

Blended Learning: A Basic Overview of Typical Implementation Models and Four Keys to Success

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A growing number of schools are piloting or implementing blended learning programs. However, many educators are unfamiliar with the different aspects of this new approach and how the various implementation models of blended learning differ.

Technology-laden terms like “one-to-one” and “flipped learning” make blended learning an intriguing—if not daunting—endeavor. However, the foundation of blended learning remains firmly rooted in the concept of empowering teachers to provide great, student-centric instruction.

One common misconception is that simply integrating technology into the school day constitutes a blended learning approach. Yet, the mere presence of technology does not constitute a blended learning approach. Instead, it’s the educators’ ability to leverage technology to personalize and streamline the learning process for students that makes blended learning an effective way to maximize the impact of teacher time through direct instruction.

In this whitepaper, I will review the four critical success factors for you to keep in mind if your district is in the process of exploring or implementing a blended learning approach. But first, let’s review the basic definition of blended learning and some of the most common implementation models.

Blended Learning Basics

Blended learning is an instructional methodology that leverages technology to provide a more personalized approach to learning, giving students control over the time, place, path and pace of their learning.

The [Clayton Christensen Institute](#), one of the most well-known thought leaders on blended learning, defines it as a formal education program in which the student learns in part through online learning, and partly in a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home. The modalities along each student’s learning path within a course or subject are connected in order to provide an integrated learning experience.

According to the Christensen Institute, there are four models that are most commonly implemented in schools today:

- **Rotation Model** – This approach entails students working in a number of different activities or centers, including whole-group instruction, small group instruction, peer-to-peer activities, pencil and paper assignments, as well as individual work on a computer or tablet. Within the rotation model, there are several different implementation settings:
 - Station Rotation – Similar to the classroom center rotation, students work through a circuit of activities in the classroom (or classrooms) during one or more class periods, with at least one of these activities involving technology.
 - Individual Rotation – Students work through some or all of the classroom centers based on an individualized prescription determined by the teacher with the help of a technology-driven assessment tool.
 - Lab Rotation – Students work on individualized, online instruction in a computer lab. Then, typically, the teacher will use data from students’ progress in the lab session to inform whole- or small-group instruction in the classroom.
 - Flipped Classroom – Students receive the primary instruction (similar to the whole group instruction) in the form of online learning outside of the school day. The core lesson is provided via technology as “homework,” and then students apply the skill through assignments and projects during class time with the teacher’s support.
- **Flex Model** – Students learn on-site in a brick-and-mortar setting using an online instructional tool as the backbone of the course or subject, with the teacher providing support as necessary. Students’ instructional paths are customized and fluid, and the depth, frequency and manner of teacher support can vary based on each school’s implementation model.
- **A La Carte Model** – Students receive instruction in a particular course(s) entirely online. Teacher support for the A La Carte model is via an online instructor who is not located at the student’s brick-and-mortar school or learning center.
- **Enriched Virtual Model** – Students are required to have face-to-face learning sessions with their teacher, but then complete the rest of their coursework remotely, outside of the brick-and-mortar school. Although students may not meet with their instructor on a daily basis, there are formal, regularly scheduled instructional sessions (unlike optional office hours).

Four Factors for Success

Now that you have a basic familiarity with the various implementation models, there are several important factors that will help minimize the level of frustration for students and teachers. Below are four keys to success that can accelerate the benefits of a blended learning implementation.

Success Factor #1: Select a technology tool that adapts to each student's abilities

One of the core objectives of a blended learning model is to personalize instruction to meet the specific needs of each student. However, if the school chooses a technology-based curriculum that does not include an element of scaffolding and adaptive technology, student learning will be no more personalized than the traditional "one size fits all" instruction. As a result, on-level and advanced students might become disengaged or bored, while struggling students will experience frustration if the task is too difficult.

Many technology-based instructional programs—across all subject areas—provide personalized learning that adapts to each student's strengths and weaknesses in a dynamic fashion. This means that students at or above grade level can continue to soar ahead without being held back by the rest of the class and without becoming bored. Students who struggle with particular skill areas can progress at their own pace, receiving scaffolding and additional instructional support, through a structured and sequential approach within the online component of the blended learning model.

Personalized learning also allows teachers to focus their class time on those students who have encountered an obstacle in their skills development working independently, and allows the teacher to spend less time with those students who are progressing without any problems. This makes the most efficient use of teachers' skills by enabling students to develop basic skills on their own, and receive assistance from the teacher on the more challenging concepts.

Pay particular attention to the instructional "branching" that your instructional program provides. Some products may state that they provide "adaptive assessment," but not actually provide "adaptive instruction." These programs place students at the proper instructional level, however, once students begin the instructional component of the program, they are subjected to the same "one size fits all" instruction. For example, without adaptive instruction, all students would be required to receive direct instruction on every skill, regardless of whether they have demonstrated mastery or show signs of struggle. A truly adaptive approach would be able to determine which students had not yet reached mastery, and only

those students would receive scaffolding and instruction on that particular skill.

Success Factor #2: The instructional program should capture student data

While structured practice or skill instruction delivered online can be beneficial in a blended environment, far too often, these online activities are occurring without the data being captured, or require a separate test event. If a blended approach is intended to help each student accelerate their skill development, the technology tools chosen must record student progress at a fairly granular level.

As part of their blended learning model, many schools integrate some of the free apps available online. Although these apps may provide valuable exposure to important skills and concepts, they often lack the ability to record and report student data back to the teacher. Without some kind of data capture, these apps undermine the entire goal of providing a personalized approach. Students' paths are not differentiated from session to session and teachers cannot monitor student progress through the at-home, online instruction. As a result, teachers need to spend additional time gathering progress monitoring data through assessments and other means.

When the right technology tools are used, the student experience is monitored in real-time—without administering a test. Teachers can view data showing which students have completed each skill area, and which students have encountered an obstacle and require individual or small group direct instruction. These data inform the instructional plans in the classroom, helping the teacher to be targeted and time efficient in focusing on the students most in need of help.

Success Factor #3: The program should recommend next steps for the teacher

Because a blended approach meets each student on his or her own level through personalized learning, the student experience can become much more individualized. 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. This is a tremendous benefit to the student, but it makes the teacher's role significantly more complex. As students' online experience is increasingly catered to their individual needs, the teacher's role in providing direct instruction and intervention becomes more individualized.

With technology-based tools gathering data on student progress in real time, teachers can access fairly granular information on each student's performance. Although this kind of view into each student's strengths and weaknesses provides a wealth of information, teachers are still faced with the challenge of analyzing and connecting those data to the appropriate instruction or intervention strategies for each student.

Schools can dramatically improve their levels of teacher effectiveness if they implement technology that provides recommendations for teacher intervention—connecting personalized learning, embedded assessment and teacher-led instruction.

Success Factor #4: The program should provide resources for teacher-led instruction

Blended learning can provide a powerful, flexible way for each student to progress as quickly as possible. With real-time data capture, teachers have a window into student performance and can plan the classroom component of their blended model more effectively. However, as the technology-based components help to identify the students who are struggling and the skills on which they are struggling, teachers are sometimes left to plan the curriculum and choose the appropriate materials to help students who are struggling.

The final step in ensuring an effective blended learning implementation is to select instructional resources that help the teacher to connect performance data to instructional strategies. Some technology programs analyze and connect student data to the school's existing basal program, while others provide customized strategies for direct instruction by a teacher or paraprofessional. The key is to help the teacher to understand not only which students need support, but to also help teacher understand exactly how to support them.

Summary

When blended learning incorporates adaptive technology, real-time progress monitoring, and provides the recommended next steps for the teacher to customize instruction for each student, the result is a powerful combination that helps teachers become more targeted, time efficient and effective in improving students' overall ability in reading.