

Undefined: In Search for a Definition of Blended Learning in SBAE

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Introduction and Conceptual Framework

Many K-12 teachers and teacher educators found themselves unprepared, lacking both the skills and resources to facilitate learning in remote settings during COVID-19 emergency school closures (Cahapay, 2020; Short et al., 2021). Likewise, school-based agricultural education (SBAE) programs were not immune to the impacts of the pandemic (McKim & Sorensen, 2020). Educators throughout the profession implemented new strategies and methods to deliver instruction using a variety of technologies. Students today are considered digital natives, never knowing life without many forms of technology and with instant access to vast amounts of information via the internet, computers, and smartphones (An & Reigeluth, 2011; Roberts et al., 2016). Educational technologies and online communications are ever-present in the lives of today's students, and as a result, many stakeholders are demanding an education that reflects the 21st century (Roberts et al., 2016). As we move beyond the pandemic, we should consider the strategies and technologies we used and explore alternative pedagogical models to enhance learning opportunities for our students. Blended learning may very well be able to meet the needs of the 21st-century student and teacher, but before blended learning in SBAE can be effectively evaluated and implemented, identifying a commonly agreed-upon definition may be required.

Blended learning has historically been ill-defined and there is no commonly agreed-upon definition among scholars and practitioners (Dziuban et al., 2018; Norberg et al., 2011; Oliver & Trigwell, 2005). Horn and Staker (2015) proposed a definition of blended learning and argued that three distinct components must be present in a blended learning environment: 1) a formal education program that facilitates student learning, at least in part, through online learning, and provides an element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace; 2) student learning happens, at least in part, in a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home; and 3) learning experiences for each student are purposely coordinated between the brick-and-mortar and online modalities. Unlike other definitions of blended learning, Horn and Staker (2015) incorporated the idea that students must have some control over when, where, what, and how they learn.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how SBAE teachers defined blended learning, which aligns with the American Association of Agricultural Education's Research Priority 4, Question 1: "How do digital technologies impact learning in face-to-face and online learning environments?" (Roberts et al., 2016, p. 39).

Methods

This study was part of a larger study that explored SBAE teachers' beliefs and practices in blended classrooms. For this study, we employed a phenomenological approach, seeking to explore, describe, and analyze the meaning of a shared experience or phenomenon by several individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Using the Horn and Staker (2015) conceptualizations of blended learning as a lens, we explored how five SBAE educators who self-identified as blended teachers defined blended learning. Each participant engaged in an hour-long, semi-structured interview during which they were asked to define blended learning in

their own words and based on their experience. Data were transcribed and initial coding, as described by Saldaña (2009), was used to break down participant responses as a way to closely examine individual definitions and compare them for differences and similarities.

Findings

We discovered that each definition of blended learning given by participants was unique to the individual. One participant, Jill, drew on the definition of a flipped classroom to define blended learning saying, “to me, blended learning is when core knowledge is on the kids”. Kathy provided a definition that was focused on technology integration as a way to provide experiences saying blended learning is “students utilizing technology as a tool to learn and experience things that we can't necessarily provide here in our program”. Similarly, Nancy defined blended learning as “using a computer platform to offer the opportunity for kids to engage in content, and then be able to utilize that content...where they're building something with the knowledge that they've learned”. Although Nancy’s definition does mention technology integration as a component of blended learning, Nancy acknowledges that students are not passive participants in a blended environment and that there is an expectation that they engage in constructive learning processes. Julianne defined blended learning as “focusing on the hands-on labs and projects of our class, as this is a big part of agriculture, but also integrating technology”, viewing SBAE and blended learning as potentially in conflict with one another. Of the participants, Jeremy was the only one whose definition of blended learning explicitly aligned with the core pieces of the Horn and Staker (2015) definition. He said blended learning is when “students are in class, some of the time and online some of the time”. Upon reviewing these definitions, no participant accounted for student control over when, where, what, and how they learn, key components of the Horn and Staker (2015) conceptualization of blended learning. The definitions provided by the participants indicate an inconsistency in how these SBAE teachers defined blended learning. This aligns with what others have identified (Dziuban et al., 2018; Norberg et al., 2011; Oliver & Trigwell, 2005), and may demonstrate a lack of understanding of blended learning among the SBAE profession. This inconsistency and lack of agreement could potentially impact how SBAE teachers implement blended learning in their classrooms.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Blended learning provides opportunities for teachers to personalize learning by incorporating student choice, accounting for student interests, and increasing application and connectivity to the communities in which students live. However, before these opportunities can be realized, it becomes important to have a shared understanding and definition of blended learning in the SBAE profession. Creating an SBAE-specific definition for blended learning allows the profession to account for the specific needs of SBAE teachers, students, and programs. Discovering what our teachers do and do not understand about blended learning will better help teacher educators provide adequate instruction to fill in the gaps. We can begin this process by seeking to understand how SBAE teachers define blended learning, what has influenced their definition, and then provide relevant blended learning training to preservice and in-service teachers built on a common framework. Additionally, teacher educators can evaluate and refine how technology integration and blended learning are being discussed within their programs so that future SBAE teachers have the skills and knowledge necessary to implement true blended learning in their future classrooms.

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