Internet, a digital tool to corral it is your best bet. Since the databases are probably already on the library website, talk to

your librarian, who may be able to add websites and apps to the online library catalog homepage.

As part of my library coaching, I write booktalks for hot new books, JLG’s Booktalks to Go. I also search for resources to use in the teaching of these books. With ready-to-go resources such as these, easy access makes them more usable. I store them in one place for convenience—LiveBinders.com. It is an online notebook where you can collect websites, documents, and videos into one container.

Whether you use it as a public resource or a private collaborative tool, you’ll find it easy to use. Like Pinterest, you can add resources to your binders while you work. Because they have social media capabilities, tabs can be easily shared with others. In addition, you may want to use multiple resources for the same content to reach the most people. My Booktalks to Go are also saved on Pinterest, Twitter, Facebook, and blogged at Junior Library Guild.

Another digital resource is Screencast-o-matic, which records as many as 15 minutes of your computer screen. Along with the audio you record, students in flipped learning can see a lesson whenever they need to. Teachers can create a free channel, embed videos on their own pages, or post to YouTube. How-to videos could include:

- Logging into databases;
- How to wisely search online; and
- How to use a LiveBinder (or other resource).

Make Better Use of What You Have

You probably already have the tools you need to launch blended learning. From reworking your library schedule to accommodate collaborative teaching to better using databases, it just takes a little effort.

With a little bit of planning, schools can take the good they already have and make it better. Look for the tools that work for you and your community, gather your resources, set implementation goals, and hone your digital skills. Student learning and achievement will ensue. 📺

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DO THIS

Want to implement the ideas in this article? Try these steps to get started.

- Highlight a resource in every newsletter and meeting.
- Work with your librarian and technology team to provide training for teachers.
- Organize a parent night where databases, websites, and apps are demonstrated.

