

Capacity Building for Teachers in Blended Learning and ICT Skills

Dr. Chakrapani Ghanta

Professor of Sociology, Director, Center for Staff Training and Development (CSTD), Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad, Telangana State

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has created the most significant disruption of education systems in history, affecting almost all the institutions and countries across the globe. Educationists and policymakers are trying to identify alternative classroom teaching and learning alternatives to overcome the situation. In India, in the wake of the COVID pandemic, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has prepared a concept note on the blended learning mode to manage the situation. According to the UGC Blended model, up to 40 percent of a course will be taught online, and the rest 60 percent through traditional, offline methods in all higher education institutions. Similarly, Open Universities must design the counseling sessions in a blended mode. Adapting technology is easy, but training teachers using ICT and other tools required for blended mode will be tough. Enhancing teachers' skills is essential to prepare for the new teaching-learning. For this purpose, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA) has designed Capacity Building Programmes for Teachers working in Higher Education Institutions. Center for Staff Training and Development (CSTD) at Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University (BRAOU) successfully conducted a two-week capacity-building program in online synchronous mode and trained hundreds of Teachers.

Keywords: blended learning, digital technologies, online learning, ICT, CSTD-BRAOU

INTRODUCTION

The context of Covid-19 brought a clear paradigm shift in teaching and learning in educational institutions. More particularly, the developing countries adapted a readily available blended learning model to meet the challenge posed by the pandemic. Everything has been impacted, including the teaching-learning process from primary level to university, which has experienced unforeseen changes in many parts of the world. Some policy experts describe the new nations in the field as a 'silver lining' in the clouds. Blended learning is one of such innovative methodologies that evolved during the pandemic.

Keeping the Covid-19 pandemic situation in view, institutions continue to adapt to the new normal, and blended learning has emerged as an essential framework to ensure continuity in education delivery. A critical and related aspect is the appropriate and effective use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in higher education to continue to reach and engage learners for improved learning experiences and outcomes. Integral to the process of capacity building in blended learning design and delivery is the need to promote skills in education so that teachers can effectively integrate ICT into teaching practice to provide undisrupted quality teaching and learning. Recognizing that "technology will play an important role in improving educational processes and outcomes," the National Education Policy 2020 recommends training teachers in technology use and integration.

To cope with the situation, UNESCO is insisting on Blended Learning (BL) by using available Education Technologies to reach the learners. Responding to the call, the Indian National Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO (INCCU) has prepared a policy framework for the country to promote digital education through online educational platforms with equity and inclusion with the help of technology. University Grants Commission prepared a policy and circulated it to all the Universities in the country to follow a Blended Mode of Teaching and to learn with 60 percent offline and 40 percent online.



As per the “Blended Mode of Teaching and Learning: Concept Note” released in May 2021 by the University Grants Commission, New Delhi, blended learning is critical in terms of offering flexible, learner-centric education. There is an urgent need to empower faculty in higher education institutions nationwide with the knowledge, skills, and competencies to develop and deliver blended learning effectively.

Blended learning is an instructional methodology, a teaching and learning approach that combines face-to-face classroom methods with computer-mediated activities to deliver instruction. This pedagogical approach means a mixture of face-to-face and online activities and the integration of synchronous and asynchronous learning tools, thus providing an optimal possibility for effective learning processes. Blended learning is the term given to the educational practice of combining digital learning tools with more traditional classroom face-to-face teaching. According to Graham (2006), blended learning is the organic combination of carefully selected and complementing face-to-face and online methods and technologies. Blended learning combines physical and virtual components, which can be considered essential for Higher Education institutions. Blended learning is a learning program that utilizes many delivery modes to maximize the learning outcome and lower program delivery costs, which allows teachers to fully exploit the benefits of both traditional classroom instruction and online instruction.

Blended mode is not just an online or distance teaching-learning method; it is creating a new teaching environment within the classroom where both the student and the teacher should be physically located in the same space.

Perspectives on Blended Learning

Blended learning, from an educational perspective, refers to the teaching and learning process combining classroom-synchronous and online-asynchronous education. In a blended learning environment, teachers combine online and traditional face-to-face activities in a planned and systematic way to enhance the overall learning experience.

Traditional classroom instruction generally allows teachers and students to engage face-to-face, facilitating synchronous communication. Teachers can provide rapid feedback to students on every question, and pupils are positively influenced by their teacher's personality, behavior, and values in a typical classroom. Conversely, virtual classrooms allow students to learn from anybody, anywhere, at any time. In blended learning, students can always meet with their classmates and teachers in virtual classrooms, regardless of geographic constraints. They can gain and impart knowledge without reluctance or fear of ridicule.

Moreover, as the development of technology has transformed our planet into a global village, it is now possible for students to contact professionals around the globe to increase their knowledge. The experiences of blended learning pioneers demonstrate that by implementing such an innovative learning program, one can significantly enhance the efficiency, reach, and affordability of education. Blended learning courses provide students with a broader range of affordances, boosting the learning experience beyond online or face-to-face modes alone, further demonstrating the efficacy of blended learning in education systems. According to Norberget al. (2011), blended learning has become the "new standard" in higher education. This tendency is corroborated by Means et al. (2010). They conducted a meta-analysis of 50 research indicating that students taught in a mixed learning environment outperformed those taught in a non-blended learning setting. Blended learning, which combines online and face-to-face components, offers students a unique experience by allowing them to learn at their own time, place, and speed.

Ramsden (2003) suggested that mixed learning gives students more options for picking the learning mode that best meets their specific needs. Blended learning maximizes students' educational effect by mixing in-class and out-of-class instruction. It enables educators to deviate from the one-size-fits-all approach to education by extending instruction beyond the physical classroom and allowing students to learn whenever and wherever they choose. In conventional classrooms, lecturers offer lectures while students sit passively in the audience. However, a blended learning program redefines the teacher and student roles.

Models of blended learning

Due to technological advancement and accessibility, teachers can now rearrange their classrooms and teach pupils in novel ways. Blended learning combines in-class education with online technology to facilitate student-centered learning. However, there are a variety of blended learning education styles, and no one model is a perfect fit for all schools. Station rotation, lab rotation, remote blended learning, flex blended learning, and the flipped classroom model are common blended learning approaches.

Numerous studies published in the past have demonstrated the costs and benefits of various blended learning strategies. For instance, Dziuban (2018) examined the United States Department of Education's blended learning strategy, which combines online and in-class training with reduced in-class student time.

The research of Bralic and Divjak (2018) comprises the incorporation of a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) alongside campus-based courses in which students have the choice to engage in a MOOC instead of completing project work. On the other hand, the paper by Le Roux and Nagel (2018) focuses on the flipped classroom paradigm, which inverts the traditional learning environment by offering online instructional content so class time can be used for other activities. In this study, students received lectures via online videos, while in-class time was devoted to seminars employing the Harvard case approach. To suit the demands of their pupils, academic institutions and teachers will need to select the blended model they deem most beneficial to develop something unique.

Nonetheless, blended learning may generally be classified into two distinct groups: in the first group of blended learning models, the face-to-face instruction time remains the same, but the class time is utilized differently due to various online technologies. However, face-to-face interaction time is decreased in the second set of blended learning models because most instructional sessions are delivered via online platforms. These strategies may be more cost-effective for educational institutions and provide students with greater flexibility. Here, certain classes are held outside of regular classrooms; hence, students have greater control regarding time, place, learning path, and location.

Serdiukov (2001) notes that overestimating technology's potential can result in a loss of the human aspect. According to UNESCO's Innovative Teaching and Learning (ITL) research project, "ICT has the potential to promote innovative pedagogies, but it is not a magic bullet." They also note that while evaluating the use of ICT in the education sector, it is crucial to prioritize student learning and the twenty-first-century skills that ICT can facilitate rather than flash. When integrating technology into education, Zhao and Frank (2003) suggest that it is crucial to stress the number of computers used and how they are utilized to improve the quality of education.

Flipping the classroom is a significant advantage of developing a blended learning program at higher education institutions. According to Bergmann and Sams (2012), this paradigm is an educational method that inverts the usual learning environment by presenting instructional information via an online platform. In a traditional classroom, students must attend classroom lectures and then return home to complete specific duties, such as homework assignments assigned by the course instructor.

UGC on Blended Learning

In India, in the light of experiences of other countries, the University Grants Commission (UGC), the highest policy-making body in the country, is pushing for blended learning as a new methodology to be adapted in universities and colleges. The concept note of the Commission suggests that blended learning will increase students' learning skills and give them greater access to information. Further, it says, "improved satisfaction and learning outcomes and opportunities both to learn with others and to teach others" (UGC 2020). According to UGC, blended learning is a well-planned combination. It is not just a mix of not mere mix of online and face-to-face modes of teaching. The blend includes several factors, focusing on learning outcomes and the learner-centered instructional environment. Further, the UGC note says the new National Education Policy has prepared the Blended model (NEP) suggests, "Given the emergence of digital technologies and the emerging importance of leveraging technology for teaching-learning at all levels from school to higher education." The NEP-2020 states that while promoting digital learning and education, the importance of face-to-face in-person learning is fully recognized.

The blended learning model will benefit both students and teachers; it shifts the teacher's role from knowledge provider to coach and mentor. This shift does not mean that teachers play a passive or less important role in students' education; quite the contrary, with blended learning, teachers can have an even more profound influence and effect on students' learning. The note highlighted the importance of a new form of education: "Traditionally, classroom instruction has largely been teacher-directed, but with blended learning, it now becomes more student-driven, bottom-up, and customized, with differentiation as the main feature."

To implement blended learning as a new mode of teaching-learning in higher education, the UGC suggested that the pattern of assessment and evaluation will also be changed. In blended learning, summative evaluation strategies make the continuous comprehensive evaluation possible. Besides formative evaluation strategies like ePortfolio, innovative products, and classroom or online quizzes, on-demand tests have been recommended. UGC even suggested that higher institutions must ensure the availability of infrastructure for implementing blended learning in universities and colleges.

Blended learning provides full scope for teachers to utilize the benefits of both traditional classroom teaching and online teaching. Traditional classroom teaching allows face-to-face interactions between teachers and students, which help in synchronous communication. In a conventional teaching setup, teachers can give immediate feedback to their students on any query, while students are positively influenced by their teacher's personality, behavior and value system. On the other hand, virtual classrooms provide students the option to learn anywhere at any time from anyone. In blended learning, students can always meet in virtual classrooms with their co-students and teachers regardless of geographical barriers. They can learn and share their knowledge without hesitation or fear of being ridiculed. Moreover, as the advancement of technology has turned our world into a global village, students can communicate with experts from other parts of the world and enhance their knowledge.

BRAOU Capacity Building Programme

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University, the first open university in India (established in 1982), initiated a much-needed training and capacity-building program for higher education teachers with the support of Commonwealth Education Media Center Asia (CEMCA). CEMCA is established by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) to meet the educational media needs of the Commonwealth countries of the Asian region with a focus on Open and Distance Education. Commonwealth of Learning has been a strong proponent of Blended Learning methods and approaches in higher education. The organization believes its adoption can usher in transformative experiences for students and teachers. For a few decades, COL has advocated using Online and Blended Learning in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and Technology-Enabled Learning (TEL) practices in education and skill development. Recognizing this need, CEMCA designed a Capacity Building Programme for higher education teachers and extended the same to the teachers working in Higher Education institutions in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh States of South India. Centre for Staff Training and Development (CSTD) of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad, organized the program with the two-fold interrelated objective of capacity building in ICT skills for higher education. It blended learning design and delivery where the learners have trained in ICT tools and technologies and also preparation of blended courseware. The objectives of the capacity-building program are to select, adapt, and utilize a variety of ICT tools for teaching and learning, to apply composite learning principles in course design, development, and delivery, and to evaluate and effectively use appropriate ICT tools and platforms for blended learning and to assess the design and delivery of blended learning.

The two-week online capacity-building program was conducted a month from March 14th March 2022, through March 19th, 2022, and the second week was from March 21st, 2022, to March 25th, 2022. The training was in synchronous mode, with flexible timings from 3.00 PM to 5.00 PM, two hours a day. A total of 458 participants registered for the program, of which 251 were male and 207 were female.

The program's first week introduced the main concepts, principles, models, approaches, and blended learning scenarios. This part also explained various benefits and challenges in preparing blended learning modules. Since the program was designed to provide hands-on experience based on activities to the participants in creating the courses and modules with synchronous and asynchronous elements. Blended Learning: Teaching, Learning and skill Development for Teachers and assessment in blended learning. Relevant guidelines and templates for the design and development of a blended learning lesson were also explained during this week. The second week is focused mainly on ICT Skills for Teachers, based on the practical components and application of ICT skills useful in teaching and learning. To start with basics such as creating and managing documents, spreadsheet applications, and presentations, the program incorporated advanced activities like Learning Management System (LMS). This part mainly concentrates on Basic ICT skills for teaching and learning, Content creation using ICT, Content delivery using ICT, and ICT for assessment.

Overall, the training program gave a comprehensive understanding and knowledge of Principles, Design, and Delivery modes of blended learning and enhanced the ICT skills of participants to design and deliver the blended modules and their assessment.

CONCLUSION

In the post-Covid-19 scenario, ICT-mediated teaching and learning emerged as a new normal. Across the world, institutions continue to adopt new technologies, teaching-learning methods, and new pedagogies. Blended learning has emerged as an essential framework to ensure continuity in education delivery. India UGC adopted blended learning as one of the modes of teaching in all its colleges and Universities. Now India is preparing to create a new infrastructure to adopt and implement ICT-oriented teaching and learning. Adapting technology is easy but implementing the same is very difficult. By recognizing the importance of training the teachers in ICT and other technology-intensive teaching, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Open University, the first Open University of India, has initiated training the higher education

teachers in collaboration with the Commonwealth Educational Media Center for Asia (CEMCA). The University's Human Resource Training division Center for Staff Training and Development (CSTD) successfully trains teachers in Higher education in blended learning.

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