

Unveiling Blended Learning: Transformative Modalities and Dimensions in the “Internet Plus” Era

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Abstract: This research examines the transformative impact of blended learning within the era of “Internet Plus” in China. It focuses on two prevalent modalities: MOOC/SPOC-based and LMS-based blended learning, to trace the evolution and increased prominence of these methods. The study delves into the challenges associated with deciding ‘what to blend’ and ‘how to blend’, underscoring the necessity to include diverse perspectives on learning, teaching, curriculum, and resources. Additionally, it explores the physical, learning theory, and teaching theory dimensions of blending, offering insights into the multifaceted implementation of BL. The paper highlights the importance of BL within China’s educational system, especially considering its endorsement by the Ministry of Education and extensive integration into the country’s national first-class undergraduate courses.

Keywords: Blended Learning; Educational Innovation; MOOC/SPOC-based BL; LMS-based BL

1. Introduction

In the context of “Internet plus” era, blended learning (BL) has emerged as a transformative approach in educational pedagogy. By harmoniously integrating traditional face-to-face instruction with digital technology and online resources, BL maximizes the efficiency and effectiveness of the classroom teaching ecosystem—encompassing educators, learners, curricular content, and educational media. This synthesis leads to the development of a novel educational paradigm that transcends traditional boundaries (Dziuban et al., 2018). In China, BL has experienced exponential growth and is institutionalized as a cornerstone of educational innovation. The Ministry of Education(MOE)’s recognition and promotion of BL are evidenced by the substantial presence of BL-oriented courses among the national

first-class undergraduate excellent courses announced in 2020. A significant three-quarters of these courses adopt the BL approach, signaling a profound shift in China’s educational practices—one that is being driven by BL as an intrinsic force of educational reform.

2. The Debate of Defining Blended Learning

Despite nearly 30 years of development, the academic community remains divided in its understanding of BL (Hrastinski, 2019). Contentions are split between the definition of the concept as “a blend of online and offline teaching and learning” from a narrow sense and a blend of learning theory, teaching media, teaching modes” from broad sense (Hu, 2021).

Based on the different standpoint, BL is defined variously. Graham (2006) introduced three categories of BL according to its purpose: enabling blends, enhancing blends, and transformative blends. Sharma (2010) concluded three types of blends, encompassing a combination of traditional classroom instruction and online instruction, a combination of various digital media and technology tools, and a combination of various instructional methods. Feng et al. (2018) divided the evolution of BL into three phases: technology application, technology integration, and “Internet plus” from the physical and pedagogical dimensions, and proposed offline-led, online-led, and fully integrated types of BL as well as didactic, autonomous, and interactive and collaborative types of BL for the two dimensions, respectively.

The aforementioned literature showcase that the different understanding of BL represents the different operation of blending in education. Therefore, ‘what to blend’ and ‘how to blend’ have become the tough challenges for teachers (Feng & Wang, 2019). To this end, it is essential to balance ‘Mix and order’ and make

clear the specific form and special content of blended learning (Feng et al., 2020). This paper adopts a Chinese perspective, responding the challenges of ‘what to blend’ and ‘how to blend’ for highlighting the innovative BL modalities in China local context.

3. Blend the Best of the Two Worlds

Blended modality has evolved to be the best of both worlds, providing an opportunity for optimizing face-to-face instruction through the effective use of online components. BL can not only empower teachers to develop their educational technical abilities, but also empower students to learn individually, think deeply and develop whole-person.

Although Chinese teachers in colleges and universities have carried out blended learning to varying degrees, most online learning is still only assisting, supplementing and promoting face-to-face classroom teaching in its implementation process. They are faced with two challenges ‘what to blend?’ and ‘how to blend?’. Prior to answer the two questions, it is necessary to know the two main BL modalities in China local context.

3.1 Two Main Blended Learning Modalities

According to the *Guidelines on the Construction of First-Class Undergraduate Courses* launched by MOE in the year of 2019, the first-class BL courses mainly refer to the transformation of on-campus courses based on MOOC, SPOC, or other online courses, using appropriate digital teaching tools, combining with the actual situation of BL courses.

Firstly, MOOC/SPOC-based BL is the most advocated mode of BL in China. The adoption of Massive Open Online Courses and Small Private Online Courses has been instrumental in fostering a new wave of BL initiatives. These platforms, such as the Chinese University MOOC, Xuetang Online, UMOOCs and Chaoxing Erya Network General Education Course Platform, have become key players in the integration of online and offline educational experiences.

The innovative application of MOOCs in Chinese teaching environments has given rise to various BL models that leverage the advantages of online resources to transform traditional instruction. These models include MOOC+offline classroom, MOOC+flipped

classroom, MOOC+SPOC+offline classroom, and MOOC+SPOC+flipped classroom, each offering a unique blend of online and face-to-face learning opportunities.

Secondly, Learning Management System (LMS)-based BL offers unparalleled flexibility in educational delivery. The advent of mobile technology in the “Internet plus” era has transcended the physical limitations of BL, enabling educators to expand their classrooms effectively. When harnessed appropriately, these technologies can foster a seamless integration with the unique characteristics of BL, thereby enhancing the teaching and learning experience.

Through the utilization of specific platforms and tools, such as Dingding, Tencent Classroom, Rain Classroom, U-campus Wisdom Teaching Cloud Platform, and the Micro-assisted Wisdom Teaching System, China has embraced a wealth of online teaching platforms to support BL. These platforms facilitate the implementation of innovative teaching modes, such as micro class/live class/recorded class + offline classroom/flipped classroom, which continue to evolve and diversify.

3.2 What to Blend

BL is constantly evolving and upgrading with continued development over time, and its teaching delivery mode, learning space and way, teaching and learning focus have all changed (Feng et al., 2018). And therefore, what to blend on earth?

1) Blend different perspectives on learning. The occurrence of learning in BL is not only the embodiment of behaviorism and cognitivism, but also the embodiment of constructivism and connectionism. In the context of information interaction and knowledge construction, BL in the “Internet plus” era concerns the acquisition of personalized knowledge and the generation of creative knowledge, which can better achieve the higher order educational objectives of Bloom’s taxonomy.

2) Blend different perspectives on teaching. The essence of BL is to create a truly highly-engaged and personalized learning experience for students. The transformation of learning concept inevitably requires the innovation of teaching concept. BL advocates personalized learning and practices the concept of whole-person education. It is necessary to shift the

focus from teaching materials, teachers, and classrooms to student development, student learning, and learning effect.

3) Blend different perspectives on curriculum. In the “Internet plus” era, the changes of teaching objects, environment, and elements direct a new curriculum view, which is expected to realize a new blended curriculum teaching design. More and more scholars have shifted their focus from teaching in BL to learning of students, and from separate design of online and offline teaching to overall design. Curriculum construction integrates various elements with multiplication effect in order to achieve the optimal deep learning effect and realize the essence of BL (Liu et al., 2020).

4) Blend different perspectives on resources. BL breaks through the closed and limited resource environment of traditional classroom and places itself in the ocean of information resources. In the teaching process of BL, resource acquisition is no longer static. The creation of valuable data, information, academic achievements and experience, activities, etc., all can be converted into curriculum resources which are in constant flow, change, collision, integration, refining, and thereby, promoting network classroom generation and evolution, forming the great vitality of learning community (Xie et al., 2017).

3.3 How to Blend

While researchers and practitioners are the cohorts on the convenience brought by the flexibility and spatio-temporal extension of BL, they have wide discrepancies about ‘how to blend’. Feng et al. (2019) argued that BL content is neither the simple removal or extracurricular extension of traditional classroom teaching by information technology, nor is simply replacing or supplementing face-to-face classroom teaching with information technology resources. Hu (2021) pointed out that BL is a dynamic and complex system, and it is necessary to examine ‘how to blend’ with a multi-dimensional view.

1) In terms of physical properties dimension, the crux of blending lies in understanding how different forms of digital education can be combined with traditional face-to-face teaching methods to create a modern learning environment and achieve a shared

target. Teachers and students can harness the potential of technology to create effective classrooms, and obtain the inherent benefits from face-to-face discussion and offline materials learning as well. Xie et al. (2017) expounded four key links of *Tai Chi Academy* which using the *Tai Chi* in traditional Chinese culture to describe and understand the interaction between ‘virtual and real space-time motion laws’ in BL. Moreover, the three-stage BL design of Pre-class-In-class-After-class, which is widely adopted and implemented in China teaching practice and takes activities as the center and simultaneously considers online, offline asynchronously, is also considered as an effective mixed path.

2) In terms of learning theory dimension, Zhao and Liu (2021) claimed that BL should focus on task assignment and combination of online and offline learning routes, and build CRI (Combine, Resign & Independent) BL mode by integrating the two learning views of connectionism and neo-constructivism. Its core characteristics can be summarized as one-combination (online learning and offline flipped), two-reconstruction (teaching process and teaching content reconstruction), and three-autonomy (autonomous connectivity, autonomous construction and autonomous creation ability), so as to achieve effective BL.

3) In terms of teaching theory dimension, in higher education, BL has gained substance in academic literature in the last decade (Porter & Graham, 2015). Educators and practitioners in China tend toward the whole process of the overall design rather than the sub-design of environment, strategy and reflection. Garrison et al. (2000) proposed the Community of Inquiry framework to expound how to blend. By presenting the interaction of social presence, teaching presence and cognitive presence, this framework provided a feasible teaching design support and showed how to give full play to the overall effect which is applicable to the sub-items and whole process design of BL.

4. Conclusion

Blended learning has evolved from a stepping stone to the future to a model that encompasses a richer set of learning strategies and multiple dimensions. This article highlights the dynamic nature of BL in China and emphasizes the ongoing quest for innovative approaches to optimize its potential. By embracing a

comprehensive understanding of BL and addressing its multifaceted dimensions, educators can continue to leverage this transformative model to enrich the teaching and learning experience.

Acknowledgments

This paper is supported by Xinyang College education and teaching reform research and practice project (No.2022YJG106).

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