**Abstract**

"Blended learning is not new. However, in the past, blended learning was comprised of physical classroom formats, such as lectures, labs, books or handouts. Today, organizations have a myriad of learning approaches and choices. ... The concept of blended learning is rooted in the idea that learning is not just a one-time event – learning is a continuous process. Blending provides various benefits over using any single learning delivery medium alone."

*Harvey Singh (2003)*

This paper is intended to provide some issues for thought on the importance of implementation of Blended Learning in traditional universities, particularly in the Indian university system. Current trends in higher education are moving from more didactic content delivery towards constructivist student-centred models, with an increasing emphasis on the skills that support independent, self-motivated learning and a collaborative work.

**Keywords:** E-Learning, Blended learning, Virtual Learning Environments, ICT.
One of the benefits of a blended learning platform is preventing the ‘lone – learner syndrome’. A blended learning approach combines face to face classroom methods with computer-mediated activities to form an integrated instructional approach. In the past, digital materials have served in a supplementary role, helping to support face to face instruction. For example, a blended approach to a traditional, face to face course might mean that the class meets once per week instead of the usual three-session format. Learning activities that otherwise would have taken place during classroom time can be moved online.

The goal of a blended approach is to join the best aspects of both face to face and online instruction. Classroom time can be used to engage students in advanced interactive experiences. Meanwhile, the online portion of the course can provide students with multimedia-rich content at any time of day, anywhere the student has internet access, from browsing centres, computer labs, the coffee shop, or the students’ homes. This allows for an increase in scheduling flexibility for students.

There are no rules in place to prescribe what the ideal blend might be. The term “blended” encompasses a broad continuum, and can include any integration of face to face and online instructional content. The blend of face to face and online materials will vary depending on the content, the needs of the students, and the preferences of the instructor.

In this respect, it can be stated that virtual environments are likely to meet some of the needs raised by the globalization of education, trying to maintain the quality of teaching and at the same time taking advantage of the functionalities that virtual learning platforms offer. It is very clear that an approach of learning from an open and constructivist nature in universities is a complex process that faces significant technological, administrative and human barriers. Therefore, in order to put plans in universities, it is necessary to analyze the state of the art of some indicators relating to the use of ICT, with special attention to virtual teaching and learning, so that the main obstacles can be identified and adaptive strategies can be framed or designed for the full integration in Indian educational system.

One critical part of the definition of blended learning is that it involves some element of student control of time, place, path or pace. Digital learning describes each dimension as follows:

Time: Learning is no longer restricted to the school day or the school year
Place: Learning is no longer restricted to the four walls of the class room.
Path: Learning is no longer restricted to the pedagogy used by the teacher. Instead Interactive and adaptive software allows students to learn (in a method that is customised to their needs).
Pace: Learning is no longer restricted to the pace of an entire classroom of students.
Blended learning is a method which combines online and classroom learning activities and resources to mitigate in-class seat time for students in face-to-face environments. It can foster under-enrolled programs, accomplish faculties teaching load. Blended learning develops individuals learning skills, meets their requirements for using technology, affords flexibility and convenience, provides access to those with job, family, distance barriers and reduces the educational cost for students.

To a faculty, it gives them access to new resources and online learning, lets them experiment with new profession of teaching techniques, helps in meeting student’s expectation and skills. And for an administrator, offers a learner cantered education, may merge with the strategic plan, enhances the classroom utilization and can help in filling under-enrolled courses and various programs.

Blended learning is made possible by implementing learning management system and by insisting the faculty to integrate into their curriculum.

Internationalization and globalization of education has resulted in the need for universities to increase the quality of their teachers, researchers and administrators. The objectives of the new Higher Education in India today puts emphasis on the capacity for innovation and entrepreneurship of future graduates; learning throughout life, learning by doing as well as active and collaborative learning approaches are critical to achieving these goals. The pedagogical innovation should consist in putting into practice a differential model of teaching and learning process which is currently widespread in traditional university classrooms. Psycho-pedagogic research reveals that truly learning occurs when students "construct" knowledge through interaction with their environment, through the personal information searching, and through constructive problem resolution processes (Rosales, 2001). This new model of open and constructivist teaching involves maintaining the following principles for action:

- Encourage teamwork and collaboration.
- Encourage independent learning.
- Encourage practical skills development for conceptual knowledge application.
  (case studies and real situations of the environment).
- Use various media, technologies and ways of representing information with special focus on computing resources.
- Encourage and facilitate analysis, debate and criticism of available knowledge.
- Address the individual pace of learning of each student through the supervision and monitoring of progress and participation in activities in the framework of the course.
• Use different techniques and procedures for continuous assessment of learning and report outcomes offering recommendations for improvement (feedback).

• Combine different types of strategies and teaching techniques such as seminars, practical activities, simulations or role plays, case analysis, problem solving, etc.

• Develop quality training materials or reuse others that have been created, which apart from the specific content of the course material, practical proposals are being included.

However, it is obvious that some of these principles are difficult to implement due to a number of reasons, including i.e. the existence of a large number of students, architectural configuration of the classrooms, teacher/student ratio, etc. Hence, it is proper to recommend and advocate a blended learning model, or stated in other words, a teaching modality that combines face to face teaching in classrooms, with the development of an independent and distance learning through virtual platforms or classrooms. This combination of different learning tasks that the student has to carry out using different resources and learning spaces is called Blended learning (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004), which is a variant of the e-Learning concept. The model of Blended learning that emphasizes active learning and a reduction of classroom time, is based on the concept of hybridisation, the bringing together of two dissimilar parts to produce a third result. In the case of an effective Blended learning course, these two dissimilar parts are the online and face to face classroom components. (McCray, 2000). When they are successfully combined, the potential result is an educational environment highly conducive to student learning. According to several authors, this teaching modality that facilitates a more flexible learning adapted to the student's own pace, will generalize in the coming years in the higher education systems. Regarding to virtual learning environments, the social networks connected to the webs of knowledge or virtual areas in which common base of references and theoretical contents could be collaboratively built. Virtual environments for teaching and learning offer special features that allow promoting:

• Self-directed and autonomous learning
• Development of a flexible teaching
• Development of generic and specific skills.
• Knowledge construction by students.
• Collaboration between groups.
• Accessibility to shared resources.
• Searching for collaborative data and indexing information.
• Using multiple platforms, depending on the needs of creators, collectors and context.
• Bearing in mind the above characteristics, the educational objectives pursued when designing a course supported by a virtual platform should be directed to:

• Finding a balance between student autonomy and flexibility of its learning.

• Developing generic and specific skills.

• Promoting interaction between students from different universities.

• Building learning in problem solving, case analysis and discussion.

• Involving students in the evaluation process by developing both continuous assessment and self-assessment.

• Harnessing Information and Communication Technologies to facilitate access to any kind of course material inside or outside the university environment.

There is no doubt that the methodologies that are used so far have to adapt to changes in society, to new environments, to businesses needs, to the students’ demands. More specifically, a type of student who does not only attend a lecture, but discusses, gives his/her opinion and criticizes. The students’ profile now has little to do with past decades. Current generation of students are digital natives, they are born with the Internet network, and now they are experiencing the transition from the old to the new web-based technology, which is more participatory, more collaborative and semantic, and in the future these students would not conceive a passive space without interaction.

Therefore, it is essential to introduce and expand a new culture of knowledge, based on active users who are able to create, search, analyze, communicate and share information and knowledge. In this respect, Blended learning constitutes a strategic environment which facilitates the adoption of the new educational paradigm based on active learning.

The development of Blended learning in the university system is still in a nascent stage, so it is necessary to advance through its effective integration as an interactive tool, allowing cooperation between teachers and universities both at state and international levels. A policy framework should be developed, which explicitly states how Blended learning supports the vision, values, and principles of the institution. Faculty development program should be central to the success of an institution’s Blended learning initiative. The program should include opportunities for faculty to learn how to redesign their courses, teach well online, and effective use of technology. Without adequate preparation, most faculties will simply replicate their traditional class sections and the benefits, resulting from a Blended course, will not be achieved and the new model of teaching and learning will no longer be a novelty and become a common practice in the Indian university system.
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