

Brief Communication

Hybrid and Blended Learning – A Step in the Right Direction

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Singh, Jitendra, Steele, Keely, & Singh, Lovely (2021). Combining the Best of Online and Face-to-Face Learning: Hybrid and Blended Learning Approach for COVID-19, Post Vaccine, & Post-Pandemic World. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 50(2), 140-171. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00472395211047865>

The article titled “*Combining the Best of Online and Face-to-Face Learning: Hybrid and Blended Learning Approach for COVID-19, Post Vaccine, & Post-Pandemic World*” authored by Dr. Jitendra Singh et al., presents a research study that creatively examines the history, evolution, and development of blended learning in a variety of educational settings. The article describes the review of various models of hybrid learning and different e-learning models currently used in higher education. In addition, the article articulates a number of issues that students, faculty, schools, and institutions of higher education–faced during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. Finally, the authors examine effective strategies for integration of best practices moving forward in the pandemic trajectory. Using a fishbone analysis, challenges faced by instructors and academic institutions are examined to lay the foundation for potential solutions and strategies. A detailed Strength–Weakness–Opportunities–Threat (SWOT) analysis of-blended and hybrid mediums of instruction is described. The authors conclude with an evidence-based approach from their own experience and research which can be utilized by faculty and administrators worldwide, as we enter a post-vaccine and post pandemic world.

This descriptive study involves systematic analysis of research evidence, fishbone analysis, and in-depth SWOT analysis to understand the current learning environment and how academic institutions can utilize their resources to provide meaningful learning experiences for students in a virtual environment. This methodology is clear and easily transferable to other situations related to online and distance learning situations. The study consists of two sections. The first section builds a necessary background and understanding of the problems faced by instructors, administrators, students, and academic institutions during the COVID-19 crisis between 2020-2021. The second section proceeds with a data-driven approach detailing 10 key points on how academia may work towards creating and establishing systems that could allow both faculty and students to perform more effectively and successfully academically: –

- Greater attention to the needs of faculty and students’ mental health;
- Professional development opportunities targeting resilience and well-being strategies for faculty staff and students;
- Continuous course reviews with an aim to improve the quality of online/distance learning;
- ‘Humanizing’ content in online mediums of instruction to promote a sense of belonging amongst students;
- Increasing instructors’ presence in online classes to improve instructor-student connections;
- Promoting student collaboration online to address the sense of isolation;
- Building a cognitive presence through inclusion of variety of content and assignments to improve students’ participation in classes;

- Closing the digital divide by including innovative technology programs and inclusive policies;
- Providing a variety in learning mediums by switching between hybrid and blended instructions; and,
- Emphasizing the importance of assessment in online and hybrid mediums of instruction.

The ‘fishbone analysis’ (Harel et al., 2016) used in this research proved to be a powerful quality improvement tool, despite there being minimal or no research in the field of distance learning where this approach has been utilized. It provides the following advantages to the study: (a) categorizes problems faced during pandemic into five categories (person, machine, method, material, and environment), (b) allows academia to examine potential cause’s specific to each category, and (c) identify solutions that may work as we navigate the complex COVID-19 crisis. This study is unique as it uses a sound research methodology that is easily transferable to other situations related to online and distance learning situations, and integrates previously unrelated concepts to develop new learning, which can be immediately applicable to distance learning practices. Application of these practices may support student learning outcomes and directly improve their levels of engagement and satisfaction in online learning modalities. This research is important for the field of distance learning because it presents an evidence-based approach to streamline online teaching and learning processes, while preparing classes for students across a range of academic settings. The findings can be applied to distance learning programs in a variety of academic settings including universities, community colleges, and technical colleges.

Evaluation

Originality and Innovation

New concepts and perspectives often result from the re-visioning of current concepts and novel integration of current perspectives. Literature about fishbone, SWOT analysis, and the continuous quality improvement methodology exists in multiple areas, including business processes in settings of higher education. Literature is also present regarding online education. *However, research and application of the use of such methodology related to online delivery in higher education is lacking.*

Major impacts on the advancement of distance learning strategies

During the COVID-19 pandemic in the USA in the spring of 2020, university education providers were challenged to pivot rapidly from the traditional classroom, face-to-face education, to online distance learning delivery. Many programs were required to complete this shift within two or three weeks to meet the college and university course and program delivery requirements. Under normal conditions, this change in delivery methods would be accomplished over several months (Dhawan, 2021; Singh & Matthees, 2021). This article provides a solid understanding of the problems and issues faced by institutions of higher education, and presents a broad array of teaching and learning strategies that may be of value to academics across different majors and/or programs. This research reports that careful planning by higher education institutions to support their students is important to assure appropriate progression without extraneous-challenges that may derail the student’s progress.

In addition, the key points from this article are very relevant for non-traditional adult learners who are often financially independent, working full time while taking care of family and attending school, living in rural/remote areas, and/or experiencing low socioeconomic status (SES). These students currently constitute approximately 38.2 percent of undergraduate students studying in the USA (Chen, 2017; Singh, 2019). Distance education is often the preferred learning medium for adult students (Chen, 2017). These students may also be geographically bound and hold broader responsibilities than the traditionally aged college students (Chen, 2017). Therefore, improvements and efficiencies in distance learning strategies can improve access to higher education for this growing population of students.

In summary, this project is of critical importance to the field of traditional face-to-face learning, distance learning, and hybrid education. This research fills much needed gap in literature, contributes to the academic knowledge base in online education, and provide practical tips to educators who teach in face-to-face, completely online and/or hybrid medium of instruction.

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