



HOW TO PUT THE “BLENDED” IN BLENDED LEARNING

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Blended learning can be complicated by the anxiety of moving to digital curriculum and unfamiliarity with new tools. Here’s how experts and district leaders are successfully integrating live and digital lessons and getting results.

Introduction

BLENDED LEARNING IS ON THE RISE IN K-12 SCHOOLS, and it’s easy to see why. The model combines the best of face-to-face and digital instruction in ways that can personalize learning, make content more accessible, and shift the old-school paradigm from students as receivers of information to students as creators of new knowledge.

Trying blended learning for the first time can be intimidating. Change of any kind can lead to anxiety, and that’s especially true when using technology in the classroom because it involves changes in pedagogy as well as the use of unfamiliar tools (Bitner and Bitner, 2002). But the transition doesn’t have to create anxiety.

In this ebook, experts discuss their top strategies for how teachers can get started with blended learning—including how to overcome initial concerns, choose the best model for their particular context, and effectively integrate digital content into their instruction.

What Is Blended Learning?

THE CHRISTENSEN INSTITUTE DEFINES BLENDED LEARNING as an education model in which students learn partly through face-to-face interaction with their teacher and partly through online or digital instruction, “with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace.”

The institute describes four different types of blended learning: Rotation, Flex, à la Carte, and Enriched Virtual. Catlin Tucker, an English language arts teacher at Windsor High School in Sonoma County, California, says the models that might work best for teachers who are new to blended learning are variations of the Rotation model:

- Station rotation, in which students move in small groups from station to station within their classroom, and at least one of these stations involves some form of online or digital learning.
- Whole group (or lab) rotation, in which students shift between modalities—traditional and online or digital instruction—as an entire group. This can be accomplished through the use of student devices in class, if there are enough devices so that all students can be working on a device at once, or by moving to a computer lab for all or part of a class period.
- Flipped classroom, in which students receive instruction online at home in place of their traditional homework, and then teachers extend the learning in class by leading students in discussion, practice, or project-based learning.

Benefits of Blending

MICHAEL B. HORN, CO-FOUNDER AND DISTINGUISHED FELLOW OF THE CHRISTENSEN INSTITUTE, says at least 75 percent of K-12 schools in the United States have implemented some form of blended learning—and at least nine million students are benefiting.

The first figure comes from Evergreen Education Group and its “Keeping Pace with K-12 Digital Learning” series of annual reports, Horn says, and the second comes from his own estimate after talking with various digital learning vendors.

Blended learning has become so popular because it offers many benefits. Perhaps the most important of these is that it enables teachers to meet students’ individual learning needs more effectively.

“Teaching in a public school with classes composed of students at various skill levels, it’s so challenging to differentiate and personalize instruction for different students,” Tucker says. “In a traditional model, students have one chance to ‘get it,’ and if they don’t understand the information, too bad.”

But with a blended model, “students have online resources at their disposal,” she says. “If I connect them with a resource online, they can revisit that resource as many times as they need to be successful. It gives them the time and the space to make sense of the information. And I can use online tools to personalize the practice they’re doing for where they are in their skill level, which is an incredible thing to be able to do.”

Blended learning also extends the learning for students. “I love the idea that, if we don’t finish something in class, there’s a very fluid learning that happens where things extend online,” Tucker says. “There is no endpoint—no cutoff to their learning, or their exploration, or their collaboration, or their communication.”

How to Choose the Right Model

How you approach blended learning with your students will depend on a number of factors, including your goals, your teaching style, the kinds of activities you intend to lead, and the edtech resources you have at your disposal.

Horn recommends figuring out what problem you’re trying to solve and then designing an approach that best addresses the problem. “If you start with the ‘why,’ then the ‘what’ will become more apparent,” he says. For instance, if you’re looking for more time to work one-on-one with individual students or small groups of students, then a station rotation model might make the most sense.

For middle- or high-school teachers who are used to leading mostly whole-group instruction and are trying blended learning for the first time, the whole group rotation model might be the easiest method to begin with, Tucker says, because it most closely mirrors traditional instruction.

“You’re leading an online activity with the entire class, which is an easier transition for some teachers,” she explains. “You are moving as a cohesive group through a series of activities, so there isn’t a radical shift in terms of lesson design.” It’s a less daunting transition, because the pedagogy is basically the same.

However, the whole group rotation model is easier to pull off if you have devices for every student, Tucker notes. Taking students to a computer lab is an alternate option within this model, but that can be disruptive and can result in lost class time as you move to the lab, set up the computers, and so on.

“I very rarely do a whole group rotation unless I have a Chromebook or iPad cart and I can get all of my students online at one time,” she says. “If you don’t have access to a one-to-one scenario or a mobile cart of devices, then the whole group rotation is hard to make a reality.”

For elementary teachers, who tend to rely more on station work, the station rotation model might be a more natural extension of what they’re already doing, Tucker says. This is the method she prefers in her own classroom as well, because she doesn’t have enough devices in her classroom for every student.

The flipped classroom model works well if students have online access from home, but it’s important to note that flipped learning isn’t just about flipping “when and where” instruction is delivered. It’s also about flipping the attention away from the teacher and toward the learner by designing in-class lessons that spur student inquiry and take their learning deeper.

“In the traditional teacher-centered model, the teacher is the primary source of information,” according to the Flipped Learning Network’s definition of the flipped classroom. “By contrast, the flipped learning model deliberately shifts instruction to a learner-centered approach, where in-class time is dedicated to exploring topics in greater depth and creating rich learning opportunities. As a result, students are actively involved in knowledge construction as they participate in and evaluate their learning in a manner that is personally meaningful.”



Blended Learning with Catlin Tucker: Whole Group Rotation

6:54 MINUTES

What Effective Blended Learning Looks Like

Blended learning will look different for every teacher. For Tucker, because she doesn't have devices for every student, it typically involves a station rotation in her classroom, or she'll have students complete online assignments for homework and then use class time to engage students in discussion or collaborative projects.

Tucker uses many online resources, but one of her go-to solutions is StudySync®, offered by McGraw-Hill Education. She often has students read and annotate digital texts in StudySync for homework.

“I’m a huge fan of the online annotation tool, because one of my big concerns as an English teacher is that—as kids go online—they transition from focused reading to a ‘skim’ mode, where they’re not really employing any of the active reading strategies they might employ with pen and paper,” she says. “I’m focused on helping students to take those pen-and-paper active reading strategies and shift them to the online environment, so that when they see a text online they’re thinking about interacting with it in a meaningful way.”

Tucker teaches many students who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and she says that the audio tool that is built into the StudySync texts is “incredibly helpful as an accommodation for those kids.” She also has her students complete online writing assignments for homework and then review each other’s writing during station rotations using the StudySync anonymous peer review tool.

“One of the biggest challenges I face is finding the time to review student writing,” she says. “Peer review is a strategy that helps me to get eyes on their work when I can’t get to it that quickly. Students get anonymous feedback from their peers almost instantly, which I love.”

Tucker says her students find the StudySync videos that introduce each text an engaging way to prepare for what they are about to read. “Anything with media tends to be more engaging for students than text alone,” she observes. And the StudySync® TV videos that model student discussions “help them to see what strong academic discussion looks like. I can see them picking up cues from that—and their discussions have definitely improved.”

Tucker hasn’t abandoned print materials altogether. She has purchased optional student workbooks from StudySync and has her students work on their close reading skills in these workbooks during station rotations as well.

“The day they got their StudySync print companions, the kids were flabbergasted: ‘We get to keep these? These are ours?’ They were so excited to have something that belonged to them,” she says. “Every time we get them out, I know they appreciate having them, and I think there’s something really powerful about the combination of both print and online materials.”



Blended Learning with Catlin Tucker: Station Rotation (Part 1)

5:24 MINUTES

Keys to Success

Trying blended learning for the first time can be daunting, but it doesn’t have to be. Here are four strategies to help you get started effectively.

Start slowly.

Many teachers make the mistake of thinking that blended learning has to be an “all-or-nothing” proposition. But that isn’t true. Teachers can try blended learning regardless of where they might be on the spectrum of technology use.

You don’t have to give up your traditional practices, Horn says. Instead, experiment with blended learning for a single lesson. Assess your results, figure out what worked and what didn’t, and then try another lesson or a whole unit when you’re ready, with the goal of improving on what you did before.

Choosing curriculum materials that offer both print and online modalities is one way to scaffold your entry into blended learning. You could start by teaching with the print-based components and then transition to the digital resources as you have the capacity to do so—or you could even take a hybrid approach and combine the use of both print and digital materials.

Tucker, who describes herself as someone who was never very tech-savvy, says she began her foray into blended learning by extending class discussions online with the help of Google Apps. That led her to try flipping some lessons, and now she has fully embraced blended learning with a station rotation model in her classroom.

“When you’re just starting out, choose one technology tool, or one strategy, and try it out,” she advises. “You might make mistakes, but you can learn from them, and then you can add another tool or strategy. Teachers often think they have to do it all at once, and they get overwhelmed—and that sets them up for failure.”

Be willing to adapt.

As is the case with any change, being flexible and willing to adapt can serve you well as you try blended learning for the first time.

Because Windsor High School is not a technology-rich environment, “I’ve had to be creative in my approach to blended learning,” Tucker says. But that hasn’t stopped her from moving forward.

“I began by leveraging the connectivity my students had at home,” she says, “and then I branched out and started embracing a ‘bring your own device’ approach in

my classroom, which I was able to do because we do have a pretty robust Wi-Fi infrastructure. I’ve tried to leverage the technology that comes through the door with my students, in addition to the technology we have in the school.”

If your students don’t have Internet access at home, Tucker says, consider combining the flipped classroom and station rotation models. That way, students “are still able to watch the videos, and they still have control over the pace of their learning—and they are able to apply it and extend it at the next station.”



Blended Learning with Catlin Tucker: Flipped Classroom

4:54 MINUTES

Focus on the culture of your classroom.

If you want to give students more autonomy by shifting some of their learning online, you have to think about the implications of that decision and how to make sure your students don’t abuse that privilege, Horn says.

This requires establishing, and reinforcing, a positive classroom culture in which students respect each other’s opinions and follow the rules—and understand the consequences for failing to do so.

“Blended learning will take a good culture and make it better, but it will also take a bad culture and make it worse,” he says.

When Tucker started engaging her students online, one of her biggest fears was, “What will 158 teenagers say when they’re let loose on the Internet? What will they post? What will they do? Then I realized that they’re already in this space, connecting with people and having conversations. It’s my job to teach them how to do this in a respectful, supportive, and substantive way. They might be in this space all the time, but they don’t necessarily know how to have academic conversations or collaborate in a productive way with their peers.”

Tucker realized she needed to teach her students these skills proactively, so they could “navigate this space better and hopefully avoid the behavior I was afraid of.”

Don’t be afraid to fail.

Trying anything new is fraught with risk, especially when you’re trying it out in front of students. There might be times when a lesson doesn’t go as you would like, and there are bound to be some complications along the way. It’s how you handle these challenges that makes all the difference.

Horn suggests that teachers try to change their mindset about failure—and in the process, they’ll pass on valuable lessons to their students.

“Be comfortable with failure, but don’t see it as failure. See it as learning,” he advises. “That way, you’re actually modeling the behavior you want your students to develop, which is to look at failure as an opportunity to learn. And be open about that with your students. As educators, too often we want to have all the answers and be in control. You have to be comfortable giving up some of that control and showing students that it’s OK to fail—that everybody is learning all the time.”

Tucker acknowledges that she made several mistakes herself when she first tried a blended learning approach in her classroom.

“If we’re going to change with the times, if we’re going to allow education to evolve as it needs to, we can’t make decisions from a place of fear,” she says. “There is a whole

taboo around failure; we feel we have to master tools or strategies before we actually use them in our classroom. Unfortunately, that’s not realistic anymore, because tools are changing so quickly and our kids are more comfortable using technology than many of their teachers. Try something new, make mistakes, learn from those mistakes, and then you can add another tool or strategy the next time.”

Conclusion: Listening to Student Voices

Tucker has her students evaluate her class every semester, and one of the questions she asks is how they feel about blended learning and the flipped classroom style of learning. “Of the 85 kids who took the survey last semester, only two kids said they didn’t prefer a flipped classroom,” she says. “All the rest said they strongly preferred it and had anecdotal reasons why.”

Across the nation, students—and educators—agree that blended learning is enhancing their education. In the 2015 “Trends in Digital Learning” report from Project Tomorrow, these were some of the key findings:

- 45 percent of district administrators say their implementation of blended learning is already achieving positive results.
- Three-quarters of principals attribute increased student engagement in learning to the effective use of digital content in their blended learning classrooms.
- Teachers who have implemented blended learning are more likely to use online textbooks, games, animations, and other digital content within instruction than teachers in traditional classrooms.
- 52 percent of teachers in blended classrooms say that their students are developing collaboration skills as a result of using technology within learning; 61 percent of their students agree.

Students really do gravitate to these new digital strategies, Tucker concludes, noting: “The most powerful aspect of blended learning, in my opinion, is that I feel like we have the opportunity to give every single student a voice. There are kids who aren’t going to talk in real time in front of a group, but they’ll thrive online.”

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How StudySync® Supports Blended Learning Success

When StudySync Founder and CEO, Robert Romano, noticed that his own children and their friends weren’t interested in reading, he was inspired to create an online resource that would bring classic works alive for the YouTube generation.

The result was StudySync, a comprehensive blended learning ELA curriculum that makes literature and nonfiction texts more accessible to today’s students. With the help of video, audio, and social media tools that engage students, StudySync makes ELA curriculum relevant to their daily experience.

StudySync enables teachers to create and send assignments that are accessible from any device. For teachers who are still transitioning to blended or digital learning, an optional print companion is also available.

At the heart of StudySync is an extensive digital library with online access to full texts and excerpts from more than 1,000 fiction and nonfiction, both classic and contemporary works for middle and high school. The library also provides scaffolded supports, including audio recordings, closed captioning, and annotation tools for improved reading comprehension.

Each anchor text includes a movie-like trailer to introduce the work, piquing students’ interest and providing context for their reading. Texts also are grouped thematically, and classic and contemporary works are often paired along themes such as Justice or Power to get students thinking more deeply about the material.

Teachers often struggle to engage their students in high-level discussions about literature. A feature called StudySync® TV aims to help with that by providing short video clips that model rich academic discussions for students. In addition, daily writing prompts called “Blasts” challenge students to reflect on topics of current cultural interest. Students form their own opinion in 140 characters or less and then share it with their peers on a national social media platform, leading to further debate.

Teachers are being asked to make an enormous leap to interactive learning,” said StudySync CEO Robert Romano. “Our goal is to help teachers bridge that gap, meet them where they are, and help them forward to where they want to be.