The rise of blended learning - students' perspectives

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During the recent years blended learning has become more common strategy in higher education. In Oulu University of Applied Sciences School of Business and Information Management blended learning was developed in a project where about 20 teachers from two degree programs developed courses from the point of view of individual, blended and online learning. A focus group interview was organised with voluntary students in order to get insights to student's experiences.

Learning revolution

Traditional teaching methods struggle as the students' needs and ways of learning have changed during the last few years. The paradigm change in learning is a reality and forces the teachers to increase their understanding about how students learn today, which media they use in their daily lives, how they experience present teaching environments and how they would like to develop the learning tools - such as blended learning.

Blended learning

Blended learning, also called hybrid learning and mixed-mode learning, is commonly understood as a practice of using both online and in-person learning experiences when teaching students [1]. In its simplest form blended learning is a mix of traditional classroom studying and distance learning [2].

However, many blended learning models exist and the representation of those depends on the context. Figure 1 includes a representation of six blended learning models.
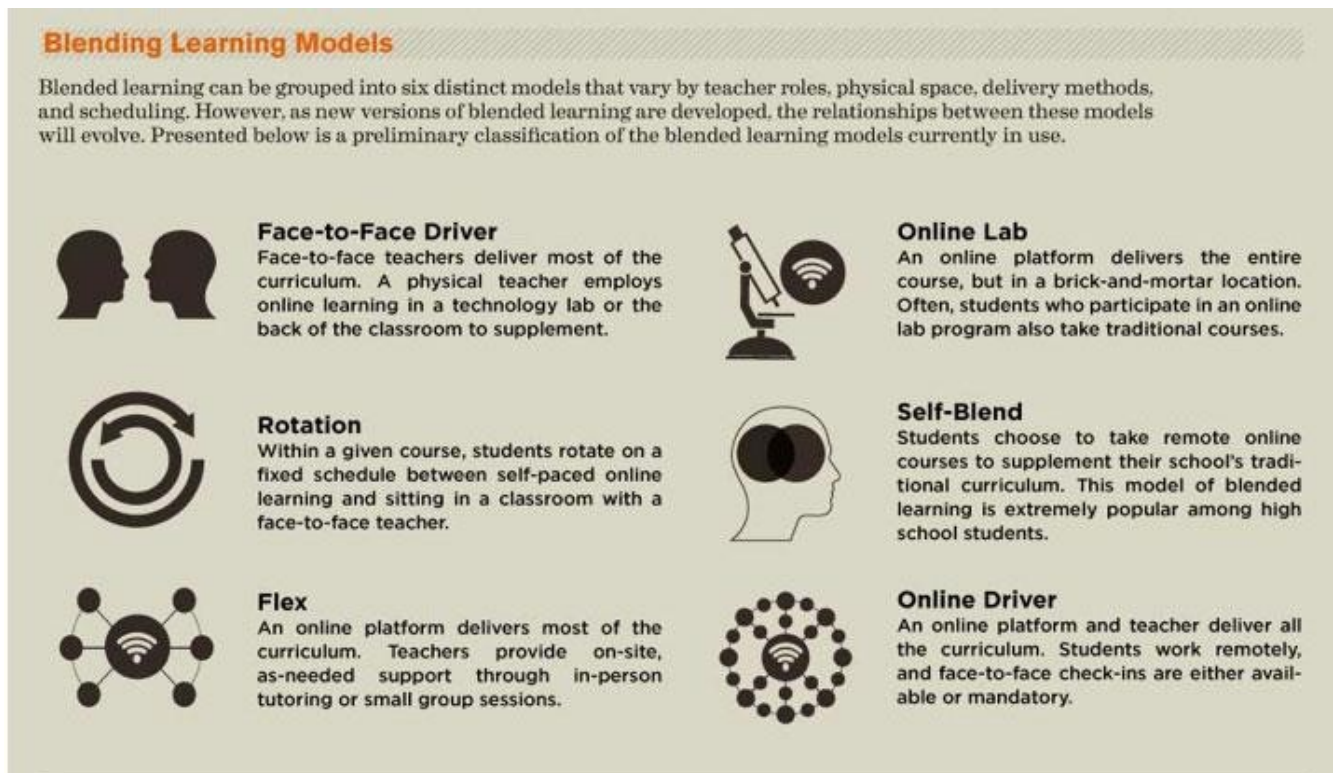

Blending Learning Models

Blended learning can be grouped into six distinct models that vary by teacher roles, physical space, delivery methods, and scheduling. However, as new versions of blended learning are developed, the relationships between these models will evolve. Presented below is a preliminary classification of the blended learning models currently in use.

Face-to-Face Driver
Face-to-face teachers deliver most of the curriculum. A physical teacher employs online learning in a technology lab or the back of the classroom to supplement.

Rotation
Within a given course, students rotate on a fixed schedule between self-paced online learning and sitting in a classroom with a face-to-face teacher.

Flex
An online platform delivers most of the curriculum. Teachers provide on-site, as-needed support through in-person tutoring or small group sessions.

Online Lab
An online platform delivers the entire course, but in a brick-and-mortar location. Often, students who participate in an online lab program also take traditional courses.

Self-Blend
Students choose to take remote online courses to supplement their school's traditional curriculum. This model of blended learning is extremely popular among high school students.

Online Driver
An online platform and teacher deliver all the curriculum. Students work remotely, and face-to-face check-ins are either available or mandatory.

FIGURE 1. Six models of blended learning [1]

There are many justifications for blended learning and today it can be a dominant learning-delivery model for a school's academic program [1]. Figure 2 presents ten common drivers of blended learning.
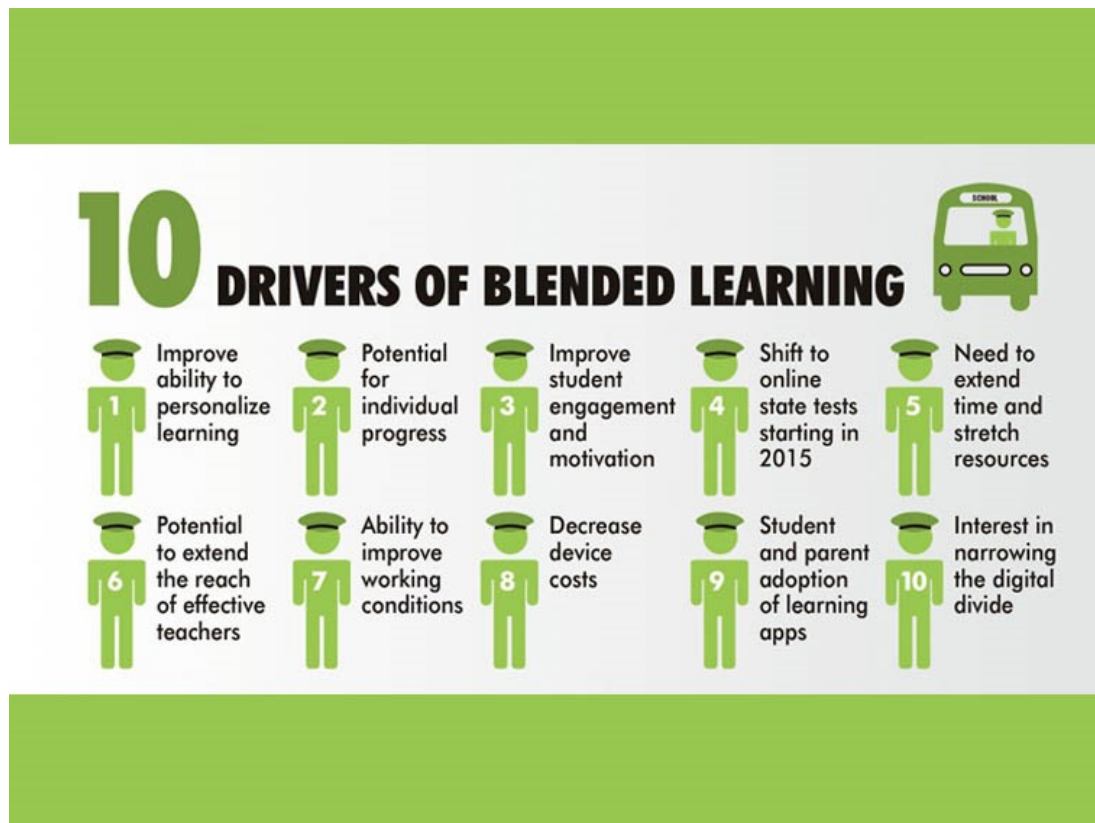
FIGURE 2. Ten drivers of blended learning [2]

Blended learning raises new challenges for learning institutions. Typical challenges for students are unrealistic expectations and feelings of isolation. Teachers and other staff are challenged by time management and support issues. Technological issues are common challenge for all actors in this scene. [3]

KV-MOMU-project

The importance of blended learning has been recognised also in Oulu University of Applied Sciences. About twenty teachers took part in a project called KV-MOMU (Blended learning course planning and piloting in international degree programs) in the school of Business and Information Management during the autumn 2015. Teachers were responsible for developing their courses and materials to enable more individual, blended and online learning. Teaching for young international and Finnish students was enriched with online lectures, self-study materials, teaching videos, online assignments and online discussions. The development focused on two international degree programs, Business Information Technology (BIT) and International Business (DIB). [4]

Focus group interview to raise students voice

A focus group interview for students having participated in courses developed during KV-MOMU was organized to gain more insights into student's experiences and development ideas related to blended learning. Figure 3 includes selected main themes for focus group interview.
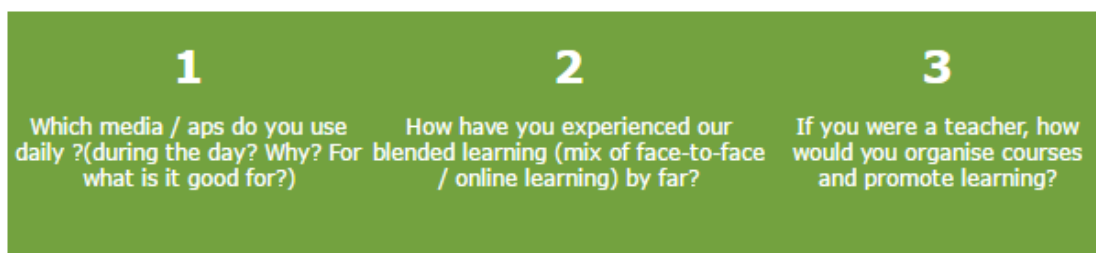

FIGURE 3. Main themes of focus group interview

Focus group interview with four active Finnish, Latvian and Mexican students was conducted on 22nd March, 2016. Different themes were first approached so that each participant used Post-it notes to record their ideas. After this the Post-it notes were organized by common sub themes and then the ideas were discussed and developed further in group discussion. The interview was recorded and notes were made.

Social media tools

First the students told which different social media tools they currently use. These were Youtube, Vimeo, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin, WhatsApp and Pocket (Figure 4). Then the students evaluated different social media tools that they currently use and their suitability for blended learning purposes.


YouTube and Vimeo
Educative videos

Facebook
Communication, team working, networking, following and sharing news and articles

Whatsapp
Communication, team working, urgent information sharing

Moodle
The most used learning platform in OUAS

Pocket
Following and sharing news and articles

Twitter
Posting videos, sharing news and articles

LinkedIn
Finding jobs, networking

Skype
Distant learning (e.g. seminars) and communication

Instagram and Snapchat
Fun and entertainment. The latter has been utilised in the marketing of education

Figure 4. Different social media tools used in learning purposes

From YouTube students watched mainly educative videos such as Ted Talks and documentaries. The ideal use of YouTube videos was seen to be outside the classroom. The strength of videos compared to face-to-face teaching was that you can replay the videos if you missed something.

Difficult topics such as accounting were mentioned to be ideal examples of courses where educative videos could support learning. Teachers were reminded to be selective when using videos during the traditional classes as long videos were experienced to be boring. Teachers were encouraged to find videos where difficult things are easily explained. Examples of these kind of videos are the ones that use drawing technique - such as the one where Panama Papers are easily explained.
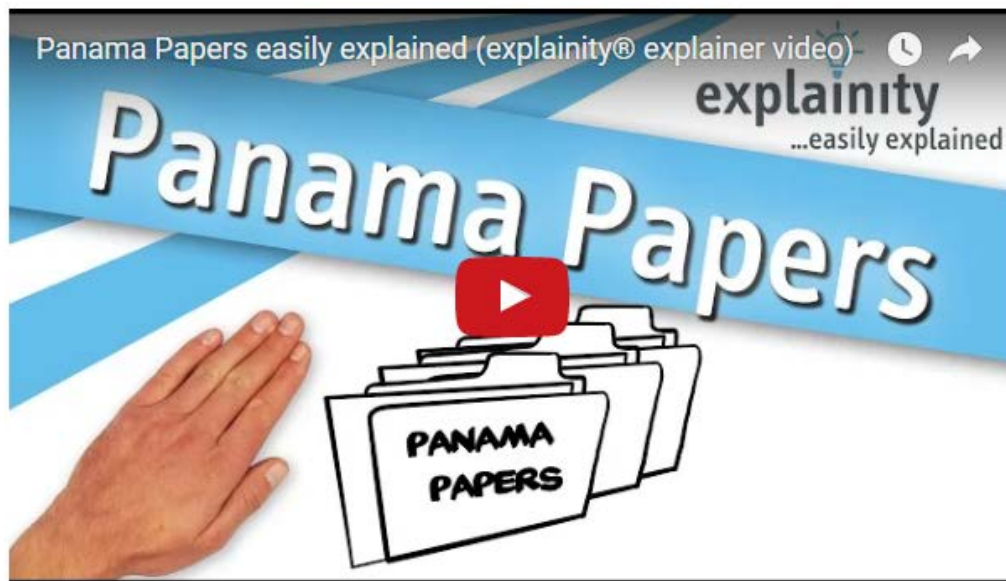
Facebook was found out to be best fitted for contacting people and useful tool for communication in group works. Facebook groups are already commonly used by students for these purposes. The students argue that Facebook beats all the other channels used for in-group communication such as Moodle group discussions. Moodle as a learning environment was felt to be fine but old-fashioned and a kind of file collection. Besides Facebook WhatsApp is used for in-group messaging and seen perfect for urgent information sharing.

Facebook was also mentioned to be useful tool for live news follow-up. As regards articles, Pocket was mentioned by one student to be useful tool for collecting good articles and sharing them. Twitter was seen to be suitable for posting videos, blogs and links to articles. LinkedIn seems to be a good tool for job hunting and networking. Skype is handy for distant learning purposes, seminars and when talking to classmates. Widely used tools such as Instagram and Snapchat were not seen as relevant learning tools due to their nature of having fun and entertainment.

Student experiences

One of the most distinctive advantages of blended learning according to the students is that it forces to be more active and engaged. During traditional lessons students may listen or do something else. In online environment, students have experienced high motivation levels working on inspiring assignments, such as reading and writing or development tasks related to real life cases. They like the challenge as long as the topic is motivating and not too challenging. With difficult topics - such as accounting - they prefer traditional lessons and do not want to study on their own.

Independence in online studying is appreciated a lot. The students feel they have to take more responsibility while learning independently and enjoy working their own way. As they have freedom to choose time and place, they feel very satisfied with the flexibility blended learning enables. Furthermore, they learn personal time management skills.

Students seem still to have mixed emotions concerning blended learning. They feel that while it increases flexibility in learning it also brings new challenges. For example, group work is felt to be much more complicated. The problem seems to be that whereas blended learning engages better active students it is far less fitted to students with motivational problems. This is a challenge not only for group works, but for the completion rate of courses.

The feedback collected from both teachers and students in KV-MOMU project supported generally the findings of focus group interview. Some students like online and blended learning whereas some others face problems to proceed in their studies. While some students enjoyed the freedom to study anywhere anytime, the others

passively participated in online interactions resulting in weaker learning results. On the other hand, some students who were shy in classroom interactions became active in online discussions.

Changing landscape of teaching and learning

During the courses piloted in KV-MOMU the interaction and communication took place online. As a result, the nature of lessons and group work changed. The students learnt to collaborate actively online and this experience has helped them also in other group works. Clear benefits were also gained when teaching videos were used to revise and to exercise for examinations and tests.

KV-MOMU project feedback further revealed that while there are obvious advantages in blended learning it also raises some serious worries. Both teachers and students share the worry about marginalization. The classroom interaction plays a significant role in young people's life and classroom interaction helps also teachers to see what is going on and makes it possible to get regular feedback. When students and teachers meet and know each other in person communication and study counselling is easier.

Blended learning also sets high pedagogical challenge for teachers. According to both teachers and students good learning assignments play a significant role in learning experience. In general, more careful course planning, selection of learning materials, scheduling of assignments, and selection of suitable evaluation practices are critically important.

Technological challenges are a reality. In KV-MOMU project both students and teachers were challenged to use different online tools efficiently. Paper, pens, notebooks and printed books were replaced by text editors, files and online materials. To be able to teach and study online adequate ICT skills are needed: a few requirements - a computer in general, knowing cloud services, such as Google Drive and OneDrive, finding suitable room for studying, having functioning equipment such as headsets and microphone – just to mention but a few.

Developing ideas

Students wish that they would have activities and feedback along the course - not big assignments or exam at the end of the course. Blended learning should be tied to real life cases which are connected to theories. Two-way interaction plays a critical role when blended learning is used in order to avoid the isolation of students. Learning Cafe type of assignments, where talented students' expertise could be used in coaching, received excellent feedback because of the better interaction.

Technology, learning platforms and teaching methods evolve all the time and are important part of the blended learning landscape. At this point students did not have or they had very limited experiences about, for example, gamification, flipped classroom technique, 3D environments or virtual reality. In the future a breakthrough of these is very likely to happen.

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