



An Appraisal of Blended Model as New Teaching-Learning Paradigm

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Abstract:

This paper investigates a unique mode of blended learning as a combination of flipped method, priorly available study material, online lectures and assessments and physical campus interaction between the instructor/moderator and the students. A mixed-method qualitative approach has been employed for data collection. The data have been collected from the university's administration, a few involved teachers and selected students. A few interactive sessions of the hybrid courses have also been observed. The relevant administrative authorities are aware of their vision and required efforts and procedures for making the blended model successful. The teachers' and students' aptitudes and classroom environment are found more formal while the lectures are recorded for later use in blended learning. The students, who are taking up courses through this blended model, view the blended model as a unique one, though initially, it takes them some time to get familiar with this innovative model of learning. The study concludes that the blended model can be effectively utilized for: the selected courses of humanities and social sciences; as an alternative and supplement in distance learning programmes, and; for the further education of professionals who want to continue their studies along with their employment responsibilities.

Keywords: Pakistan, Covid-19, blended model, hybrid learning paradigm, classroom, education

INTRODUCTION

Education methods have undergone massive transformations over the centuries. The use of technology is the fundamental reason for innovations in teaching methods (Rizvi, Gulzar, Nicholas, & Nkoroi, 2017). The most significant technological contribution in the field of education is electronic learning (e-learning); the use of electronic devices for learning. It has changed the whole

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teaching paradigm. E-learning is novice since it focuses on students' learning in contrast to the traditional way of teaching whose main focus is the teacher's imparting knowledge to the students. For better gain of teaching outcomes of e-learning along with traditional teaching methods, a new approach called blended learning or hybrid learning has emerged.

Hybrid learning is a combination of face-to-face learning and e-learning using a wide range of teaching resources and communication options available for both learners and instructors. By practicing blended learning, the benefits of e-learning are achieved without losing face-to-face communication. Blended learning is a term increasingly used to describe the way e-learning is being combined with traditional classroom methods. It reflects a greater change in basic teaching techniques than simply combining e-learning with traditional learning. Blended learning modifies the ways teachers and students undergo the learning experience. This mode of learning is self-determined and autonomous. It has also benefited the flipped classroom approach which is a discrete approach of its own with multiple horizons of innovative learning.

Blended learning with the assimilation of 'flipping' differs from the traditional mode which relies on lectures, taking notes, completing assignments, and passing a final examination. The students in blended learning are free to access the online study material at their ease and convenience. Online availability of lectures and other relevant materials enhance the later utilization of classroom sessions as real-time work sessions, class discussions, or other activities designed to support the student's progress. The idea is to introduce and reinforce student-centered learning wherein learners can handle course contents and experience innovative ways of self-learning in a fully individualized way. Apart from flipped classrooms, there are other models of blended learning as well which include face to face driver model, rotation model, flex model, online lab model, self-blend model and online driver model. They are differentiated based on the blend percentage of face-to-face and e-learning. Their basic components are almost alike. All these models utilize behaviorism, cognitivism and constructivism as their underlying teaching approach.

Learning and teaching methods are very important in achieving the learning outcomes. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has experienced new scenarios in various fields of life, and the education sector remains at the top of this list. The concepts of online teaching and learning got popularity around the globe and still, many institutions are continuing hybrid teaching for it is a convenient and alternative learning/teaching method. In this study, the researchers have investigated different aspects of blended-hybrid teaching to reduce its drawbacks and enhance its fruitful objectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The emergence and consequent wide use of various technologies, especially information technology, have brought significant update in traditional modes of teaching and learning at various levels (Rizvi, Gulzar, Nicholas, & Nkoroi, 2017). Among such newly emerged modes and methods are distance learning, e-learning and blended/hybrid learning (Hammond, 2015). The blended learning model is considered unique owing to its multiple advantages (Rizvi, Gulzar, Nicholas, & Nkoroi, 2017). E-learning and its various forms are being widely appreciated for higher education (Ozkan & Koseler, 2009). Klimova and Kacetl (2015) view the hybrid model as a complement to the traditional teaching-learning of foreign languages and the model helps in compensating the

deficiencies which otherwise hinder the students' learning. The blended model can contribute to solving issues in second language learning, especially in reading comprehension (Rombot, Boeriswati, & Suparman, 2021). Khader (2016) finds the blended model effective in teaching-learning of science subjects at primary school. For the teaching of social sciences and languages, where lab work is not required, the blended model can be considered a complement to conventional teaching for its multiple benefits.

Educational institutions in developed countries are working quite massively on framing various models of e-learning and blended learning along with distance learning and conventional classroom learning models (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2018). The recent three decades have seen a growth in innovative modes of teaching-learning including the blended model, and still further innovations are being added (Güzer & Caner, 2014). Education innovators unanimously agree on three basic components of the blended learning model:

- A trained educator conducting in-person classroom activities
- Learning material in the form of pre-recorded lectures (available online) by the same instructor
- Structured, independent study time guided by the material in lectures, and skills developed during the classroom experience (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2018).

In some situations, the move to this new teaching paradigm i.e. blended learning requires redefining traditional roles. For example, the term “facilitator” is used as a replacement for “teacher” to highlight a slightly different focus. The facilitator's focus is to empower the students with the skills and knowledge required to utilize most of the online material and independent study time. The facilitator guides the students towards the most meaningful experience. Facilitators focus on four key areas:

- Development of study material in the form of online lectures and offline activities.
- Facilitation of customized and scheduled communication with and among students.
- Orienting the learning experience of individual learners and strengthening the learning experience by customizing study material.
- Testing and grading, unlike traditional teachers (Hammond, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of any research study is very important as it is directly related to the validity and reliability of the results. The study is qualitative in its form and nature. A mixed-method qualitative approach has been employed to investigate the diverse aspects of the blended-hybrid model of teaching-learning at the chosen study site. Multiple qualitative methods for data collection have been chosen since they are more popular and more beneficial for research in the areas related to organizational dimensions (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012; Gummesson, 2005).

This study aims to explore the motives behind introducing the hybrid (blended) model for the selected courses, particularly the course “Report Writing Skills (Course Code: HUM102)” as a case study at the study site, the procedures of launching a hybrid mode of teaching/learning, difficulties during the phenomena, students' perceptions and attitudes towards this innovative pattern, the

effectiveness of hybrid learning for university students, and areas to be addressed for improvement.

To meet the aims and objectives of the study, the following research questions are formulated: How far is the hybrid mode of teaching effective for the selected courses at the study site? What are the students' attitudes and perceptions towards the blended model? What difficulties do arise in the use of the blended model, and how can these difficulties be overcome?

Instruments of Data Collection

We adopted a mixed-method approach for data collection through the following instruments:

- Semi-structured interviews of (1) the Administrative Incharge of the hybrid teaching/learning, (2) the instructors whose lectures are being provided to students in recorded form and the nominated facilitators, and (3) the students who are studying the offered hybrid courses.
- Classroom observation of (1) the session arranged for face-to-face interaction with the instructor whose lectures are being provided to the students (two sessions were observed), (2) the teaching sessions which are being recorded for later use.

Data Triangulation

The data collected through the aforementioned tools have been triangulated as Gast (2010) endorses the "use of varied data sources in a study" e.g. observations and interviews for consistency and convergence (p. 12).

The Population and Sample

The data was collected from three echelons of the university: The Administrative Incharge of hybrid learning, three moderators/facilitators of the course and some teachers whose lectures were recorded for this course and other courses to be offered as 'hybrid' in the future, and students of 2nd semester (BSCS, BSSE, BBA) from Computer Sciences department and Management Sciences department. The students were interviewed in two sessions. One session was conducted during the course and another session was conducted at the end of the course. Fifteen students from each section of each programme were selected through random sampling.

Research Site

This research is a case study of the effectiveness of the blended model at the study site when the university introduced "Report Writing Skills" as a hybrid course. The researchers have focused on investigating the effectiveness of the hybrid mode of teaching through the blended model at the research site: COMSATS University Islamabad. The components of hybrid learning used at the university are shown in Figure 1.

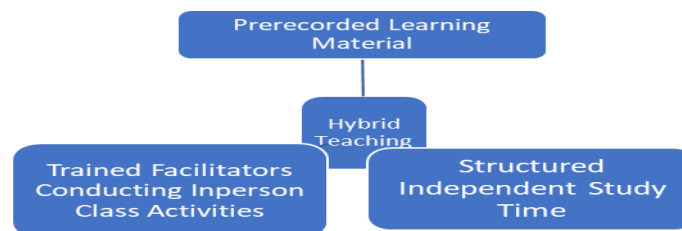


Figure 1: Components of Hybrid Teaching.

Thus, the aims and objectives of the study, research questions, data collection tools, and strategy of the research paradigm have been addressed systematically.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Social Sciences and English language courses were selected, with a particular focus on one course “Report Writing Skills”, for examining the blended learning model at the study site for BS (Bachelor of Science) level i.e. undergraduate level courses. Most of the course material is delivered videotaped, ahead of time, so that the student can watch at their own time and convenience. The classroom time is spent on structured exercises that emphasize the application of the curriculum to solve problems and other work tasks are assigned to students. Moreover, an individual semester/course of blended learning emphasizes face-to-face learning at the beginning, then, there is a gradual increase in the amount of work that the students do online or during their independent study.

Administration’s Perspective

The researchers interviewed the administrative officials responsible for the online course for the students of the physical campus of the selected university. The content below reflects the administration’s opinion about the hybrid course at the study site:

The present pattern of launching an online course is ‘blended’ as the students of the physical campus are taking their other courses through conventional classrooms and only one online course (along with some physical sessions with facilitators/moderators) is being offered. Thus, the present case is scenario-based blended learning.

An introductory session was arranged for the students who were going to take the online course. In this session, the students were provided with information on technological aspects of learning, interacting and evaluation. As online courses are among the latest phenomena and are in vogue in many developed countries, the selected university being a top-ranked higher education institution has taken the initiative of the blended model.

Online courses save resources. Online education is facing hurdles in Pakistan, including scarcity of internet, power failure in many areas, and limited access to labs and PCs. The selected university has a competitive edge over other educational institutions in launching e-learning activities at its physical campuses as it is equipped with ‘state of the art’ IT labs, 24/7 power supply, and fast internet.

From the afore narrative of the university’s administration, it is inferred that the administration is aware of the objectives and motives for launching an online course for the students of the physical campus. Moreover, the administration ensures the physical sources required for the successful functioning of e-learning opportunities for the students.

The Teachers’ Perspective

The researchers interviewed a few teachers whose lectures are recorded for ‘blended teaching/learning’. The researchers also visited the classroom where the lectures were being recorded. The researchers observed the teachers, their methods, the classroom environment, the

students' attitudes and other aspects to support the findings of this research. The major findings are as under:

The teachers stated that they put their utmost efforts into the lecturers being recorded. They are well-prepared, well-dressed, and well-motivated. They are focused on the selected course contents for a specific recording. They maintain their good appearance and demonstrate excellent communication skills. Only those teachers are selected for recordings of the lectures who have wider teaching experience and have exposure to media recordings/broadcast.

The researchers observed that the recorded lectures are more concise as compared to those of traditional classrooms since a teacher, while his/her lecture is being recorded, is aware of the check and balance. A formal environment is maintained and jokes and informal discussions are avoided.

The students present in the classrooms where lectures being recorded were found reluctant while asking questions from the teacher as they were aware of the camera recording. The researchers observed that maintaining class control and discipline was more focused and a team of teaching assistants was used to manage the smooth flow of lectures. Three cameras were installed: one focused on the teacher, the second on the whiteboard/display board and the third on students.

The teachers during their interviews shared that in a traditional physical classroom, the students may ask their queries and they may give feedback immediately, whereas in case the lectures are recorded and administered for an online course the students' queries and feedback would be delayed. Thus, queries may not be directly handled by the concerned teacher but by a moderator whose expertise in the subject and course contents is needed to be on par with that of the teacher. The task of hiring a moderator is not difficult as the syllabus and its course contents are predefined. A trained subject expert moderator is sufficient to address students' queries.

From the afore-narrated points of discussion, it is inferred that recorded lectures are more focused, properly sequenced, and well-designed. The course contents are appropriately taught.

The Students' Perspectives

This subsection comprises the students' feedback sought on the success and difficulties during an online course to identify the areas to enhance the effectiveness of blended learning. The data have been gathered through informal discussions with the students who are taking "Report Writing Skills" as an online/hybrid course, while the other courses are taught through conventional mode (Over time, Pakistan Studies and Islamic Studies have also been offered as hybrid courses). The gist derived from the discussions with the students is narrated below:

The students are familiar and comfortable with traditional classroom teaching as they are learning the rest of the courses through the traditional mode of learning. The students also feel that they miss the physical classroom experience. Some students do not find an online/hybrid course as interesting as their other courses.

Learning from online provided material is also a different experience for students. The students are required to 'pause' to focus on some contents of the lectures which makes their learning experience fatigue-some. The students find that recorded lectures are lengthier than their conventional lectures. The prolonged length reduces their interest in the lecture.

Some students reported that some of their classmates adopt a 'third party' like attitude towards the moderators when physical classroom sessions are arranged. Such an attitude curtails the effectiveness of sessions with the moderators.

The researchers found that the students taking the 'hybrid' course are not prior familiar with the under-discussion mode of learning, and thus they find some difficulties. From the students' afore feedback it is revealed that the students' concerns need to be addressed to enhance the effectiveness of blended learning.

The Launch of Blended Learning

The university selected as the study site is among the top-ranked universities in the country in the field of information technology. It has technologically advanced infrastructure for imparting education. It has also become the first university to introduce hybrid courses in its undergraduate and graduate programmes to keep pace with international trends in education. It started offering "Report Writing Skills" as a hybrid course in the Fall Semester of 2017 for undergraduate programmes. However, the development, management and continuous improvement of hybrid learning are found quite challenging at the study site. In that, assessment has become an essential requirement of a feedback loop for continuous improvement: "What gets measured gets attention" (Eccles, 1991). The present research is an attempt to evaluate the pros and cons of introducing hybrid courses at the study site.

Limitations of Blended Teaching/Learning Activities

The content in this subsection is derived through the researchers' visits to the classroom sessions arranged for hybrid learning where the students were supposed to interact in person with the moderators of the course.

In blended teaching, the role of the teacher and moderators is of a facilitator. At the study site, the well-structured study material is made available online. The role of the teacher/facilitator and components of hybrid learning for the hybrid courses cannot be evaluated comprehensively until the recorded lectures are observed and matched with the course outline and course objectives. Thus, the researchers downloaded lectures with the help of students from their portals and listened to the lectures. Recorded lectures are found to be systematic, precise, focused and coherent. The teacher, whose lectures are recorded, is not all the time available to address the students' queries. The students are required to interact with an available 'moderator' or 'facilitator'. Occasional sessions are arranged with the teacher, whose recorded lectures are provided, as per the students' request, if needed. Moderators assess the assignments, midterm exams and final term papers, and answer the students' queries.

The selected university has seven physical campuses and a virtual campus which is responsible for the launch of online courses for distance learning students. The Virtual Campus is also responsible for the 'blended' courses offered at the university's physical campuses. The moderators from the virtual campus have one interactive session at the beginning of the semester with the students. The majority of the students did not manage to attend the session. Afterwards, the moderators decided to interact with the students through online communication. Some sessions were also arranged

with moderators at the physical campus. It was also revealed that physical classroom sessions would be arranged on a 'whenever' required basis.

Through aforementioned observations, the researchers find that the one online offered course can be made more successful if the teacher whose lectures have been recorded can arrange sessions with the students. The moderators from the physical campus should be duly trained, motivated and rewarded for this additional task. The sessions with moderators from the virtual campus can prove more effective to enhance the students' interest and novel learning experience.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The benefits of the blended model are multifold. The blended courses have proven successful. These courses are strategically aligned with the new technology-oriented teaching paradigm. The development and delivery of blended courses can be used to address a variety of institutional, faculty, and student needs:

- Universities can benefit from blended courses by accommodating limited classroom space, along with encouraging their faculty to collaborate with faculty from other universities.
- Faculty can benefit from blended courses by adopting strategic methodology to enlighten established courses with new engagement opportunities or, for some, provide a transitional opportunity between face-to-face and fully online coaching.
- Students can benefit from blended courses with the conveniences of online learning combined with the social and instructional interactions that may not lend themselves to online delivery (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2018).
- The blended model can become a powerful source for institutional transformation if an institution's blended learning strategies are properly incorporated to address the needs and dynamics of all three constituencies (institution, faculty, and student) simultaneously.

The university chosen as the research site has opted for the blended model for a few selected courses since the university has sufficient information technology infrastructure. The adoption of the blended model at the study site is supported by many previous studies. The rapid expansion of the internet as a delivery platform, combined with the trends towards location-independent education and individualization, has motivated universities to invest their resources in developing blended programmes (Ozkan & Koseler, 2009). Blended learning is an extended form of e-learning involving the use of computers in specifically designed learning activities (Aparicio, Bacao, & Oliveira, 2016) and thus it is different from conventional classroom instruction. The blended model combines the advantages of traditional classroom instruction and e-learning. The findings of this study are supported by another empirical study (Rombot, Boeriswati, & Suparman, 2021) which endorses that the blended model also contributes to developing confidence, responsible-mindedness, discipline and motivated learning through digital technologies.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the blended model of teaching and learning at the selected university has proven effective for many positive points. For example, the students at the selected university are equipped with relevant technology to take hybrid courses. There are little technical lapses i.e. power failure, and unavailability of internet and digital devices on the part of both university and students. The properly structured study material was available online for students. Blended learning is one of the unique educational operations adopted at the physical campuses of the

university. The learning phenomenon for the hybrid courses is alike e-learning, with some elements of on-campus education. It can be said that the context of the phenomenon is hybrid as the students are learning their other courses through conventional classrooms in the university's physical campus and a few courses are through the university's virtual campus with some on-campus interaction facilitation. The model of blended learning is a novice in Pakistan; thus some students are not comfortable with this change. Except for a few customization issues of online quizzes and communication with moderators, the blended model has been found effective for courses on humanities and social sciences.

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