Blended Learning

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Abstract

Give a kindergartener a pencil and see what happens. Now, give a kindergartener the world and see what changes. Giving a five-year-old the worlds seem quite ridiculous, wouldn't you agree? What could they possibly know about the world around them? Society views the length of time each person has been on Earth as a measurement of that person's worth and capabilities. With this notation, we, unintentionally, limit that person's potential. Haraphnuik tells us, "It has to start with the learner. The needs of the learner become the measuring stick." Although educators teach students of a wide range of ages, they are not the only means of a student's learning. The student themselves are apart of that measuring stick, as Haraphnuik explains. Blended learning allows the student, teacher, and experiences within and outside the classroom to mold a student's education. Through various learning materials, explorations, and meaningful connections, students will not be limited to what I, as the teacher, think they may or may not know. This literature review will examine a variety of articles, scholarly cites, and books on why blended learning is essential to a student's educational career and beyond, the importance that needs to be placed on students having choice in their learning, and why student ownership will facilitate lifelong learning.

Blended Learning

What is blended learning?

Blended learning is not a new form of education. John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, Sigmund Freud, B. F. Skinner, just to name a few, all have their version of blended learning. Constructivism is a more likely term that would have been examined and discussed by these theorist.

"According to Jonassen (1994), constructivism is also often misconstrued as a learning theory that compels students to "reinvent the wheel." In fact, constructivism taps into and triggers the student's innate curiosity about the world and how things work. Students do not reinvent the wheel but, rather, attempt to understand how it turns, how it functions. They become engaged by applying their existing knowledge and real-world experience, learning to hypothesize, testing their theories, and ultimately drawing conclusions from their findings." (Olusegun, 2015, p. 66)

Notice that Jonessen mentions nothing of an educator's presence within the student's learning. Constructivism, or blended learning, holds the student's ability to take ownership of their own learning at the forefront. With this type of learning the teacher kindles the passion for learning, not for the material that is being taught.

Although we are currently in the Digital Era, it should be noted that incorporating a technology device into a classroom, does not signify a blended learning atmosphere. The benefits for having such a valuable resource in the palms of student's hands is bountiful, but technology isn't a fix for the education system. Computers, laptops, and any other technology device does not make the learner a better learner. It's the experience behind the technology that helps the learner obtain an authentic learning experience. Horn and Staker explain that, "Blended learning

is any formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace."(Horn & Staker, 2014, p. 34) Recently our entire school system has gone disarray due to the Coronavirus. Teachers were asked to flip classrooms on their backs and run races that have never been paved. The belief that technology would be the savior through this process is proving false time and time again. Now, revamping Horn and Staker's definition into the year 2021 means educators have to intwine technology into a student led classroom rather than become dependent on it. "Personalized learning technology allows students to work at their own pace, focus additional time on areas of weakness, and develop automaticity in skill areas that have been mastered."(Four Keys to Success Using Blended Learning Implementation Models, 2015, p. 4) Nothing is removed or deleted, but rather restructured with the student's ownership and individuality of their learning still remaining first and foremost.

What tends to happen to "many schools is they find themselves unsuccessful in implementing blended learning because purchasing technology is not enough to transform learning."(How to Effectively Implement Blended Learning, 2018, para. 6) A technology device will not change the learner itself just as giving a student a pencil will not create a world known author. The way an educator is able to successfully integrate different pieces of learning, such as technology, into a blended learning environment distinguishes whether or not the approach is successful and impactful on student's learning.

Why is blended learning meaningful?

Blended learning is not a matter of meshing a few good things that work and miraculously thinking change will happen. This type of learning stems from the fundamental

parts of knowledge. "A successful blended environment involves an appetite for trying new things, strong district and school leadership, teacher buy-in, effective training, and vibrant community partners. It is a recipe that, despite the hard work, the district is willing to take on because the results appear to be worthwhile." (Daniel K. Lautzenheiser & Taryn Hochleitner, 2014, p. 13) The mouthful that that is reiterates that blended learning is the entanglement of the student, teacher, parent(s) and experiences cohesively working together to provide a meaningful learning environment. It takes a village to raise a child. Why would it not take a village to educate one. The collaboration between a student and their own innate curiosity mixed with teacher scaffolding infused with parent's guidance and an inviting community is the depiction of Lautzenheiser and Hochleitner's recipe for blended learning. Taking this thought process into the classroom means making the necessary shift to strengthen our entire educational system. Igniting and fostering the love of learning will sequentially result in a meaningful learning experience.

Harapnuik asks, "What if we focused on helping all learners learn how to learn? What if we focused on helping all learners continue to be the autodidacts they actually were when they were young children?" (Harapnuik, 2020, 17:18 - 17:35 min) Kindergarten is the foundation of every student's educational career, but it is not the foundation of their learning career. Since the womb, humans are learning. Learning to breathe, learning to talk, learning to learn. "Perhaps, [and] more importantly, students are given a more comprehensive educational experience that can boost retention and engagement [through blended learning]." (What Are the Benefits of Blended Learning? | Dmi, 2018, Benefits to students section). Attending school should not hinder that love of curiosity and wonder, but rather allow it to blossom and show students how to continue cultivating it.

Through a kindergarteners eyes, words mean nothing. Placing a book in front of them and asking for a twelve page dissertation of it is absurdity. Placing a book in front of them and asking them to explore it and tell someone their findings is age appropriate, genuine and eminently beneficial. This learning-by-doing (Pektas & Gurel, 2014, p. 31) action continues to foster the development of lifelong learning. "Whilst a researcher or teacher might consider a course to be successful if students meet or exceed expectations in assessment, learner satisfaction is important because it accounts for students' personal experiences of the course." (Jessica Bowyer & Lucy Chamber, 2017, p. 19) Putting age aside, the dissertation described above might be considered a form of success in a traditional classroom, but in a blended learning classroom it is nothing more than a piece of paper with words on it. Blended learning allows students to make the most out of their learning experience; it makes for an authentic exploration rather than a mundane essay.

COVA

Blended learning is a type of COVA approach because it allows students to experience learning in its rawest form. COVA is an approach that emphasizes learner choice, ownership, voice, and authentic learning experiences through student-centered, active learning. (Dwayne Harapnuik et al., 2018) Providing real world experiences and connections, students are actively engaged and constantly longing for more learning. Thus, having the choice, ownership, and voice in their learning experience that Harapnuik describes.

Choice.

Allowing students, regardless of age, choice in their learning will create a positive impact throughout their life. "Learners are given the freedom to choose (C) how they wish to organize, structure and present their learning experiences and evidence of learning."(Dwayne Harapnuik et al., 2018) Referring back to the dissertation discussion, Dr. Harapnuik's statement would signify

that if a student so chooses and prefers to write, an educator is not there to take that away from them. The choice is truly all at the student's discretion. What they feel comfortable and confident with should be placed above requirements that could alter the authenticity of their learning.

Without deprecating the learner's power in having choice, "it is crucial to acknowledge that the learner's choice is guided by the context of the learning opportunity and by the instructor who aides the learner in making effective choices." (Dwayne Harapnuik et al., 2018, p. 69) At five-years-old, there is always a window for a learning opportunity but it is still important to steer students in the right direction. Let them create what you are steering, let them navigate how to get there, but guide them in a significant way that still allows them to do the actual doing and learning.

Ownership.

When a student takes control of their learning, it will change the dynamic of their education, along with their life, forever. Jonassen explains that a learner taking ownership of the problem is key to learning because it increases learner engagement and motivation to seek out solutions.(Reigeluth, 1999) A result of this is taking a kindergartener's infamous question "why" and turning it back on them. A student taking "ownership requires that the teacher give control over/back to the learner."(Dwayne Harapnuik et al., 2018, p. 71) This means you aren't dismissing their "why" questions, but instead empowering them to find this answer creatively and on their own.

This part of the COVA approach continues to make the learning unique to the individual. "When we let our learners take control of their learning, the experiences they can embrace, the meaningful connections they create, and the knowledge that they gain will be life changing." (Dwayne Harapnuik et al., 2018, p. 83) By allowing a five-year-old, or a learner of any age for

that matter, to take ownership of their learning shows that the teacher is instilling in them to take the world and make it their own. The answers are all around us and simply giving the student the response they are looking for gives the learner zero tools and skills to put in their toolbox for situations that are guaranteed to arise later on. "If we care enough for our learners, we need to let go of the control and be willing to see them struggle or fail or even get annoyed with us if we expect them to learn the life lessons that come about through taking full ownership of authentic learning opportunities."(Dwayne Harapnuik et al., 2018, p. 82) As scary and as impossible as it may sound, kindergarteners are well equipped to take ownership of their learning. Educators are resources to them and should hold that title with pride, but believing that they are capable of accomplishing such higher level thinking tasks will further support the COVA approach in every learner. This is what makes a blended learning environment great, although it's probably the hardest part, teachers can let go of the control in their classroom and let the students thrive (How to Build a Successful Blended Learning Model, 2017).

    Voice.

    With the endless amount of platforms that promote individuality, students are easily provided a way to have a voice all their own. Learners should use their voice in the structuring of their work and ideas and when sharing those insights, knowledge and their creations with their colleagues within their organizations (Dwayne Harapnuik et al., 2018, p. 70). Because of these opportunities there is no longer the same regurgitated information projected out of different learners, but instead meaningful knowledge that can be presented in a voice all their own. "Voice is realized and is authentic when the learner is creating, writing, presenting and sharing with their audience and not for their instructor."(Dwayne Harapnuik et al., 2018, p. 71) The simple shift of throwing the question back on to the learner allows for their own voice to shine through. Their

own takeaway of the information that they themselves researched through blended learning will be different than what the teacher would have given, and that is the point. The continuation of fostering a love for learning and sharing it with the world is shown through this part of the COVA approach.

Authentic learning.

Authentic learning happens when choice, ownership, and voice are all embedded within a learners learning. This blended approach meets each student on his or her own level through personalized learning, thus making the student experience much more individualized (Four Keys to Success Using Blended Learning Implementation Models, 2015).

Bartell states, "I teach my students that failure is an opportunity for growth and that they shouldn't be afraid to try new things, but sometimes it's hard to take my own advice. My students need to practice being independent thinkers and learners like all other students, and they deserve to know what it feels like to take pride in their own learning." (Bartell, 2018, para. 14 & 16)

Authentic learning does not mean failure is obsolete. Instead it means that failures are only another benefit from the blended learning approach. Failures bring more questions, consequently leading to where and why the initiative was started. A student is guaranteed to fail, but through blended learning the learner will be equipped with the tools needed to continue their cycle of learning.

Conclusion

Blended learning is not a new approach to teaching. We have seen it take form through Dewey's works along with many others. What remains at focus is the choice, voice, and ownership through the learning that will facilitate a passion for an authentic learning experience.

Although incorporating technology is needed in the world we live in today, so is ensuring that the educator let go of control within their classroom to develop the learner's own thoughts and ignite a lifestyle of life-long learning. Blended learning allows learners to make meaningful connections through both their successes and failures. Adapting this learning approach, especially at a young age, will empower students to look for answers long after their educational career.

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