Blended Learning & Learning Platforms

How you can start blended learning tomorrow
What is blended learning?

With the rise of online technology, the modern classroom is changing – and one of the biggest changes is blended learning. But what is blended learning? And how is it different from what you’ve done before?

Blended learning can be defined as the mixing of face-to-face teaching and online learning. Students have some choice over where they study (at school, at home or somewhere in between) and when they study (during school hours, in the evening or on weekends). But it is still the teacher who decides the extent of the choice, as well as which elements of the student’s education are completed online and which elements are completed in the class.

During the research for this paper, we visited a number of schools and educational institutions. Many of the teachers we spoke to didn’t realize they were practicing blended learning. They were simply doing what they’d always done: asking students to study in their own time (homework, for example). The only difference was that their students’ self-study work was supported by an online element.

Safe, secure and time-saving online learning spaces

With the rise of learning platforms, teachers and students have access to a shared online learning environment that only they can access. This enables the teacher to set up and manage online activities where students can chat, share knowledge, ask questions, access learning resources and complete work online – without the fear of random internet users stumbling across the information.

There are also even more digital resources to use in education. This includes educational videos, interactive learning games and applications that enable students to make videos, animations, webpages, podcasts, music and much more. All this helps drive student engagement and, ultimately, performance.

This paper looks at how learning platforms can help teachers succeed with blended learning.

In the paper you will:

• See examples from schools and teachers who are putting blended learning into practice
• See the models of blended learning
• Get ideas for simple ways you can start with blended learning tomorrow
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10 benefits of blended learning

All the educational institutions and teachers we spoke to when compiling this paper began with blended learning because of a pedagogical desire. Yes, they said, blended learning requires an understanding of technology, but that technology is merely a means to an end. Here are some of the benefits they get from blended learning.

1. More effective use of classroom time
   Blended learning enables teachers to make better use of the limited time they have with their students. By moving some traditional classroom activities into the online world, you end up spending less time talking in front of the class and more time working with individual students.

   Research by Auckland University Professor John Hattie shows that one key to successful education is less teacher talking time and better relationships between students and teachers.

2. Easier differentiation
   With more time to work with individual students in class, teachers find they can better differentiate their teaching to suit individual needs, answering student questions and giving individual feedback. Many online resources also differentiate automatically: math exercises can be set to get progressively harder the more answers a student gets right, for example.

3. More active students
   Blended models such as the flipped classroom use online videos and resources to prepare students before they come to class. This way, the students have already learned the theory and can use the classroom time to put that theory into practice. In this model, the classroom teacher takes the role of guide and mentor.

   It’s also possible for you to assess the work done by students before class - so you know exactly what your students need help with. This links to another John Hattie finding: that 50% of what is taught in the classroom is already known to students.

4. More creativity for students
   There are thousands of online resources that enable students to create videos, animations, podcasts and new media. This gives your students new ways to engage with the work and express what they have learned. Stronger students can also do extra work online to show their knowledge and understanding of a subject without taking up your valuable class time.
Better prepared students

When the online work is done to prepare students in advance (in the flipped classroom model, for example), students arrive in class better prepared. This often means they are more engaged in the topic from the start.

Teaching 21st century skills

Today’s students need to learn how to work, study and collaborate online. They also need to develop the critical-thinking and creative skills demanded by modern employers. Blended learning helps you teach these skills by encouraging your students to work, share and collaborate online.

Less paperwork

Many teachers’ desks and briefcases are full of student papers that need to be marked and returned. The grades and feedback also need to be logged in the students gradebook or report card. Online learning platforms digitize many assignments, so your marking can be done online (from school or at home).

Many learning platforms also automatically add grades and feedback comments to student gradebooks, and even automatically make this information available to other teachers, departmental heads and parents.

All your teaching resources in one place

Online resources can be accessed from any internet-connected computer. This means you only have to upload a video, website link, newspaper article or other resource once. You and your students - as well as other teachers - will then be able to access it from their computers at home or internet-enabled computers in the PC lab.

Lower costs

Although setting up the IT required to teach blended learning may require some initial investment, many schools and colleges report reduced long-term costs due to reduced expenditure on textbooks, paper and photocopying.

Better informed parents

As most students do online work at home, this increases the opportunities for their parents to take part and help out. As a result, students get increased support from parents, and the parents feel a closer connection to their children’s school work.
Case stories

Real-life examples of blended learning

Many teachers already practice blended learning. Here are four examples of teachers and schools that have adapted blended learning theories to suit their own needs, with great success.

These cases show a single blended learning model in operation. However, most of the teachers referenced here mix and match their teaching styles, borrowing from different techniques, to suit the subject and students – and so use a number of different models during a semester or week.
Assigning materials to prepare students for class has been around since the dawn of teaching. But, with the emergence of learning platforms, “flipping” your classroom is now easier and more effective than ever.

In traditional teaching models, the students learn the theory in class and then do practice assignments at home. The flipped classroom concept flips this around (hence the name). At its heart, the concept is about better preparing students for the work they are going to do in class – so the teacher can focus class time more effectively.

When one secondary school teacher in Norway tried it, she discovered that she spent less time talking in front of her class, and more time working with individual students. Here’s how she does it.

**Schoolwork at home, homework at school**

The teacher films herself explaining the theory she is going to cover in the next class, and puts the video onto her school learning platform as an assignment. For homework, the students watch the video and then do a quick digital test in the learning platform to check how well they understood the theory.

The test report tells the teacher if anyone struggled with a particular aspect of the theory. This information is important, as it means she can plan her next class more effectively to ensure she focuses on the areas where her students need most help. She can also identify anyone who really struggled, and set aside time to work with them one-to-one.

**Teachers present at crucial learning stage**

This style of teaching also makes learning more efficient. Watching videos is a low-cognitive process – it’s all about absorbing information and little critical thinking is required. Completing assignments, on the other hand, is a high-cognitive process that requires problem-solving skills. Thanks to the flipped classroom concept, this high-cognitive work is done in class, with the teacher present to assist, guide and further challenge her students.

“Flipping the classroom establishes a framework that ensures students receive a personalized education tailored to their individual needs”

**From Why Flipped Classrooms are Here to Stay**

by flipped classroom pioneers
Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams

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**More than just video**

You don’t have to be a video master to practice the flipped classroom. You can use any resources (PDFs, audio recordings, websites) that explain the theory.
Station rotation gives teachers more time with students

The station rotation model of blended learning is a simple way to vary your teaching, and ensures you have more time with individual students.

It’s the start of another day for the students at this primary school in Massachusetts, USA. 24 students are gathered in front of the smartboard brainstorming different words that begin with the letter L. When they’ve exhausted the words they know, the teacher splits the students into groups of four and each group heads to a work station in a different part of the room.

Different activity at each station

During the lesson, the groups will work at all the work stations for 20 minutes. At each station, they complete different activities related to the letter L, sometimes as a group and sometimes individually. This is a simple way for the teacher to introduce different activity styles and learning methods for her students. The key, according to the teacher, is to set up each station so that the activities are varied, but still connected.

At one table, for example, the students work with clay to form words with the letter L. At another, students match words with pictures. There is also a reading station, complete with bookshelves and comfy chairs, where the students read books and then discuss them with each other. Although the work done at the stations varies depending on the topic, there are always two stations that remain the same: the PC station and the teacher station.
Bringing online work into class

The PC work station has five internet-connected PCs where students work with online educational games, reading and listening activities or online activities designed specifically for students and teachers. This station helps the students develop their 21st century skills and, as most online activities have an element of interaction (giving hints if the student gets something wrong for example), the students find it an engaging way to work.

The online PCs also have advantages for the teacher. Many online educational activities give feedback reports that tell the teacher how well her students did and where they struggled. (As they are online, she can check this from home, if necessary.) Also, even if the class changes rooms, the online activities are still accessible – and previous work saved – regardless of the PC.

Individual instruction at teacher station

At the teacher station, the teacher works with one small group of students at a time. This enables her to give individual attention to each student and ensures the students’ work day has a good balance between direct instruction and group work.

As most stations require students to work independently, they are often targeted to a lower cognitive level. At the teacher station, the students work at a higher cognitive level because they get immediate feedback from the teacher. The PC station is something in between, as the students can get feedback from interactive activities.

Making the most of your time

The teachers at the school all practice this model to a greater or lesser extent. (All teachers agree, for example, that it’s a very good model to use when teaching grammar.) And they are convinced that it helps them make the most of the time they have with each student, as they spend most of their time working with very small groups.

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**Students:**
Primary

**Subject:**
Grammar, reading, maths, etc.

**Blended learning model:**
Station rotation

**The process:**
Students rotate between in-class learning stations

**Tools:**
Five PCs + the itslearning learning platform + online educational activities
Learning by Design

Learning by Design is an innovative approach to teaching that lets the students decide what they study and how they will show what they’ve learned. As well as inspiring students, this award-winning blended learning approach leaves teachers free to tailor the education to each child.

Planning for assessment

Ask a bunch of 11-year-old children what they know about Australia, and you’ll get a vast range of responses, from kangaroos to the Great Barrier Reef. This presents the teacher with a problem: what should you teach your students when they all have different starting points and interests?

The answer is Learning by Design, an innovative approach to learning practiced by a number of secondary and primary schools in the Netherlands.

Hello, what do you want to learn today?

Learning by Design is an education approach that gives students control over what they learn and when – and encourages them to come up with creative ways of expressing what they have learned. If, for example, the class is learning about the solar system, students begin by brainstorming what they already know, as well as what they want to know.

Working in small groups, the students then set about finding the answers: from reference books, the internet, their parents and siblings – any resource that they find useful. Once the students have the answers, they create a ‘product’ – usually a video, presentation or podcast – that explains the answers to the rest of the class. This product is then shown to the rest of the class, and forms the basis of the student’s grade.
An individual education for every student

Learning by Design means quite a shift in the teacher’s role and most teachers need to be trained in the new style of working. The teacher spends much less time talking in front of the class. Instead, they act as facilitators, regulating the questions the student will answer, pointing them towards useful resources, guiding them in their work, keeping them on track and making sure they push themselves.

This gives the teacher more time to tailor the education to each child. If a teacher notices that a child is struggling – or needs to be pushed further – they can step in, offering one-on-one tuition, giving the students extra study materials or adjusting their group task to better suit their needs.

Motivated students and parents

The Maria Primary School in the Netherlands won the 2011 National Education Award (primary category) for its Learning by Design approach. According to principal Gerard ann de Stegge, this way of working is enjoyed by teachers, students and even their parents.

The students find this an incredibly motivating and satisfying way to work. The parents have also been really positive. They get much more closely involved than before. They answer their questions, get involved in the research and even help with video editing. We can also see that our students’ study skills have improved significantly since we introduced Learning by Design a few years ago. But more importantly, I see more motivated and happier students and more motivated and happier teachers.
One higher education center in Germany has found that blended learning can help thousands of students from around the country re-train and re-qualify, even while working full-time, by letting them study at their own pace and in their own style.

**Extending the classroom**

Higher education centers take students from all walks of life and, as many students have full-time or part-time jobs, the education the center delivers has to be extremely flexible. The solution developed by this center in Germany is to create distance learning courses that mix online learning with face-to-face classes.

**Completing assignments online**

At the start of the course, each student is given access to itslearning, the center’s online learning platform. This gives the students access to study materials – including online lectures, links to articles on the web, podcasts and instructive videos – at anytime and anywhere with an internet connection.

The students begin by working through the materials in their own time. Then, when the teacher feels that the students are ready, she gives them assignments designed to test and stretch their new knowledge. The students work online to complete the assignments, which can be both theoretical or practical (a Nordic Walking assignment, for example, may include videoing yourself walking).

**Moving from the internet to the classroom**

After completing the online section of the course, the students study with instructors and other students for two weeks at one of the school’s four main locations. And on longer courses, this pattern is repeated, with more online learning followed by more face-to-face classes.

The final stage of all courses is a two-part certification: the students take an oral and written exam, and then work remotely on a written assignment that covers a particular issue in-depth.

**Creating an online community**

For the teachers, the biggest challenge with this approach is ensuring that the students don’t feel isolated when studying at home. The key, according to one of the teachers, is to create an online community that the students can feel part of. At the start of each course, for example, each teacher and student writes a short introduction of themselves so everyone knows who’s in the course; and each week the teacher sets up a discussion forum in the learning platform that the group of students can discuss.
The theory

In this section, we look at the different models you can use when practicing blended learning.
The blended learning models in a nutshell

How do the leading blended learning experts define the different models of blended learning? One of the most comprehensive analysis of blended learning comes from education researcher Michael B. Horn of Innosight Institute.

Michael B. Horn has identified the four most common blended learning models. However, he is also clear that these models are merely a framework for teachers to use when developing and discussing blended learning, and most teachers pick and choose elements from these models to suit their teaching. They may use one model on a specific day, and another one the rest of the week.

The models are mainly intended to create a common language for teachers in order to be able to talk about different teaching approaches.

Flex model
Content and instruction delivered primarily by the internet with the teacher providing assistance as needed.

Set-up
Students work at computers at school (either for the entire class or in break-out rooms) while receiving individualized attention from the teacher.

Teacher role
The teacher provides group instruction and individual support as needed.

Student experience
Students work on the materials at their own pace online with face-to-face teacher support.

The blend
Online delivery of curriculum in the physical classroom.
Michael B. Horn divides the rotation model into four sub-categories. For more information, please see the Innosight Institute paper: Classifying K-12 Blended Learning

Rotation model
Students rotate between learning stations, both in and outside the classroom.

Set-up
The classroom is divided into stations and the students spend their day rotating between them.

Teacher role
The teacher sets the rotation schedule. They then sit at one station where they give direct instruction.

Student experience
Each station has a different approach to the same learning objective, and the students work individually, in groups or with the teacher, depending on the station.

The blend
One of the stations is online (for example, where students complete surveys, write, listen to a story or answer questions).

Self-blend model
Students take online classes to supplement traditional courses.

Set-up
Online coursework done at home or at school.

Teacher role
Physical classroom teacher doubles as online teacher.

Student experience
Students work at their own pace while having the option of face-to-face instruction.

The blend
Same teacher for both online and physical courses allows students to get help on online courses at school.

Enriched-virtual model
Primarily distance learning combined with seldom school visits.

Set-up
Students complete courses online, with seldom visits to brick-and-mortar school.

Teacher role
The teacher provides remote assistance to students through email exchanges and online discussion boards.

Student experience
Students work at their own pace and learn to take responsibility for their own learning.

The blend
The online and physical elements merge on the rare occasions students attend school for instruction.

* Michael B. Horn divides the rotation model into four sub-categories. For more information, please see the Innosight Institute paper: Classifying K-12 Blended Learning
Start blending today

The great thing about blended learning is that it doesn’t require you to change your whole teaching methodology. Follow one of these five simple tips, and you could start blending today.
Getting discussions going in class

Every teacher would love their students to be enthusiastic about the topic they are about to teach before they enter the class. Here’s how online discussions can help.

Online discussion forums are a simple way to get students thinking about a topic before a class. Anyone in the class can read and comment on contributions to the forum, and so start discussing the topic in advance. They are also useful as they give an opportunity for students who are not comfortable speaking in front of the class to take part in the discussion.

Simply start by asking a question on the discussion forum, and then ask your students to contribute with their own thoughts, ideas and online examples. As well as getting your students in the right frame of mind before the class, the comments on the forum will also give you a good idea of how much your students know about a topic and what their opinions are.

Using polls instead of surveys
If your students have little time, you can use a poll instead of a discussion. The poll works in the same way, but students have to select one option from a number of choices. The question “Was Macbeth mad or bad? Yes/No” will get students thinking without taking too much time.

The question doesn’t have to be yes/no. You could also ask “Who is your favorite character in Macbeth?,” which will enable students to see that a variety of opinions are possible.

How to do it in itslearning

1. In your itslearning course page, click Add in the tree menu and then click Add discussion.
2. Give the discussion a name and write a short text to explain what the students need to do. (Remember to make sure the topic of the discussion will engage your students.) Click Save and the discussion is ready.

Quick tips:

Inspiring questions
The key to making these discussions successful is starting with a question or statement that inspires the students. One way of doing this is beginning with something controversial. Before teaching a unit about IT security, for example, you might want to start with a discussion about whether or not students would like closed circuit TV cameras installed in school corridors, classrooms and playgrounds.

Checking understanding after class
This technique can also be used after a class discussion or other work to check how well students understood the concept. After teaching the theory of democracy, for example, you could set up an online discussion forum and ask your students to give an example of a democratic process they have experienced.
Using videos in class and at home
Many teachers would like to reduce the amount of talking they do in class to a minimum. This gives their students more opportunity to be active in class time, and gives the teacher more time to spend talking to and helping individual students. One answer is video.

Often made by teachers, there are thousands of educational videos online, covering almost any subject from specific maths theories to ancient history. All you need to do is find the video, embed it (or just a link to it) into your learning platform, and ask your students to watch the video at home. They can watch the video to prepare before the class (watching it as many times as they need in order to understand it) and you can use your class time to discuss the video and complete exercises that practice the theory.

Finding videos
The internet is all about quantity and not necessarily quality, so you may want to start you search for teaching videos on websites dedicated to teachers, such as mathtv.com, teachertube.com and khanacademy.com.

Making your own videos
On page 7, you can see an example of a teacher who makes her own videos and uses the itslearning test tool to check how well her students understood the video before they come to class.

How to do it in itslearning
1. Once you have found a video, copy the URL (the www. address at the top of your web browser).
2. Go to your course page. Click Add from the tree menu and then click Add assignment.
3. In the Rich text editor, add a quick description of the video and then click Insert. Choose Web 2.0 content and paste the URL into the top field in the pop-up box. Click Insert.
4. Click Save and the assignment will be automatically added to your students’ calendars.

Quick tip:
Any resource will do
You don’t have to use videos for this. Any resource that explains the subject will do, whether it’s a PDF, interactive animation, website, newspaper article or academic paper.
Using webcams for revision
Letting students loose with webcams can aid the revision process – and take the weight off your shoulders.

Blended learning gives you plenty of opportunities to encourage your students to get creative. Here’s one way that you can engage their imaginations and simplify the revision process by using webcams.

As you lead up to the end of term exam, divide your students into groups and ask each group to make a video that recaps a certain topic from the course. When all the videos have been completed, you can either show them in class or ask your students to watch them at home and give comments on a discussion forum. In this way, the videos become part of the shared resources of the class – and everyone can watch them as they revise. Also, as the students know the videos will be reviewed by their classmates, they often work harder to make them right.

Not just videos
Of course, you don’t have to restrict your students to making videos. You can ask your students to create songs, presentations (try the online tool at www.prezi.com), photo stories or even animations (try using J2Spotlight, a spot-motion animation tool available in the itslearning App Library).

How to do it in itslearning
(creating the assignment)

1. In your itslearning course page, click Add in the tree menu and then click Add assignment.
2. Complete the assignment form. In the description, make it clear that your students have to create a video and upload it to itslearning once they are done.
3. Click Save and the assignment will be automatically added to your students’ calendars. You’ll get a notification when a student uploads a completed assignment.

See the technique in action
You can read about one school’s experiences with this technique at http://www.itslearning.eu/web-cameras-give-new-possibilities-in-itslearning
Social media in a safe environment

Most students enjoy keeping in touch and sharing information using social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Learning platforms give you the chance to tap into this enthusiasm in a safe, school-controlled environment.

One way to achieve this may be to create a shared resource page on your school’s learning platform. Make the page not only accessible to all students but also editable by them, and they can then take ownership of the page by adding videos, comments, links and other materials themselves.

In a geography class, for example, the resource page could cover a certain topic, such as glaciers. The students then gather as much information as they can about the topic and post it onto the resource page with a short explanation, and comment on the material posted by other students. If having one page for all student material seems disorganized, you can break the students into groups and ask each group to create a page.

How to do it in itslearning

1. In your itslearning course page, click Add in the tree menu and then click Add Page beta.
2. Then click Edit permissions and choose Select who can edit the element.
3. Select the names of the students you want to be able to add content to the page (to select them all, click the box at the top of the list). Click Add and then Save. Click Return to New page and you’re ready.
4. To change the name at the top of the page, just click the page title and type in a new name.

Quick tip:

Make sure you don’t lose anything

Giving students full editing rights means they can delete as well as add content – so it may be worth establishing a rule that only the teacher can delete things from the page.
Journalism for all

Journalism is already online – and now your journalism courses can be too, with this simple technique that enables you to create differentiated assignments in just a couple of minutes.

For your next journalism assignment, ask your students to make a report about a current event – and give them a choice of which medium they use when making the report by telling them that they can write an article, record a radio news report, make a video recording or a blog post.

Simple differentiation

This is a very simple way to differentiate your assignment. It gives your students the choice of how they complete it. Students who enjoy writing may do a standard newspaper article, while more visual types may create a full video news report. To hand it in, all they need to do is upload the final file to the school learning platform.

Extend the activity with peer assessment

If you’d like to extend the assignment further, you can ask the students to post their finished work into a discussion forum. The other students can then look at the work and give their feedback. Questions for them to consider could be: Was the chosen media the best format to communicate the material? Did the student make the best use of the medium’s possibilities?

After reviewing the work, the students can discuss the projects and feedback in an in-class discussion. They can also make their work available to their peers in other classes for comment. This allows students to share their work with someone other than their teacher, while keeping their work in a controlled environment. This combination of online and in-class activity makes this an example of blended learning.

How to do it in itslearning

1. In your itslearning course page, click Add in the tree menu and then click Add assignment.
2. Complete the assignment form. In the description, make a note that students can write a newspaper article, record a TV news report or make a radio story.
3. Click Save and the assignment will be automatically added to your students’ calendars. You’ll get a notification when a student uploads a completed assignment.

Quick tip:

This model works for all types of courses, not just journalism. Teachers in most subjects will benefit from differentiating their assignments. The key is to give your students a choice as to how they complete an assignment.
Further reading

Reports


Books


Online articles and resources
* Blended learning with learning platforms. itslearning’s blended learning resource page http://www.itslearning.eu/blended-learning


* Blend your classroom. Blended learning approaches revolutionizing teaching http://www.itslearning.eu/blend-your-classroom


Case studies
* AHA-Academy, Germany. The perfect blend: turning everyday people into health experts http://www.itslearning.eu/ahab-academy

* Maria Primary School, the Netherlands. Learning by Design http://www.itslearning.eu/maria-school

* Eastfield Primary School, UK. Lights, camera, action...primary students learn with video http://www.itslearning.eu/eastfield-primary-school
Designed for teachers and how they want to teach, itslearning is a cloud-based learning platform that connects teachers, students, parents and school leaders – both in and outside the classroom. It gives teachers countless ways to create engaging lessons and resources, makes sharing materials easy, and automates routine tasks so teachers have more time to focus on their students.

A cloud-based platform that’s easy to set up and maintain, itslearning is used by millions of teachers, students, administration staff and parents around the world. It can be found at all levels of education, from primary schools to universities, helping teachers make education more inspiring and valuable for today’s students.

At itslearning, we pride ourselves on understanding the needs of education. More than 20% of our staff have worked as teachers and we can often be found in the classroom, learning from teachers.

We provide a full range of services to educational institutions, from simple training sessions to full-scale implementation projects. Established in 1999, we are headquartered in Bergen, Norway, and have offices in London, Birmingham, Berlin, Paris, Mulhouse, Malmö, Enschede and Boston.

Helping teachers collaborate with colleagues

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