Implementing blended learning in an EFL classroom

Neda RADOSAVLEVIKJ[1]

Abstract

In this paper I will discuss the importance of a blended learning model and its implementation in an ESL classroom. Blended learning is a mixture of online and face-to-face communication that can help students choose their preferred learning style and become more autonomous in acquiring English as a second language. It gives opportunity to look creatively at how learning experience is designed and to use a variety of media to suit differing needs.

The advantages of Blended learning is that it focuses on the learner and the learners need and institutions should tend to tailor learning to the individual rather than applying one size fits all. The learner-centered construction of blended learning helps learners choose what and when to blend, so that it can be manipulated and controlled by learners rather than teachers. In addition, through effective facilitation, instructors can support students in understanding what it is they are expected to learn, the choices they have available for them and how can they assist them in developing the necessary skills of reflection, self-direction, self independence and self-management.

This approach helped stimulate students' progress by increasing student-instructor and student-student interaction. The gained knowledge in a group of students at the LC was applied in order to increase students interactive activities such as higher-level discussions, small group work, debates and discussion forums on line. Blended courses create enhanced opportunities for teacher-student interaction, increase student engagement in learning as well as give chances for students' continuous improvement.

The importance of Blended learning model and its implementation in an EFL classroom

Blended learning is a mixture of online and face-to-face communication that can help students choose their preferred learning style and become more autonomous in acquiring English as a second language. It gives opportunity to look creatively at how learning experience is designed and to use a variety of media to suit differing needs.

Blended learning is a logical and natural evolving process from traditional forms of learning to a personalized and integrated self - directed learning. It is an opportunity to integrate the innovative and technological advances offered by online learning with the interaction and participation offered in the best of traditional learning. It is an ultimate perfect solution to tailoring learning to fit not only the learning need, but also the style of

1. *Neda Radosavlevikj, Senior Lecturer , South East European University, n.radosavlevicj@seeu.edu.mk*

the learner.

The advantages of Blended learning are that it focuses on the learner and the learners need in the process of learning English as a foreign language. Moreover, it gives opportunity to look creatively at how learning experience is designed and to use a variety of media to suit differing needs. Another important factor is the institution and how they will support this approach of learning. Blended learning is also known as cooperative learning which allows students work closely together helping another to achieve desired goals. Learn new activities to promote comprehension and how to use metacognition which means not to focus only on language but on the learning process itself. In that way, the learners can learn how to create link between classroom language learning outside the classroom in real life contexts. On the other hand, adopting interactive, student-centered teaching, using methodology (communicative and constructive approach) and assessment (formative and summative evaluation). The role of the teacher in the online environment is to provide students with real, authentic opportunities to interact in the target language. The modern technology such as multimedia programs, video presentations and IT skills should conduct courses in English. The information should be presented in a new interesting way, moving away from the teaching rules, patterns and definitions, involving the students more in discussions, communicating genuinely spontaneously and meaningfully in the second language.

Furthermore, Blended learning represents a very real step towards learning in a different more interesting way. It is a new approach enabling schools, teachers and Higher education institutions to make progress either in ways of working, the environment, or in giving individuals freedom to be themselves. The challenge for the instructor applying Blended learning in class is to predict possible drawbacks, difficulties, obstacles regarding institution, colleagues, administrators and adopt Blended learning as a possible solution. Recognizing the full potential of a blended solution will take time and patience and it's important to help people recognize the shape and scope of what you tend to develop and what are the implications of such Curriculum Design innovation model. To plan Blended learning requires significant investment and commitment. Who needs to be involved and when? Who will benefit from this Curriculum change and how will the organization as whole benefit? What affects the students? What can influence on positive tension free environment to satisfy both the needs of the students and teachers?

At the same time by implementing new methodologies students can be stimulated to understand the strenght of different mediums and can be engaged in blended learning. This approach of learning a language provide students' with more engaged learning opportunities. Furthermore this approach helps teachers learn new methods and stumulate students progress by increasing student-instructor and student-student interaction through the use of blended environment. On the other side, acquring good skills in blended learning can help use the gained knowledge and applying it at SEEU can increase students interactive activities as well as higher-level discussions, small group work, debates and discussion forums on line.Blended courses create enhanced opportunities for teacher-student interaction, increase student engagement in learning as well as give chances for students' continuous improvement.

Blended learning: Using technology in and beyond the language classroom

1.The rapid technological innovation in teaching and learning fostered the interest of blended learning such as 1. how to integrate different technology and media into

conventional classroom. and 2. how pedagogy and face-to-face instructions can be mediated by advance technology. Blended Learning is a mixture of online and face-to-face learning by using a variety of learning resources and communications options available to students and lecturers. It mixes e-learning with other more traditional types of learning. It's important that face to face contact is not lost and the learning environment is created that is richer that either only traditional or fully online environment. To some extent students are free to choose their preferred learning style however, some components may be compulsory. Lecturers are aware that students may not be able to cope with a fully online course, they want to introduce students and implement new methods of learning a language by using technological tools, or offer extra support for the weaker students (Raj and Abdallah 2005).

In evaluating blended learning model students pointed to the flexibility that the online component offers as a major advantage. The anytime/anywhere approach allows them to work whenever it suits them best and when they can perform most productively. However, although online assessment offers immediate feedback since students lack personal attention weekly contact sessions help students' post face-to-face question.

Another aspect of BL is Cooperative learning component. It helps students do assignments and projects in groups (Engelbrecht and Harding 2002). When experiencing problems students seek assistance within a group rather than just approaching the lecturer. Students rate themselves in comparison to the performance of the group.

These aspects are important when BL is implemented in an ESL classroom:

1. BL fosters self-reliance; much more time is spent on trying exercises independently before consulting; they learn to trust their own judgment more.
2. Students, in becoming more independent in their learning, acquire the skill of time management; they adjust their study schedule according to the nature of the work and their own pace of learning.
3. Students perceive that blended learning environment requires more responsibilities. Quoting one student: "You have to go every day and check and make sure you are up to date by choice instead of receiving everything the lecturer gives you."
4. Blended learning model cultivates self-discipline. Students work more regularly by actively engaging the online exercises instead of just attending classes and taking notes that they don't review it later.

Negative side: Students replied negatively due to some technical hitches such as server problems or errors in posted solutions as well as they sometimes experience learning as a lonely activity.

Assessment in Blended Learning Environment
Blended Learning Findings and Results

The online assessment component of Blended learning model under discussion was evaluated. Term tests and examinations consisted of a paper component as well as an online component (Engelbrecht and Harding 2004). The majority (56.6%) stated they preferred online testing, almost half of the students either prefer paper tests or a combination of the two modes of assessment. Reasons for online preference include the absence of examination stress, immediate feedback and availability of the results,

suitability for formative assessment, flexibility of the online environment and the virtue of being exposed to modern technology:" I prefer to see my results immediately so I can see if I need to further study the weeks work I am 'up to date'. (a student).

Reasons given for paper assessment include rigid way of marking in online assessment, little opportunity for partial credit and difficulty of adapting to an unfamiliar way of testing: "I think better when I sit and write, then I see what I think." (a student)
Students' who like blended assessment approach, see the advantages of both modes:

- With both computer and written tests we can get the best of both worlds, having equal usage of both.
- Both are equally acceptable. I enjoy computer modules but find the written section more practical since you don't always have a computer with you.
- Doing both simultaneously has a much better effect

Blended learning facilitate independent learning only when the structure provided (deadlines, weekly quizzes and continuous assessment) is effective. Self-reliance, time management, responsibility, self-discipline, are important factors when implementing Blended learning approach. Assessment is an indication of what has been learned and attention was given to improve the use of partial credit in an online assessment component. The lack of personal contact was addressed by introducing a chat room session.

Blended Learning: Uncovering its transformative potential in Higher Education

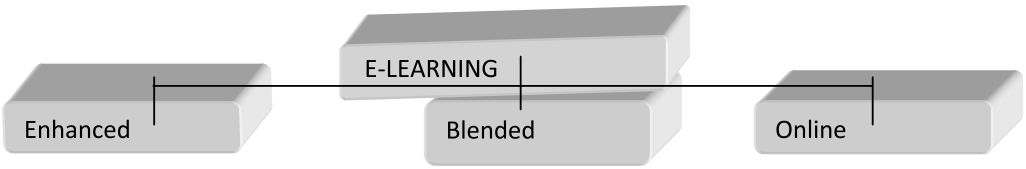
The potential of B.L is based on transforming higher education in rethinking and restructuring the potential of the learning experience. This approach has the potential to enhance both the effectiveness and efficiency of meaningful learning experiences.

It's a fact that Internet information and communication have the major influence on transformative innovation for higher education in the 21th century. Educators confront the existing assumptions about teaching and learning in an online environment. Leaders are challenged to meet the needs and demands of prospective students and meet the growing expectations and demands for higher quality learning experiences and outcomes.

Transformation of learning environments in higher education settings for an increasingly electronic world is critical to ensure that benefits are fully realized (Williams, 2002). Learners should be both together and apart and connected to a community of learners anytime and anywhere, without being time, place or situation bound. However, BL approach has a volatile impact on traditional campus-based institutions of Higher Education.

BL is an effective and low risk strategy, internet information and communication tools provide flexibility of time and place and the reality of unbounded educational discourse. This approach is expected to meet the needs of individuals by using text-based asynchronous internet technology with face-to-face learning as well as the ability to manage information challenge both cognitive abilities and traditional classroom paradigm.

B.L is both complex and simple. It's the integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences integrating synchronous and asynchronous learning activities. BL is different from enhanced classroom or fully online learning experiences.



The real test of BL is the effective integration of the two main components face to face and Internet technology. It represents fundamental reconceptualization and reorganization of teaching and learning dynamic, starting with various specific contextual needs and contingencies (discipline, developmental level and resources). In this respect, no two blended learning designs are identical. It's a question of quality and quantity of the interaction and the sense of engagement in a community of inquiry and learning together with effective integration of Internet communication technology.

"Focusing for a moment on the properties of the Internet, we know that much of the satisfaction and success of BL experiences can be attributed to the interactive capabilities of internet communication technology (Garrison& Clevel and –Innes, 2003; Swan, 2001). It's a fact that Internet Communication technology facilitate a simultaneous independent and collaborative learning experience. Learners can be independent of space and time yet together.

BL builds effective community of inquiry that provides stabilizing, cohesive influence that balances the open communication and limitless access to information on Internet. These communities of inquiry provide condition for free open dialogue, critical debate, negotiation and agreement. BL has the capabilities to facilitate these conditions and adds reflective element with multiple forms of communication to meet the specific learning requirements. Whether face-to-face or online, communities of inquiry consist of three elements: cognitive, social, and teaching presence (Garrison and Anderson, 2003).

The sense of community must be on a cognitive and social level that requires consideration of the different cognitive and social characteristics in order to achieve higher levels of learning. The focus is given on the teaching presence that facilitates learning experiences. BL offers a distinct advantage in supporting higher levels of learning through critical discourse and reflective thinking.

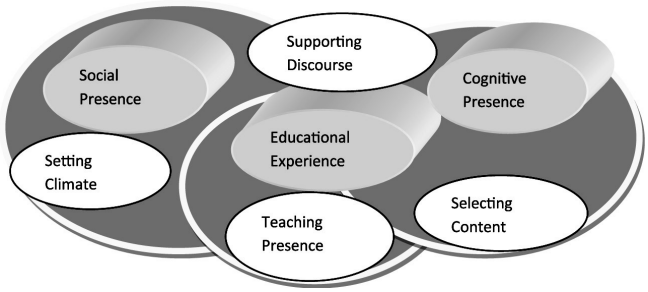


Fig 2 Community of inquiry.

BL facilitates critical thinking and higher-order learning. Hudson (2002) argues, for example, "that the very basis of thinking is rooted in dialogue, drawing on a socially constructed context to endow ideas with meaning" (p.53). The emphasis must shift from assimilating information to constructing meaning and confirming understanding in a community of inquiry. To be a critical thinker means to take control of one's thought processes and gain metacognitive

understanding of these processes (i.e.,Learn to learn). BL can provide independence and increased control essential to developing critical thinking as well as encourages scaffolded acceptance of responsibility for constructing meaning and understanding.

Meaningful educational experiences

Internet Information and communication technology supports meaningful experiences such as asynchronous computer-mediated instruction: flexibility, reflection, interpersonal and teamwork skill development, motivation and collaborative learning environments.

The discourse facilitated through asynchronous Internet communication tools provides a platform where participants can communicate and confront questionable ideas in more objective and reflexive ways than it might be possible in a face-to-face context. According to Meyer, 2003 Internet discussion forums can provide a permanent record and expand time; as such, discussions are often more thoughtful, reasoned, and supported by evidential sources. It gives the chance and opportunity for students to learn to express in a written form. Alternatively, face-to-face discussion give chances to students become more spontaneous in their discussions. However, students need to remember what have been said so assertive components or opportunities to contribute are lost. The mixture of face-to-face and online environment gives chances to students to participate actively in the process of learning in a quality learning environment.

Connection with each other helps students' realize the importance of the community of inquiry and is also necessary to sustain the educational experience over time so essential to move students' to higher levels of thinking. According to Rovai, 2002, p.330, "students with stronger sense of community tend to possess greater perceived levels of cognitive learning".

Critical thinking moves through discernible (visible) phrases of triggering event, exploration, integration, and application (Garrison&Andreson, 2003; Garrison & Archer, 2000). A community is essential to engender commitment and ensure students progressively move through the phrases of critical inquiry. In order to construct meaning communities of inquiry blend online with knowledge management into dynamic meaningful experience. The main focus is to help learners construct knowledge.

Learning in an Online Environment

Learners in the 21st century have been Web consumers for much of their lives, and are now demanding online instruction that supports participation and interaction. They want learning experiences that are social and that will connect with their peers. (West&West, 2009, p.2) Engaged learning is also known as active learning, social cognition, constructivism and problem-based learning all of which emphasize student-focused learning with instructor as a facilitator. A century ago, Dewey recognized the importance of the instructor as a facilitator is the process of active learning. Dewey (1916/1997) emphasized the value of the individual experience in the learning process as well as collaboration with others in order to define the learning environment. Dewey's work was extended to adult learners by Malcolm Knowles's concept of andragogy (1980), which considers the adult learner to be self-directed and desirous of an active learning environment in which his or her own experiences play a part.

Other learning theorists such as Bruner, Vygotsky and Piaget all embraced the philosophy that humans do not learn in a vacuum but rather through interaction. Bruner

in his work with Bornstein (1989) stated that" development is intrinsically bound up with interaction"(p.13), which build on his earlier definition of reciprocity as the "deep human need to respond to others and operate jointly with them toward an objective (Bruner, 1966, p.67).

Vygotsky (1981) "saw instruction as effective only if it stimulated the individual potential ability when working with an adult or more advanced peer and helps learner across the zone of proximal development. Piaget's philosophy emphasized that learning must be connected to the learner in order to be meaningful (Piaget, 1969). He described engaged learning as knowledge build on prior experiences and affected by new experiences. Development would be more likely to occur when two equal partners collaborated in finding a solution than when a more skilled partner dominated the task. He believed that effective discussions when there is a symmetrical power between discussants. Peer-to –peer discussion was more valuable than adult-child discussion because equals were more likely to resolve contradictions between each other's views than partners of equal authority.

The engaged learning is closely related to problem-based learning. In a problem-based environment, a problem is posed to learners who work together in teams to define the nature of the problem and determine its resolution. Through this process learners can "develop intellectual curiosity, confidence, and engagement that will lead to lifelong learning" (Watson&Croh, 2001, p.21). This process is based on interaction and meaningful learning.

Construstivism considers interaction essential for learning and addresses epistemology within the context of the individual and within social constructs. According to Smith and Ragan, (1999, p.15), the key assumptions of individual constructivism are the following:

- Knowledge is constructed from experience.
- Learning results from a personal interpretation of knowledge
- Learning is an active process in which meaning is developed on the basis of experience
- Learning is collaborative with meaning negotiated from multiple perspectives.

The collaborative acquisition of knowledge is one key to success of creating an online learning environment. Activities that require student interaction and encourage a sharing of ideas promote a deep level of thought.

In his summary of social constructivism, Weigel (2002) focus on content acquisition that defeats the overall purpose of education. "Content is the clay of knowledge construction; learning takes place when it is fashioned into something meaningful". "Creativity, critical analysis, and skillful performance are inextricably linked to the process of creating more viable and content knowledge structures" (p.5). In an online environment the focus is on the learner being engaged in collaborative activities that allow the clay to take form and have meaning for the learner.

In Figure1.1, the combination of constructivist and problem based learning philosophies within a collaborative context result in engaged learning environment. Being focused on the learner the engaged learning is based on each learner's actions that contribute not only to individual knowledge but also to the overall community knowledge development. The learners' role is to generate the new knowledge and share it with the community of inquiry.

Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, and Tinker (2000) point out, "There is strong evidence to suggest that learners learn best when constructing their own knowledge. However the

role of the instructor is to guide learners, give instruction, supervision and directions or just a critical piece of information to help them move forward"(p.97). The desired outcome of construstivism is that acquisition of knowledge is centered on the learners and their interactions.

Engaged learning in the Online Environment

The new media offers a wealth of opportunities for the learners to interact, yet many times are employed in a non-interactive mode that tends to focus on creating an online lecture. Lectures are effective for knowledge transmission, but if it is the primary strategy used in online environment, the course may become a correspondence between the learner and the instructor where the learner interacts in isolation.

Norris, Mason, and Lefrere (2003) emphasize that content may have been the primary focus of the past but the time has approached when interactivity will drive learning (p.x).Engaged learning stimulates learners to actively participate in the learning situation, and this gain the most knowledge from being a member of an online learning community. Instructors must be aware that additional guidelines are needed in order to help assist learners in evolving from their traditional role of receiving knowledge to role that focuses on generating knowledge for themselves and others.

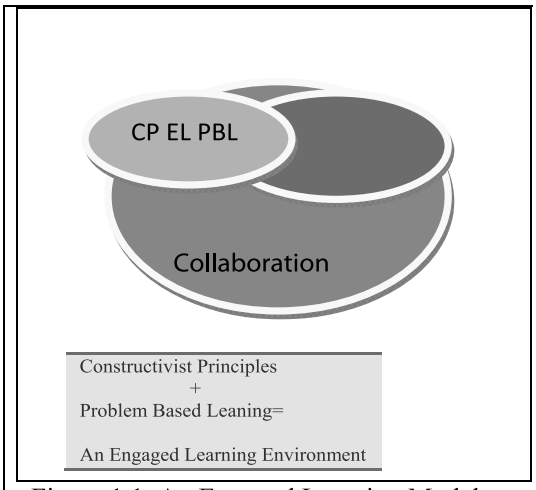


Figure 1.1. An Engaged Learning Model

Kearsley (2000) points out that "the most important role of the instructor in online classes is to ensure a high degree of interactivity and participation. In an online course students are active knowledge generators who assume responsibility for constructing and managing their own learning experience. In learner-centered environment, the traditional instructor responsibility such as generating resources and leading discussion forums shifts to the learner. The success depends on the use of the instructional strategies that support the shift of roles and development of self-direction.

Engaged learning is a collaborative learning process in which the teacher and student are partners in constructing knowledge and answering essential questions. This strategic approach includes goals, establishing timelines, and creating and assessing authentic products. Key elements of engaged learning include the following elements:

- Students' establishing their own goals
- Students' working together in groups
- Exploring appropriate resources to answer meaningful questions
- Tasks that are multidisciplinary and authentic, with connections to the real world
- Assessment that is ongoing and performance-based
- Products that are shared with an audience beyond the classroom so students' are able to add value outside the learning environment(Johnson, 1998)

The distance education pioneer Charles Wedemeyer (1981) asserted that learners must be highly self-motivated in order to be effective distance learners. The instructor in an online environment has the responsibility to support and promote a learner's internal motivations through external strategies. This approach involves: modeling, reflecting, actively involving the student and developing a community of fellow learners.

Engaged learning requires a cognitive and affective learner connection with the methodology before it can occur. The external conditions that maximize the influence of engaged learning according to Gagne and Driscoll (1988) are:

- The strategy is described or demonstrated
- Numerous opportunities for communication and demonstration of strategy are provided
- Success associated with incorporating the strategy and attitude of engagement is presented
- Informative feedback is provided as to creativity and originality is involved in learners actions as well as their successful performance
- A safe student-centered learning environment is provided
- Opportunities for self-assessment are provided

The learner must understand his role in the engaged learning process only than can be expected to form a community with others in the online environment.

Guiding Learners to be engaged online

The student's role as an engaged leaner develops over time. Initially, a learner may be more comfortable in a passive student role and will need guidance and the opportunity to become more involved in an online environment. He must quickly establish comfort with the technology, comfort with predominately text-based communication, and comfort with higher level of self-direction then a traditional classroom. If this comfort level is not accomplished the learner may walk away from the course in frustration. The instructor's role is to instruct and help learners collaborate and must design a course elements that encourage growth of learners in these new relationships. It is instructor responsibility to make sure learners find others in the learning environment with whom they can build a collaborative relationship.

The Phrases of Engagement help learners and instructors on performing the new roles in an online environment. This means developing appropriate activities and introducing them in an effective sequence. In the beginning learners must gain confidence and trust and the introductory community building exercises will help them learn how to work together. As learners gain more confidence and expertise, they can be guided to move through additional phrases of engagement.

Phrase 1: The instructor and learner begin the course in the more traditional role as deliverer-receiver, with the instructor sending them an e-mail or having the first activity to be an icebreaker introduction that requires learners to learn about and interact with each other in a nonthreatening manner. Experienced online instructors have found that interaction is actually the essence of the course (Draves, 2000;Palloff&Pratt, 2007). If appropriate frame is adopted in Phrase 1 than the rest of the course will go much more smoothly.

After establishing an appropriate climate for engagement to occur in Phrase 1, the instructor becomes a structural engineer who is responsible for organizing and facilitating the growth of the student as a cooperative participant. In the introductory phrase the

instructor pairs the students in working dyads. This approach maximizes the threat of communicating with a large group of unknown peers. Phrase 2 may begin in a social tone similar to Phrase 1, but it must then turn the learners towards more academic exchanges. In Phrase 3, the peer partners are combined into collaborative teams in which members support one another and are responsible for one another's learning. The experience shows that it takes about 4 weeks for most learners to feel comfortable. In Phrase 4 the instructor encourages learners by introducing opportunities for individuals and teams to lead activities.

The Phrase 1 example activity focuses on introducing peers to one another in a creative and fun manner. The Phrase 2 example activity focuses on two peers working together, while the Phrase 3 demonstrates a reflective activity. The content related activities should not begin until a learner has completed phrase 1 and moved solidly into Phrase 2. The most appropriate activities at that point is to have individual rather than peer related activities. It is recommended that the instructor use at least one activity from each phrase in order to help learners become oriented to the course and become familiar with the new set of peers who will be working together in an online environment.

Study Procedure

According to Parson and Brown p.34, to be effective educator one must be an "active participant" in the classroom, observing, analyzing, and interpreting information about student learning and then using this information for planning and decision making. The action research study was designed to measure students' interest in hybrid approach so that the instructor can design objective learning goals when creating the course.

Study results

Fifty students at SEEU from different Departments with mix ability skills in English as a foreign language completed a survey aimed to find out about their preferences in learning English. The majority of these students' indicated that they use computers 2-5 hours a day (62%) when completing their assignments.

Students' showed more interest in taking the courses on line than coming to class. 80% answered positively. They also agreed strongly (70%) that it will be better if they have combined classes 50% min in class and 50min in a computer lab. Since not yet implemented as a model in our institution SEEU, Blended learning model seemed not very known by our students'. However, students' preferred to communicate from home (60%) than to come to class regularly. Students' at SEEU found significant the use of the knowledge management system LIBRI and they expressed interest in Discussion Forums (32%), while Face-to-Face only(26%).

Moreover, students' agreed that technology plays important role in the society today and that it will be useful to use the Internet in order to improve their English skills (86%). They felt comfortable to use the materials online (82%), as well as that in that way it would be easier for them to complete the assignments at home on the computer (54%) than come to class.

Furthermore, students' thought that it will be very useful to receive feedback from their peers(70%) online , and schedule the class Face-to –face once per week instead of them coming to class two, three times per week (64%).

On the question about assessment students' said that they would like to be assessed on weekly basis (42%), self-assessed (20%), weekly quizzes (28%), weekly assignments (8%), combined on line work (2%).

Overall, the results of the survey were positive. In addition, these results were encouraging because for the majority of the students' this was something new and based on their feedback, the instructor can design a course with objective learning goals.

Conclusion

To summarize, blended learning courses employ active learning strategies through the use of a variety of pedagogical approaches. The asynchronous nature of Blended component of the courses has the salutary effect of expanding time students spend on course material. Discussions conducted online encourage reflection and usual reach 100% participation. As a result, the face-to-face time can be used more effectively, with students extending the material beyond what might be achieved in a conventional face-to-face course. The students in a blended course make more and richer connections between what they are learning and what they already know, creating a robust scaffold to organize the information.

Svinicki (2004) points out that one of the most effective things we can do as instructors is to help our students encode information in their long-term memories is to help them build an organizational structure for the material: "It is worth your while as an instructor to spend time thinking organizationally about your course's content and to design instruction around that organization" (.31). Well-organized knowledge is easier to connect to prior knowledge, and therefore easier to retrieve when needed.

Blended learning has a transformational lifelong learning in the lives of our students. It help students develop the desire and skills to continue learning throughout their lives by giving students' more control over their learning and teaching them skills they need to acquire, organize, and incorporate new information into their understanding of the world.

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