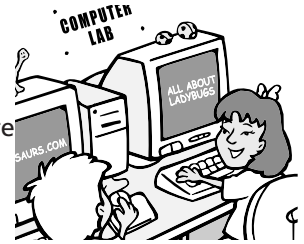## What is Blended Learning?
Incorporating Technology with Traditional Instruction and Assessment

by Becky L. Spivey, M.Ed.

Blended Learning occurs when students are under the supervision of educators and are learning, in part, through an online delivery system of information with some control over their time, direction, and/or pace. Using multiple media and other modes of instruction to teach has been around for decades. Recently has it come to mean combining face-to-face learning with technology-based learning. The increasing pressure for schools to ensure that all students achieve higher standards of learning with fewer resources has inspired educators to meet the demands of the 21st century classroom by *personalizing* instruction using a combination of technology and traditional methods.

Blended Learning is fast becoming a hot topic among educators and students. Severe budget cuts, rising student dropout rates, declining graduation rates, and an even higher decline of college graduates are causing educators to rethink curriculum delivery within the traditional public school. Educators and administrators have asked themselves, "How can we make school: more interesting and invigorating, challenging yet accommodating, more contemporary yet traditional, and more active and less passive?" The answer? Technology.

The *International Association for K – 12 Online Learning* describes Blended Learning as:

- Shifting from lecture to student-centered instruction, allowing students to become active and interactive learners.

- Increasing interaction between student-instructor, student-student, student-content, and student-outside resources.

- Integrating formative assessment (assessing what students already know) and summative assessment (assessing what students learned or did not learn from the lesson/unit)

Are there benefits of Blended Learning?

According to a recent study by the Gates Foundation, Blended Learning benefits teachers and students by providing:

- Access to high quality, current, and engaging content in a variety of forms.

- Flexible class time and structure.

- Adaptability to students' needs.

- Multiple sources of instruction and assessment as well as diagnostic tools to direct the pace and format of the students' learning.

- Opportunities for teachers to tailor instruction ensure progress and mastery for all student, particularly for those who have been underserved or overlooked.

Smart phones, tablets, computers of all kinds, and instructional programs on the internet (with no virtually no limit to their content or networking) can take students on a warp-speed ride on the information highway. In its wake, the teachers' dated content and teaching styles of traditional classrooms fall far behind. Students no longer want to (or will) sit and listen to teachers deliver information for hours that they can access on an iPad or another device in seconds. Elementary and secondary teachers coming into the field of education today understand that instruction needs to be inspiring, applicable, challenging, and current in order to maintain the students' focus and interest.

Integrating the blended classroom theory is catapulting our antiquated public school classrooms into the 21st century. By allowing groups of students to rotate between teachers and online technology stations, teachers are able to deliver and assess content in multiple ways while tweaking the students' instructional pace to be more challenging or less demanding, depending upon their individual needs. Students take in the information while attending multiple learning stations and then have opportunities to demonstrate to their teachers what they have learned.

Blended Learning in Elementary Classrooms

Severe budget cuts made in elementary schools target mostly teacher to student ratios, sometimes drastically increasing the number of students per teacher. These cuts have prompted teachers and administrators to be creative in dividing classes into smaller groups and rotating the groups between two or more teachers and a monitored, instructional computer station. Students log in and work on individualized programs for instruction, skills practice, and even tutorials. These programs assess students' progress at the end of each session. This data helps teachers and administrators analyze a student's individual progress and allows them to accelerate the student's program, maintain its current pace, or slow it down to accommodate the student's needs.

How does Blended Learning affect a school's curriculum?

Another goal of Blended Learning is to move teachers away from a "canned, one curriculum fits all" toward programs that are customizable for each student. Customizable programs focus on individual student needs and achievement and allow a student to move forward at his or her own pace. Blended Learning also help teachers address a state's standards or Common Core Standards more efficiently as they are able to deliver instruction in a variety of ways and use the student data generated by the programs to help students learn and attend at a pace that is comfortable for them.

Initial costs to adopt a Blended Learning model depend upon the size of the school or classes implementing it. Costs are steep at first due to the price of the technology components for the program, but the investment is extremely cost effective in the long run. More importantly, the benefits that result from its implementation are overwhelmingly supportive of its effectiveness in getting our students interested in attending school as well as getting them on track to be competitive with their peers worldwide.

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