Blended Learning: The Internet and the Classroom

Courses that include both classroom time and online work can be more efficient for teachers and more effective for students than either classroom-only or online-only courses.

By Melinda Maddox

Melinda Maddox *(mmaddox@alsde.edu) is the director of technology initiatives in the Alabama Department of Education.*

Educators across the country are grateful to school leaders for their past work and present commitment in addressing the most important challenges of U.S. education and in understanding the importance of technology in transforming education. Restructuring the nation's schools is vital to the United States' success in the global economy. Blended learning—when students meet face-to-face some days and work online with their teachers other days—has great potential to give teachers the tools they need to personalize learning.

To really understand the potential of blended learning, think about how you would answer the following questions:

- What is taking the majority of your teachers' time away from instruction?
- How do you offer real opportunities for students to keep up with their classes while they are at home sick or in an alternative setting because of discipline?
- How do you foster communication between your teachers and parents?
- What barriers are in place that limit the innovation of students and teachers?
- How does your school prepare students for college and careers?

Teachers' Time and Make-Up Work

I hear teachers say, over and over, "I don't have time to add anything else to my schedule or my classes." Do you know how much time your teachers are spending preparing materials for the student who is home sick or the student who is moved to an alternative school for six weeks? I know that when I was a teacher, this was very time-consuming. So, how can you save your teachers time? Have teachers put all their materials in a learning management system (LMS) or a course management system like those that are used for the delivery of online courses. A free open-source program called Moodle (http://docs.moodle.org/en/About_Moodle) is one that many schools and districts implement.

The first year, it will take teachers some time to get their materials into an LMS, but they probably have their material in a digital format by now, so it would simply mean copying and pasting to the LMS. I know of teachers who use this method for all of their handouts (just think of the paper and time saved in front of the copier). They have moved into the blended learning environment without even knowing the term. You probably have some teachers like this as well.

With an LMS, when students are absent because of a baseball game, they won't be standing in line at the teacher's desk wanting their assignments. They will know that their assignments and any handouts are online. This saves time for your teachers. What about those weekly vocabulary tests? Put them online and the LMS will grade them for the teacher.

Alabama has developed an instructional model for school reform that can be replicated by others. The ACCESS (Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, and Students Statewide) Distance Learning program (http://accessdl.state.al.us) involves the delivery of online and interactive videoconferencing courses to students in public school classrooms, blended instruction, and the incorporation of

a variety of instructional technologies. In the latest evaluation data, AC-CESS teachers said that their online teaching experience has affected their traditional classroom teaching through increased use and integration of technologies and more-effective student-focused teaching methods and techniques (Sampson-Gruener, Roblyer, Bielefeldt, & Schneidmiller, 2009). We have seen our online teachers add the LMS component to their traditional face-to-face classes in the ACCESS Distance Learning program. From teaching an online course, they realize the potential an LMS has for their traditional courses.

One challenge to implementing this instructional model is changing the habits of a teacher who delivers the majority of instruction by following a textbook, lecturing, and assigning class projects with the goal of getting students to pass a test. That teacher will need to make the transition to a model of educational delivery that engages students, personalizes their learning, and incorporates real-world problems and 21st century skills.

What must you do? First, ensure that your students have access to quality online courses. Second, encourage or even require all your teachers to take an online professional development course (see http://elearning.alsde.edu). Third, encourage your teachers to teach an online course.

Communicating With Parents

How often could a negative visit by a parent to your office be prevented if the teacher had communicated with the parent instead of the parent hearing only his or her child's side of the story? Usually visits from parents are about grades or assignments. If

a teacher has all of the materials in an LMS, the parent can have a log-in to view his or her child's work, the teacher's comments, and the student's grades. This is much more effective than the student management software that posts only grades or the public Web site that gives only assignments, handouts, and schedules.

Homework help is another big advantage. Many teachers have a discussion thread just for homework questions and will take a few moments at night to log in and answer any questions that students or parents have about that night's homework. Just think of the positive feelings those parents will have toward their children's teachers.

Innovation and Barriers

Creating innovative instructional strategies is a popular topic today. One of the best uses of an LMS for blended learning that I have seen is using the discussion board for journaling. Teachers have long struggled with getting students to write in their journals and finding time to grade those journals. Those who use the LMS discussion board feature tell me that they start the discussion thread with the journal topic, and the students respond with their journal entries and comment on other students' entries. This has fostered increased communication among students—even among those who are sometimes very shy in traditional classrooms.

A leader, however, must first address barriers before implementing innovative strategies. There are many possible barriers to using any innovative technology. One is the ability of teachers to use an LMS. I can only say this: implement professional development, mentoring, and coaching, and

lead by example. Ask your library media specialist to lead your school's effort in developing modules on an LMS. Find a few great, innovative teachers and have them get started in an LMS. Their uses and examples will quickly sell the others. Highlight the success of those teachers at faculty meetings. Of course, your leadership may have to win the last stragglers.

Policies present another barrier to innovative strategies. Policymakers must not only look at increased opportunities for students but also examine policies that are barriers to innovation. What policies are barriers to blended learning? First, access to the technology devices that the students will need to use the LMS. I know one teacher who gives students one week to complete assignments. She works around not having computers for every student in her classroom by telling her students to get to a computer that is connected to the Internet sometime during the week. "You know," she said, "they all manage to do so."

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Blocking Web sites is another major policy issue. I relate this to teaching kids to drive. Once kids are an appropriate age, they learn the concepts through a book and then learn to drive with an adult. Why don't schools use the same learning model with the Internet instead of the policy of blocking so many sites?

And I could not have a discussion on barriers to innovation without mentioning "seat time." As Alabama Deputy Superintendent of Education Tommy Bice often asks, "When are we going to move from time being the constant and learning being the variable to learning being the constant and time being the variable?" Recently, Alabama State Superintendent of Education Joe Morton led a reform effort entitled "First Choice." One of the results of this change was eliminating the seat time that is required for students to pass a course.

Preparing for College

The reason so many of us go to work every day is to prepare students for college and careers. If you examine the college model, you'll see that on the first day of classes at many colleges, students are expected to bring a laptop that is connected to the wireless school network, which they will use to log in to the college's LMS. All assignments are turned in through the LMS. Many of the tests, all of the professor's lecture notes and presentations, and any requests for an office visit will also be handled through the LMS. Why

is it different in high school? Do you have policies preventing students from bringing laptops to school and accessing the school's network? It seems to me that if colleges can secure their networks and data, then high schools should be able to do so as well. As in the driving model, there should be multitiered access procedures so that students, under the guidance of a teacher or a facilitator, receive opportunities to learn the appropriate use of Web 2.0 tools and capitalize on the rich digital resources available.

Conclusion

Having students familiar with the blended learning model and an LMS will help prepare them for the college or career of their choice. Technology-rich school reform programs are essential for reducing the drop-out rate and preparing students for the 21st century workforce. **P**L

REFERENCE

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