Six Strategies for Success with Blended Learning

By Dr. Catlin Tucker

Traditional, rigid approaches to teaching and learning have taken a profound toll on teachers and students alike. Exacerbated by the pandemic, thousands of teachers have left the profession with no one in line to take their place.

At least 300,000 public school teachers and other staff left the field between February 2020 and May 2022.
(Source: *The Wall Street Journal*)

K-12 teachers also report the highest burnout rates of any U.S. profession. According to a **Gallup Poll**, more than four out of every 10 teachers say they feel burned out "always" or "very often" at work.

On the learner side, students are losing interest in school because they can't see the relevance of learning. After having the agency to build their own music playlists and create digital games at home, students are quickly bored and frustrated in classrooms where teachers dictate their learning.

Nearly 75% of high school students report negative feelings associated with school, including feeling tired, bored, and anxious.
(Source: *Journal of Learning and Instruction*)

These trends have brought to light the importance of staying relevant as educators. Relevance requires having the skills and tools necessary to teach in different contexts and environments— from effectively implementing remote learning during a prolonged school closure to deciding how best to incorporate culturally responsive instruction and artificial intelligence into the classroom.

Blended learning gives educators the flexibility to adapt their teaching as needed while providing the support so many of our students lack. With the right strategies, teachers can feel confident designing and facilitating engaging learning experiences that free them to nurture their connections with students so learners can succeed in school and beyond.

Blended Learning Basics

Blended learning is active, engaged learning online combined with active engaged learning offline that gives students more control over the time, place, pace, and path of their learning. The goal of blended learning is to help educators shift from a traditional teacher-led model, in which teachers are disseminators of information, to one that enables teachers to design student-centered learning experiences that allow learners to build meaning.

Blended Learning Models
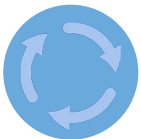
Station Rotation Model: Rotates students through a series of stations or learning activities, including teacher-led, online, and offline stations

Flipped Learning Model: Uses videos to make explanations and instruction available asynchronously so students can practice and apply during synchronous class time

Whole Group Rotation Model: Rotates the entire class through a series of online and offline learning experiences with the goal of creating personalized pathways online and allowing teachers to work with individuals or small groups

Playlist/Individual Rotation Model: Presents learners with a sequence of self-paced online and offline learning activities, such as video explanations, peer evaluation, and conferencing to help them progress toward clear learning objectives

Proven Strategies for the Blended Learning Classroom

Whether you're already using blended learning in your classroom, or are just getting started, the following strategies can set you and your students up for success.

01.

Examine Your Mindset

The way educators perceive their value in the classroom has a major impact on both the teacher and student experience. Consider the three primary roles of teachers: instructors, facilitators, and designers of learning experiences.

Teachers who spend most of their time in the expert role believe their value lies in disseminating information to students and unpacking complex concepts from the front of the room. Not only does this reduce the time spent facilitating learning, but it also sends a subtle message to students that they're not skilled enough to navigate lessons on their own.

In today's digital age, the true value teachers bring to the classroom is their ability to connect with learners, build relationships, and organically respond to their students' needs.

Success with blended learning starts with this mindset shift.

02.

Assess Your Instructional Methods

Integrating blended learning into your classroom requires that you assess the way you teach today and explore changes that can help students take charge of their learning. Start by asking yourself: "Am I planning to explain this concept or model this skill the same way for everyone, or would this benefit from differentiated small group instruction where I can provide more guidance and support?"

For example, if you're explaining a concept in the same way to everyone, incorporate blended learning by creating a video that students can access when they need it. For nuanced explanations, design small, differentiated teacher-led experiences at different levels of rigor and complexity based on student need.

03.

Empower Students as Builders of Meaning

If students are to be responsible for their own learning, they're the ones who should be doing the hard work of making meaning and applying their learning — not the teacher. Rather than passive consumers of information, students should be active participants in learning by setting goals, tracking progress, reflecting on their learning, and assessing their work. This is reflected in the definition of blended learning as "active, engaged learning."

Many times, educators unknowingly steal moments of pride and feelings of accomplishment from students can feel in their own work because teachers think students can't accomplish a task on their own.. Making students responsible for their learning helps them better understand themselves as learners and frees teachers to focus on work they find engaging and rewarding.

> **To change the focus and control from teacher to learner, don't ask: "How can I get my students to do X?" Instead, ask: "How can my students do X?"**

04.

Design Balanced Learning Experiences

In order to create blended learning experiences that better meet the needs of diverse learners while lightening teacher workloads, it's important to consider balance. By incorporating the right mix of activities, assessments, and other components into your blended learning lessons, you can create more engaging experiences for you and your students.

For example, you should ensure a balance of teacher and student voices, practice and creative tasks, and teacher assessment and self-assessment activities.

Components of Balanced Learning

Teacher Voice	**Student Voice**
Online Learning Activities	**Offline Learning Activities**
Individual Tasks	**Collaborative Tasks**
Practice Activities	**Creative Tasks**
Teacher Feedback	**Peer Feedback**
Teacher Controls Pace	**Student Controls Pace**
Teacher Directed	**Learner Choice**
Teacher Assessment	**Self-Assessment**

05.

Focus on Accessibility, Inclusivity, and Equity

While every student has the potential to reach firm, standards-aligned goals, the path to get there varies widely by learner. As architects of learning experiences, educators need to think about potential barriers in lessons that might make it hard for students to engage and how to proactively remove those barriers. Blended learning provides the instructional models and flexible pathways needed to ensure learning is tailored to meet the needs of every student.

Let's take the station rotation model as an example of how you can increase accessibility, inclusivity, and equity in your lessons. Because station rotations incorporate a variety of activities, students could choose to: read and annotate on paper or online while listening to an audio track; make connections in a paragraph or create a concept map; or complete the activity offline independently or with a partner. They might also choose to practice grammar alone or with a peer. These meaningful choices can break down barriers and ensure that all students reach their learning goals.

06.

Make Assessments More Meaningful

Blended learning models can provide the time and space needed to conduct more meaningful assessments in the classroom rather than grading at home. In-classroom assessments provide the opportunity for teachers to connect with students as they're assessed and save teachers valuable time outside the classroom.

Models like station rotation and playlists can facilitate these assessments. For example, if students are working on an essay, you can dedicate one station each day to providing real-time feedback as students write using Google Docs or another online tool. If a formal assignment is due, you can have your class work through a playlist or choice board as you conduct side-by-side assessments with students to discuss rubrics and scores.

Building conferencing sessions into playlists also allows you to provide feedback and modify playlists based on each student's needs as they move through different learning activities.

Blending Technology and Tradition for Active, Engaged Learning

Blended learning goes beyond simply incorporating technology into instruction. As educators, we must design learning experiences that encourage active, engaged learning by prioritizing balance, equity, choice, and guidance. Only then can we empower students to share responsibility for their learning and realize our true value as facilitators of the learning process.

About Dr. Catlin Tucker

Dr. Catlin R. Tucker is a best-selling author, keynote speaker, international trainer, and professor in the Masters in the Arts of Teaching Program at Pepperdine University. She taught for 16 years in Sonoma County, where she was named Teacher of the Year in 2010.

About Our Partnership

Dr. Tucker is collaborating with McGraw Hill to offer comprehensive and impactful professional development opportunities. These programs provide educators with the knowledge and skills needed to develop and implement blended learning strategies and techniques that foster individualized learning experiences and accelerate student progress. Co-designed by Dr. Tucker, these professionally curated learning sessions will be available in the Spring of 2024.