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## **What COVID-19 Taught Us about the Blended Model**

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### **Author Note**

We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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### **What COVID-19 Taught Us about the Blended Model**

Initially, many faculty in higher education were apprehensive when courses went online in Spring 2020, but they eventually learned a lot about how to effectively teach online. The need for well-designed online courses for faculty in higher education is more prominent than ever-before in the wake of the COVID-19. As reluctant or apprehensive as faculty members were, the move to an online platform offered an opportunity to learn about diverse tools, resources, and innovative ways to teach both in the blended synchronous model and the asynchronous online model. Faculty and students encountered issues, but quickly learned to overcome these challenges. What COVID-19 taught faculty about the blended synchronous and asynchronous model illustrates that the blended model is ideal, and due to the benefits, faculty should continue to utilize the blended learning model with the blended learning tools and resources post COVID-19.

Keywords: Blended, Synchronous, Asynchronous, Higher Education, Online Learning

### **What COVID-19 Taught Us about the Blended Model**

Spring 2020 brought about sweeping and sudden changes in the world of higher education. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, institutions of higher learning around the world were forced to turn to alternative methods of instructional delivery. For many instructors in higher education, this was a novel experience, and others who had taught online in the past were given the opportunity to hone their skills to deliver instruction online. Although the change was not necessarily voluntary, much was learned and new information, tools, resources, and ingenuity were obtained. Universities are now positioned to expand their reach, thus, meeting the needs of a wider variety of students through online learning tools. As instruction shifts back to more in-person instruction and COVID-19 restrictions decrease, there are benefits gleaned from the blended model that higher education faculty members should continue to utilize in the future. This paper will illustrate the benefits of the blended model which highlights why the blended model is an ideal teaching and learning model.

### **Lessons Learned about the Blended Model**

Blended learning is a contemporary teaching model where the instructor acts as a facilitator, maximizing learning through traditional face to face classroom experiences while ensuring an asynchronous component is offered on alternative days when the class does not meet. The face to face synchronous online component can be facilitated either in person or through technologies such as Google, Hangouts, Kaltura, Zoom, Skype, Adobe Connect or Microsoft Teams. Utilizing a video conferencing platform for direct teaching still provides an opportunity to see students, interact, and has the potential to reach a larger audience compared to the traditional face-to-face-classroom experience at a university.

In addition to learning about how to conduct a class synchronously online, higher education faculty also learned more about the asynchronous components of an online course in

order to supplement real time instruction with additional resources. Faculty incorporated materials into their online instruction such as readings, videos, PowerPoint presentations, discussions, and learning assignments. Online learning became more explorative and went beyond the typical discussions and scrolling through articles. One of the many advantages to the asynchronous model is that students are given an opportunity to apply what they learned in class; thus, through different methods, students can enhance their learning.

There are numerous advantages to the blended learning model. Vaksalla et al. (2019) reported that students increased their interpersonal skills, inventive-thinking, enthusiasm, determination and attendance while participating in blended courses (p. 20, 26). Online learning tools can inspire collaborative and creative learning opportunities for students. A thoughtful, well-designed learning activity encourages student participation and promotes a learner-centered environment.

Conversely, faculty and students encountered challenges with the blended learning model which included Wi-Fi disruptions or Wi-Fi strength issues, and lack of adequate technology. It is essential that the classrooms and home environments be equipped with appropriate microphones and cameras so that everyone can see and hear each other speak. When asking students to give presentations options can be provided of either pre-recording a presentation and playing it for the class or presenting live in front of their peers. However, the benefits outweigh the challenges.

### **Why the Blended Model is Ideal**

#### **Expanding Student Accessibility**

Teaching blended synchronously and asynchronously during the pandemic was a learning experience that made faculty aware that the needs of students must be met within these modalities. For students who were parents, students who became ill with COVID-19 or had a family member who became ill, teaching through blended and asynchronous platforms helped to

meet their needs and enabled flexibility. Online classes could be recorded and accessed at a later date so that students can address the needs of their families and still keep up with course content.

In order for students to be accountable for their work, asynchronous discussion questions posted to a course website can be assigned for students to respond in order to demonstrate their learning. As needs of students continue to change post COVID-19, such as enrollment of nontraditional students, working students, remote students, and students with additional responsibilities, universities need to change in order to meet these needs. An EDUCAUSE Horizon Report (2020) explains the need for higher education to advance in areas such as providing online learning to non-traditional students. Providing students with relevant opportunities to access higher education makes a difference particularly because higher education's role is to educate students, to support learners, and to maintain or increase enrollment, especially for those in remote locations. According to research by the Jain Family Institute, "In 2016, across states and territories, 5.4 million individuals lived in education deserts, lacking access to any type of higher education institution" (Beamer & Steinbaum, 2019). Implementing the blended synchronous and asynchronous teaching model extends educational opportunities to a wider student population who otherwise would not be able to access a degree in higher education.

### **Future Ready**

The blended model offers benefits beyond working towards earning a degree or certificate; blended synchronous learning and asynchronous online learning prepare students with technology skills and interactive teaching tools. According to the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.), "Online learning opportunities and the use of open educational resources and other technologies can increase educational productivity by accelerating the rate of learning; reducing costs associated with instructional material or program delivery; and better utilizing

teacher time” (para. 2). Indeed, the benefits of the blended model prepare students for expectations in their profession, offer engagement, and greater flexibility.

Many professions require that employees think creatively, use technology, and be innovative; therefore, by utilizing online resources when learning, students will explore technology, and be better prepared for the workforce. Technology enhanced teaching helps students prepare for industry expectations. As purported by Adams (2020), “Blended learning has the potential to create greater opportunities for students to develop...sought-after skills for U.S. employers” (p. 22). Exploring technology through blended learning, and asynchronous online learning instills technology skills, creativity, knowledge of online tools, and preparation for the current workforce (Herold, 2016).

There may be a learning curve for some students and instructors who are unfamiliar with these new technologies. This can be addressed through the use of live training sessions facilitated through video conferencing meetings where screens can be shared, technologies can be demonstrated, and questions can be answered. This can happen on an informal schedule or through the use of a formal orientation to online learning. Demonstrations of technologies can be recorded and posted to a class website for future reference. Subtitles can be added to videos to provide accessibility for students with disabilities.

### **Engagement**

The pedagogical impact of both the blended model are positive. The U.S. Department of Education reports that one of the many benefits of using technology to teach and learn is students' greater willingness to learn and participate, and students' increase in involvement (n.d., p. 1). A study conducted by Bahji et al. (2015) states, “Students’ perception of the blended learning approach was positive, the fact that 94% of students consider it “very interesting” and “interesting”, while only 6% of students who consider it “less interesting”” (p. 75).

**Flexibility**

Blended learning provides the advantage of delivering both an online learning experience and face to face learning (Francescucci & Rohani, 2019, p. 61) which enables flexibility. If necessary, the instructor can solely offer the class online, thus, allowing flexibility and accessibility. Additional benefits are described by Norberg, Dziuban, and Moskal (2011), “scientific meetings, professional activities and publications stress that blended learning has the potential to capitalize on the strength of both face to face and online learning, increasing the learning flexibility in a demand driven educational environment while maintaining the personal contact of the traditional classroom” (p. 5).

For flexibility purposes, each synchronous class can be recorded in order to allow students to refer to the recording if they want to hear the information again. Recording class is also helpful for the instructor because if a class is taught annually, the instructor can watch the recording from the previous year to determine how the content was addressed and make any changes necessary.

**Conclusion**

There appears to be endless possibilities to explore when it comes to the blended model which makes the blended model ideal for teaching and learning. Since COVID-19, many faculty members were putting the blended teaching model into practice and finding success. Blended synchronous learning and asynchronous online learning use a technology enhanced instructional learning environment that is more personalized. With all the online tools available, the learning experiences are richer, engaging, and more interactive. The blended model expands outreach, broaden demographics, enable flexibility, and increase knowledge about technology; thus, impacting the diverse needs of students who are pursuing a degree in higher education. COVID-19 encouraged university faculty to explore the blended synchronous and asynchronous model

aiding in the discovery that this model is ideal because it meets the needs of students, has numerous benefits, and encompasses a larger scope of teaching and learning. What educators learned about blended synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning should inform future practices post COVID-19.

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