RESEARCH ARTICLE

BLENDED LEARNING AS A WAY FORWARD IN THE POST PANDEMIC ERA

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Abstract

Covid 19 has marked profound changes in every aspect of human life and education field also underwent drastic transformation. The aftermath of corona virus was dreadful and India also witnessed people suffering during the pandemic. Schools and colleges were closed for a long time as the virus was spreading rapidly. During this period, education system was trying to be lively with online mode and this was rather a difficult alteration in the urban areas. The online learning method continued for more than two years. Now the pandemic is under control and the schools and colleges have been reopened to bring the students back to the classrooms. Despite the tremendous effort by government and other independent agencies, making the learning possible for all the learners has been a difficult journey. This endeavour has resulted in increasing resourcefulness and both students and teachers learned to collaborate learning with the assistance of ICT tools. Blended method is a combination of online learning and classroom learning. A blended mode of learning can be viewed as a balanced way to bring back the learners to a safe environment by minimising classroom time and accelerate learning process through various online resources.

Key words: Covid 19, Blended learning, ICT

Objectives

- To analyse the aftermath of covid 19 in the education sector.

- To evaluate the scope of blended method in the post pandemic era.

Schools and colleges were closed during the pandemic and it affected the students' learning, social interaction and overall development. The desperate situation also created awareness about the different roles played by educational institution and the relevance and importance of such places in a student's life. It asserted the role of schools and colleges in individual's lives, communities and societies. When the schools opened after a long break, utmost priority was given to make the children safe and comfortable. The connectivity aspect offered by technology still continues to take up an important role in the educational sector. Technology offered new ways of delivering educational services. The interactive online classes and sharing of materials through different online modes are examples. The pandemic period also witnessed inequality in access to technology especially in urban areas. Government had taken up initiatives to deliver classes through TV channel like

Kite Victors and several NGOs and individuals came forward to provide gadgets for needy students. These measures supported online mode of learning. Blended learning is a method to redefine the traditional learning procedure with the help of technology.

The term 'blend' is self-explanatory or reflective and denotes mixing or adding one component to another. Blended Learning (BL) is a combination of face to face and online activities and it comprises of interactive experiences within and outside classroom. Prior to the onset of technology, teaching happened to be comparatively formal. The concept of learning was exclusively fixed in the classroom. With the advent of technology, the education system advanced and prevailed the constraints of ancient method. In recent time Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is an ingredient of every mode of knowledge gain. BL is one such technique which explores the possibilities of ICT.

Numerous potential elements and methods can be adopted to form a blend. Instructor can combine guided individual study, self-paced learning, project-based learning and computer-based instruction with each other. The blend of face to face and online materials will vary depending on the context, needs of the students and preference of the teacher. Steps in constructing a new blend are setting the course objective, selecting media and tool, formulating techniques and strategies, organising activities and finally evaluating student learning.

Theoretical background gives framework for educational concepts and it is relevant to validate research on the basis of a theory. A paradigmatic shift has been marked regarding the educational theories during the last few decades. The change was from Behaviourism, Cognitivism and to Constructivism. The most influential learning theory at the end of 20th century was Constructivism. Constructivist perspectives on learning have become increasingly influential in the past twenty years and can be said to represent a paradigm shift in the epistemology of knowledge and theory of learning. The term Constructivism might have been derived from Piaget's reference to his views as 'constructivist' and Bruner's description of discovery learning as 'constructionist'. Social Constructivism is otherwise known as Dialectical Constructivism. In contrast to Individual Cognitivism, Social Constructivism focuses on collaborative social interaction. Through this highly interactive process learner defines meaning and helps others to find meaning in the learning process. Thus, knowledge is mutually built and this concept is a reflection of Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory of Learning.

Learning theories are changing over the years along with the progress in technology. Connectivism is a learning theory for the digital age. In the current blended method, the components are online learning and classroom learning and online teaching exploits the best possibilities digital technology. This far-reaching theory of learning was developed by George Siemens and Stephen Downes. They have analysed the limitations of Behaviourism, Cognitivism and Constructivism to explain the effect of technology on our learning, communication and life style (Siemens 2004). Siemens has published a book titled *Connectivism: Learning as Network Creation* and Downes' book is named *An Introduction to Connective Knowledge* and both the books elaborate their concepts regarding Connectivism. Behaviourism, Cognitivism and Constructivism were developed when the use of technology was not in widespread use. Differing to other theories, Connectivism includes the scope of learning by human beings, organisms, organisations, machines, systems and networks. This theory represents the modern learning environment in which internet plays an important role.

In BL both online and classroom tasks are mixed together. These two elements are not contradictory to each other but are complementary. The aim is to expose the utility of online and offline teaching to its limit. A number of ways are there to blend different components and it offers immense learning opportunities. There has to be a balance between number of classroom teaching hours and independent activity in online. The teacher has to monitor and give guidelines for both types of learning. Detailed planning will help to manage online and offline time effectively. Areas which need

Dr. Sowmya K.N.

face to face interaction can be done during classroom teaching and discussions of various aspects can be arranged through online platform. Dividing learning hours will enable the students to have a deep understanding of the topic. Teachers can encourage students to find more resources in internet and setting a collaborative online area helps to share the resources they found.

Several academicians have suggested different ways to form a blend effectively. The selected components can be used in innovative manners. According to Mei-Ya Liang and Curtis J. Bonk, steps in constructing a new blend are;

1) Setting course objectives: - It can be decided based on the needs of the students. If the aim is to learn second language (L2), the course objectives can be; a) To improve L2 ability through uses of online tools and resources. b) To enhance strategy by communicating in different formats of texts with peers online. c) To develop text comprehension and production by constructing online content.

2) Selecting media and tools: - Selection of media and tools depend on the availability and practical environment of the course. Online news sites, text chat rooms, wikis, blogs, digital story books are some of the media and tools.

3) Formulating techniques and strategies: - Based on the objectives, using the media and tools instructional techniques and strategies are employed to blend online components into face-to-face learning.

4) Organising activities and technologies: - Different learning activities and supporting technologies are organised into a sequence of three phases, the first phase involves with student interaction with somewhat familiar and relatively easy to use technologies under teacher guidance. The next level of interaction incorporates more elements of social and technological interactions. In the final stage various networked activities and media types are integrated in BL.

5) Evaluating student learning: - In the last stage formative evaluation is used to understand student's perceived learning and affective outcomes.

Following proper steps gives scientific outlook for the method. The above mentioned five stages make easy to identify the progress or change by adopting blended method.

Scope of technology in teaching is enormous and the possibilities have been explored widely. ICT will not replace classroom teacher; however, technology may assist the teacher in the teaching process. Teaching will be more productive by combining technology with classroom teaching. Students can interact with teacher both online and offline. A language is best learnt by using it. Getting more opportunities to interact in the target language will definitely improve the communication skills. Teacher can dedicate the classroom time to introduce the lesson. Conducting assignments and discussions in online will help to save teaching time. Uploading reference materials and notes will be useful for the students. They can download and save the materials for future purpose. Arranging video conference with subject experts will help to know different perspectives of the subject. This method can be utilised effectively if implemented with a clear planning.

Every teaching method has merits and limitations. Classroom learning offers and direct contact between teacher and learner. It ensures not only academic development but helps to develop the psychological and sociological wellbeing of students. These overall developmental aspects will not be possible in online learning. But the flexibility of time and abundance of resource is a great advantage in online method. By combining two different methods limitations can be minimised and can explore the possibilities of both the methods. This is the major objective behind blending two teaching methods.

Closure of schools and colleges has caused damage in children's learning, nutrition and overall well being. After reopening, the challenge in front of educational institutions is not just nurturing educational needs but to enhance physical and mental developments also. The role of technology is to accelerate these processes with the help of multiple online platforms. Innovative methods will help to design remedial learning at different level of education. Incorporating technology will help the teachers to assist their teaching process and this will facilitate the learners for a better learning habit for the future. The wide perspectives of technology for learning discovered during the pandemic can be explored in the future also by following blended method.

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