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Blending the Worst of Both Worlds On-Campus and Online Education

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Source: *Educational Technology*, Vol. 46, No. 6 (November-December 2006), pp. 76-77

Published by: Educational Technology Publications, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44429363>

Accessed: 11-11-2019 17:37 UTC

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Blending the Worst of Both Worlds On-Campus and Online Education

Blended learning troubles me. It troubled me when I taught using blended delivery—I now teach online exclusively—and it continues to trouble me. “Blending” adds another layer of complexity (and confusion) to the already very complex enterprise of education. Very little is known about what factors are involved in successful blended learning or under what conditions blended learning should be crafted. Enthusiasts are quick to point to the sense of connectedness among students and faculty that is possible. This is a fine thing. However, it troubles me that one of the potential strengths of computer systems is the individualization of instruction, yet I do not see how blended learning moves us closer to that goal. It troubles me that, outside of case studies, research examining blended learning is nearly non-existent. So far, merely finding a consensus definition of blended learning has been nearly impossible.

Blended learning is sometimes defined as combining instructional modalities or combining instructional methods. If defined this broadly, it is difficult to find any education that is not blended. What *new* is being blended anyway? Is it e-learning and traditional learning, different media, various contexts, asynchronicity and real-time modes, multiple learning theories, complementary learning objectives, collaborative learning and individual study, tutorial and coaching, diverse pedagogies, something old and something new?

Most often at the postsecondary level, blended learning signals planned courses where online delivery of instruction has partially replaced in-person (i.e., on-campus) instruction. The case for blended learning is usually presented as blending the *strengths* of in-person and computer delivery systems to form a useful new tool for education. I contend that, currently, it is just as

likely that the *weaknesses* of both online delivery and in-person delivery are blended.

For example, students in my blended classes sometimes said to me that the reason they didn’t participate in online discussions is that they knew we would be meeting in-person next Monday and thought we could “talk about it when we meet.” But, of course, we didn’t talk about it then...*not really*. When we met in-person, even if the students came fully prepared for discussion, there were many students who basically lurked in the in-person classroom. If lack of participation is not a problem, there often is not enough time to go into depth in a discussion in-person. Another observation is that some students and teachers like the *spontaneity* of in-person discussion—read *winging it*. For these reasons, it is rare, if ever, that I have been engaged in a discussion in an in-person classroom that was as thoughtful, cogent, or in-depth as in an online setting.

On the other hand, students—especially students who work full-time and have difficulty arranging their schedules for on-campus classes—have challenged me to tell them what is it that we did in-person that couldn’t have been done online. Since I have often said that I believe I can accomplish any non-skill based learning goal or objective online that I can in-person (albeit not in the same amount of time given the much wider bandwidth when people are face-to-face), I was hard-put to argue with these students about the need to come to an on-campus class.

Students who are familiar and comfortable with on-campus classes often think about the course only when “in class.” Oh, they may read some assigned reading during the time between classes. Still, reflection is a very important part of learning. I find when people have to write about a topic, they also think about it more than when they talk about it.

How often should classes meet in-person? Is 20% of the time optimal; or 70% or 35%? Obviously the answer is “it depends.” The proportion of on-campus to online time should depend upon the target audience and instructional considerations. But that is usually not how decisions are currently made about blended learning, especially since we don’t know the answers or even the questions concerning successful blended environments.

Is my point that blended learning does not work? No, of course, it can work. If one has a quality educational product, it could be equally effective whether delivered entirely in-person, entirely online, or in some hybrid delivery format at a point in-between. Under certain conditions, I believe blended learning can work better than the on-campus classroom alone or the computer-mediated classroom alone. However, the historical stance of *my place and my pace* that university faculty and administrators have traditionally taken is no longer viable. Students are much more

sophisticated and know they have choices in meeting their educational goals.

Blended learning can be less costly, more efficient, and more convenient to students. Given all this, it will not be successful if it does not match the delivery methods to the content and instructional goals. Without knowing the needs of students and without sound research to guide decisions, it may be just as likely that the weaknesses rather than the strengths of on-campus and online learning are combined, thereby blending the worst of both these worlds. □

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Some Comments on Blackboard vs. Desire2Learn

On July 26, Blackboard Inc. announced in a press release that the U.S. Patent & Trademark Office had awarded the company a patent (6,988,138, dated January 17, 2006) for a variety of features of an "Internet-based education support system and methods."¹ On that same day, Blackboard filed suit against Desire2Learn Inc. in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Texas, alleging that Desire2Learn is infringing on Blackboard's patent. The company explains their moves in two pages of FAQ postings on their Website, justifying their position by the fact that they "have invested heavily" in developing their system, "well over \$100m,"² as they state.

In various venues, from print to the Web, many educators and commentators are reacting rather passionately to Blackboard's actions. It is safe to say that most opinions are severely critical of the company's assertions, with some individuals claiming that the patent, at a minimum, is too broad. Others go much further, asserting that there is way too much prior art to justify the awarding of a patent in this area. In this regard, an intense effort is underway to document related historical developments in the Wikipedia article, "History of virtual learning environments."³ Still others express concern that open-source efforts such as Moodle and Sakai might become targets.

For their part, Blackboard, of course, defends their actions, stating specifically that the patent is not too broad and that they have no intention of attacking open-source efforts. An article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, citing an interview with Matthew Small, senior vice president and general counsel for Blackboard, said that it would make no sense for the company to go after Moodle and Sakai because the software does not originate from commercial providers.⁴

One might wonder why Desire2Learn would be Blackboard's first (only?) target, but reviewing decisions at several major universities sheds some light on various developments. The Ohio State University, the University of Iowa, and the University of Oklahoma have all three in the past eighteen months abandoned their use of Blackboard on their campuses and adopted Desire2Learn's system.

In its online statements, Desire2Learn has expressed disappointment that Blackboard would file suit without discussing their complaints, and as part of their efforts to defend themselves, they have retained outside legal counsel. In addition, the company is collecting information on prior art at one of their own Websites.⁵

Blackboard may or may not have a case, but either way, their action goes against what has become somewhat of a tradition in the software industry. While many companies apply for and receive software patents, most rely on copyright infringement as a way to protect their intellectual property with respect to software developments. This could in large measure be a tacit acceptance of the fact that many experts in patent law dispute the validity of even awarding patents for software. Wikipedia provides an overview of the debate that rages.⁶ Even Microsoft, well known for what some might call "overly aggressive" business practices, has not made it a practice to go after other companies for patent infringement. Although they have significantly increased their attention in recent years in obtaining patents for their work and have perhaps threatened action in a very few instances, it seems clear that they have in no way made it a practice to bring patent infringement suits against their competitors.

This is not the first time that such a controversial situation has existed over a patent that was granted and then contested by people working in the area of multimedia and online technologies. In August 1993, Compton's NewMedia received a patent for "Multimedia search system using a plurality of entry path means which indicate interrelatedness of information," claiming that they were due royalties from many companies that had produced multimedia software. After an industry-wide uproar, the Patent Office re-examined the patent and rescinded it in March, 1994. Another controversy has raged around Amazon.com's claim to ownership to the "one-click" purchasing process, with a patent awarded in 1998. Amazon filed suit against Barnes and Noble, and just this year the Patent Office accepted to re-examine this particular patent. Even before the Blackboard situation, these and other cases had already prompted many commentators to conclude that the federal government had lost control over the process, with a lack of funding and resources being a huge part of the problem.⁷

Given this history and regardless of whether or not the Blackboard patent is justifiable, users of any course management system or learning management system