Importance of Blended Learning and Innovative Approaches in Education: A Review of Studies

Jochebed Lepcha

[1]PhD Scholar, Social Work, Visva Bharati University, Santiniketan, Bolpur, West Bengal, India
Email - jochebedlepcha35639@gmail.com

Abstract: *Blended learning is an educational approach that includes traditional face-to-face instruction and digital and online methods, offering a flexible learning environment. This article studies the effectiveness of blending digital tools with conventional methods to enhance student engagement. This article reviews findings from various studies on blended learning and its application in education, focusing on higher education, which requires developing practical competencies alongside theoretical knowledge. Blended learning offers new ways to enhance these competencies. This approach has gained importance in various fields, including social work education.*

Keyword*s: blended learning, higher education, social work education*

1. INTRODUCTION

Blended learning is a progressive educational strategy that combines traditional in-person instruction with digital and online methodologies to offer teachers, trainers, and learners a dynamic and flexible learning experience. Blended learning seeks to provide educational opportunities that maximize the benefits of different approaches in order to facilitate successful student learning. Friesen and Norm (2012) describe Blended Learning as a structured educational program where students engage with the curriculum partially through digital and online resources, allowing them autonomy in managing the timing, location, trajectory, or speed of their learning process.

In India, The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 was enacted to revolutionize India's educational framework, focusing strongly on blended learning. It advocates for adopting this modern tool across all levels of education, from primary to higher education, to facilitate the effective distribution of quality education. The integration of various instructional mediums in Blended Learning offers a multitude of advantages. It gives space for students to engage in self-learning and provides a flexible learning environment. Blended learning enhances improved collaboration among universities and organizations. The role of the teacher in blended learning is that of a mentor or coach rather than a top-bottom knowledge contributor. It is student-centered bottom-up learning rather than teacher-centered learning. In blended learning, educators play a crucial role in establishing the base for student learning. Educators introduce the subject matter and equip learners with essential analyzing and evaluating skills, which students then utilize practically to enhance the learning process. Blended Learning merges traditional face-to-face instruction with digital and online methods, creating a flexible and interactive educational environment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

El Sayad (2023), in Higher education students' learning perception in the blended learning community of inquiry, collected data from 198 students, revealing that teaching and social presence highly influence learning presence, while social and learning presence impact cognitive presence. The study found that learning presence is the crucial factor driving students' learning perceptions and highlighted the significant mediation roles of social, learning, and cognitive presences. They demonstrate that teaching presence, social presence, and learning presence should go hand in hand with cognitive presence to provide a thriving blended learning community.

A study by Ritimoni Bordoloi et al. (2021) on "Perception towards online/blended learning at the time of Covid-19 pandemic: an academic analytics in the Indian context" found that the majority of the respondents preferred the blended form of learning as the most suitable model of learning in the Indian context. Furthermore, the study showed

that cognitive presence is enhanced when students are engaged in meaningful online and in-person discussions. However, challenges persist, particularly with accessibility and equity in ICT-based education.

Source: Ritimoni Bordoloi et al in Perception towards online/blended learning at the time of Covid-19 pandemic: an academic analytics in the Indian context
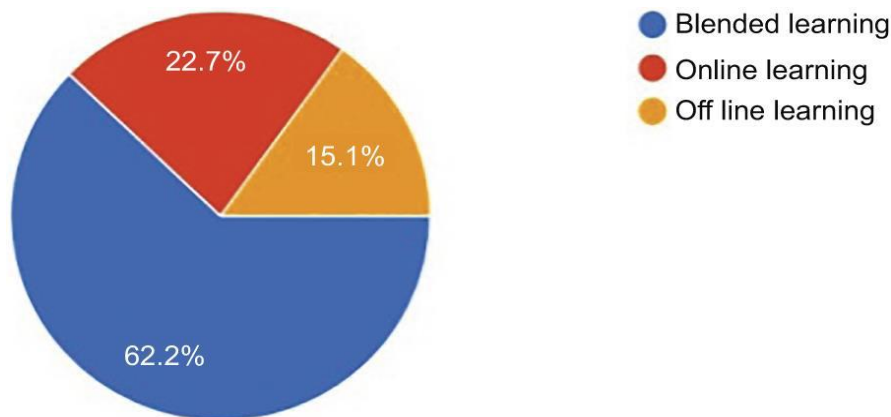

Figure 1. Best way for teaching learning transaction in post-Covid-19 situations.

"Understanding College Students' Behavioral Patterns in a Blended Learning Class," by Tang H et al. (2024), reveals that instructors are crucial for monitoring students' understanding and helping them correct misconceptions. Notetaking behavior is an essential predictor of learning gains, so instructors are advised to prompt students to take notes during lectures. Assisting students in knowledge construction and focusing student discussions on epistemic aspects rather than social ones can enhance learning. Encouraging students to use assigned or external resources during discussions can improve active learning opportunities.

Source: Tang H et al (2024) in the article Understanding College Students' Behavioral Patterns in a Blended Learning Class
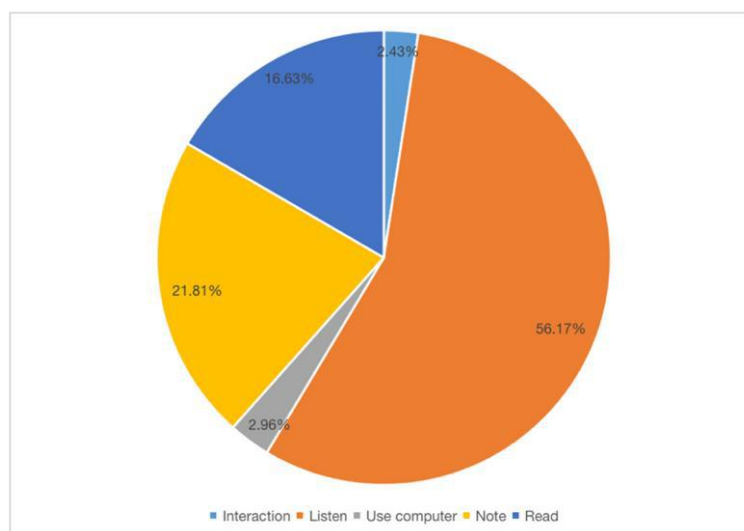

Fig.2 Percentage of students' learning behaviors during the in-class activities.

A. Kumar et al. (2021), "Blended Learning Tools and Practices: A Comprehensive Analysis," have conducted a study on the effectiveness of blended learning during both pre-COVID-19 and COVID-19 periods, highlighting benefits and challenges for students and faculty. The findings show that blended learning, supported by tools like Blackboard, CodeTantra, and G Suite, improves student performance, engagement, and cognitive processing compared to traditional methods. The study has explored blended learning practices at two Indian universities and suggests the positive effect of blended learning. It proposes extending these practices to accommodate students with disabilities better and highlights the effectiveness of blended learning in distance education for special needs students.

Bansal, P. (2014), in "Blended Learning in Indian Higher Education: Challenges and Strategies," highlights the challenges and strategies in Indian higher education, focusing on blended learning. Traditional issues persist, such as inaccessibility, lack of quality education, inadequate resources, and the need for enhanced skill acquisition. To address these, higher education leaders must rethink organizational structures, operational strategies, and policies to adapt to the digital age, avoiding generic solutions and embracing context-specific approaches.

Maple, Jarrott, and Kuyini's (2013) study revealed that integrated online and face-to-face elements create a cohesive learning experience, accommodating student engagement.

Source: A. Kumar *et al.*, (2021) "Blended Learning Tools and Practices: A Comprehensive Analysis
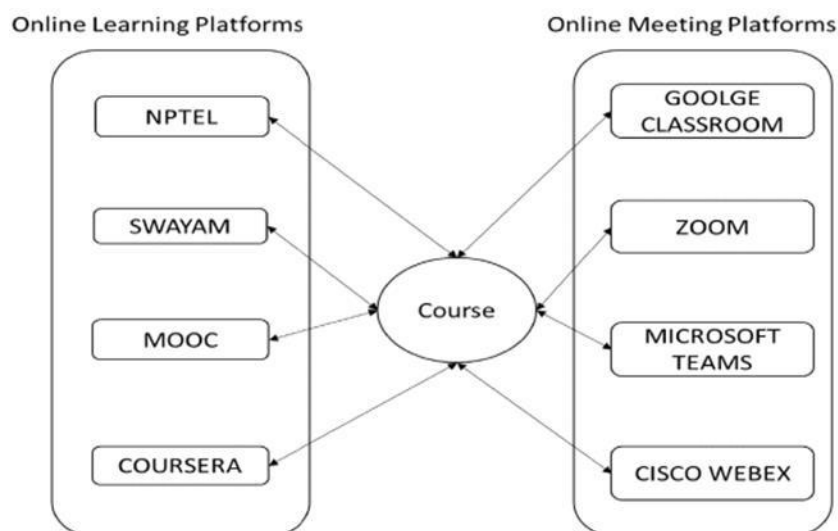

Figure 3. Various online learning and meeting platform used for stage wise blended active learning

3. FINDINGS

EFFECTIVENESS OF BLENDED LEARNING AMONG STUDENTS

El Sayad (2023) suggests that integrating teaching, social, and learning presence with cognitive presence is essential for creating effective blended learning environments. This finding supports the need to enhance the community of inquiry framework in blended learning contexts.

Ritimoni Bordoloi et al. studied perceptions of online or blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in India. Most respondents preferred blended learning as the preferred model for future education in India. The study indicated that cognitive presence is enhanced through meaningful online and in-person interactions. However, challenges related to accessibility and equity in ICT-based education remain. The findings underscore the importance of integrating blended learning into India's educational framework, particularly under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

Tang H et al. (2024). Blended learning supports student-centered approaches but still values the instructor's role. Effective notetaking is linked to learning gains, and instructors should encourage this behavior. Providing scaffolds for knowledge construction and focusing on epistemic discussions rather than social ones can enhance learning. The study also suggests using assigned or external resources during discussions can improve active learning.

EDUCATIONAL APPROACHES

Kumar et al. (2021) recommended that blended learning tools, such as Blackboard, CodeTantra, and G Suite, enhance students' performance more effectively than traditional methods. Their study, which analyzed practices at two Indian universities, revealed that blended learning is beneficial during pre-COVID-19 and pandemic times. They suggest extending these practices to support students with disabilities and highlight the overall effectiveness of blended learning in meeting educational needs and adapting to emergencies.

Monique M. J. Engelbertink et al. (2021) examined a blended learning course developed using participatory design, involving collaboration among designers, stakeholders, and future users to enhance support, usability, and engagement. The course, designed to strengthen social work students' professional identity through autobiographical reflection, combines online modules with face-to-face classes. The research evaluates students' and teachers' perceptions

of persuasive techniques used in the course and the integration of online and offline components. Methods included interviews with students and teachers and an online survey. Results indicated general satisfaction with the course structure and its motivational techniques, although some suggested improvements for the course redesign.

According to Bansal P (2014), Higher education institutions in India face challenges such as catering to diverse learner needs, managing growing institutions without proportional funding, and integrating ICT into education. Persistent issues include access barriers, quality of education, and resource allocation. The study suggests that to adapt to the digital age, higher education leaders need to rethink organizational structures, strategies, and policies, avoiding one-size-fits-all solutions and instead adopting context-specific approaches.

BLENDED LEARNING IN SOCIAL WORK

Lee, Kourgiantakis, and Hu (2021) point out that the social work profession emphasizes the effectiveness of simulation-based learning (SBL) in developing competencies. The Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) adopted a competency-based approach in the United States in 2008. While the competency-based approach focuses on the practical demonstration of skills, there is criticism that knowledge and self-reflection alone are insufficient for effective practice. Scholars advocate for new educational methods to enhance skill-building, with Simulation-Based Learning (SBL) emerging as a promising approach. SBL allows students to practice skills in a controlled environment, which is particularly valuable for working with marginalized populations. Aligning SBL with specific competencies can improve student learning and prepare them for real-world challenges in socially just and culturally competent practice.

Maple, Jarrott, and Kuyini (2013) demonstrate the benefits of blending online and face-to-face learning with PBL to enhance student collaboration, motivation, and critical thinking in social work education. Integrating online and face-to-face elements created a cohesive learning experience, accommodating different engagement patterns and enhancing motivation through authentic assessments. Effective facilitation was crucial for providing timely support and ensuring successful learning outcomes, addressing the complexities of the online learning environment.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Support services, feedback, and discussions would strengthen the performance of the Blended Learning program of NEP 2020 to a modern pedagogical approach that integrates the conventional classroom setting with digital learning and self-directed study, offering an innovative learning experience for educators, trainers, and students alike. Incorporating findings from these studies into curriculum design can lead to more effective educational programs. For example, simulation-based learning and participatory design approaches can make training more interactive and relevant, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. This can lead to more engaged and prepared social workers. Research should explore how these educational methods can be adapted for students with special needs, including those with disabilities or from disadvantaged backgrounds. Ensuring equitable access to high-quality education is crucial for fostering diverse and inclusive social work practice.

5. CONCLUSION

By combining traditional face-to-face instruction with digital and online methodologies, blended learning offers a flexible, student-centred approach that enhances engagement, autonomy, and practical skill development. Integrating diverse approaches, such as Simulation-Based Learning (SBL) and participatory design, demonstrates significant promise in bridging theoretical knowledge with hands-on experience, providing students with adequate practice.

The reviews highlight the importance of integrating teaching, social, and learning presence with cognitive presence for effective learning environments, the widespread preference for blended learning models, studies in post-pandemic contexts, and the role of instructors in supporting student-centred learning and ensuring the application of digital tools. Additionally, the research reveals persistent challenges, including accessibility, equity, and the need for improved technical infrastructure. In conclusion, blended learning represents a significant advancement, especially in higher education, with the potential to enrich learning experiences, improve educational outcomes, and adapt to evolving educational needs. Embracing innovative pedagogical practices and addressing the identified challenges will be essential for leveraging the full potential of blended learning and ensuring its effectiveness in preparing students for successful and impactful careers.

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