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Blended Learning for Texas

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Key Points

- Virtual and blended learning could prove to be a strong cost saver for the state as well as a means to improve academic performance and school choice.
- Texas should shift delivery and funding of virtual education away from the TxVSN into the local districts.
- Texas should also encourage private provider participation, allow scholarships for digital learners, and allow private school and homeschool students to participate.

Introduction

Public education, both in Texas and nationally, stands on the cusp of a technological revolution. Learning technologies are already being heavily embraced in the higher education community, and K-12 is beginning to move in that direction as well, although at a slower pace.

There are two main modalities of learning technology implementation. The first is "distance learning." Distance learning is taking courses exclusively online, and requires only a computer terminal with internet access for participation. Distance learning, while not yet widespread in Texas K-12 education, does exist, albeit under the still restrictive confines of the Texas Virtual Schools Network. This paper will focus on the second learning technology model—"blended learning"—and what we can do to expand it in Texas.

Blended Learning: What Is It?

Blended learning is any use of technology in a classroom setting that combines what one would envision as "traditional" learning—a teacher lecturing in front of a classroom or some other direct interaction with their students—with the use of technology for delivering or assisting with part of the lesson. Typical blended learning models include the following:

1. "Face to Face Driver"

This is online learning that would look most like traditional brick-and-mortar classroom learning. Teachers provide the lesson for students, and students in turn use technology to augment the lesson.

2. "Rotation"

Called the most common approach by Innosight this model involves students spending part of their day in a self-paced, strictly online learning environment, and another part in a traditional classroom setting.

3. "Flex"

Flex model learning environments place a heavy emphasis on the online portion of events. Teachers are present to provide on-site support, but for the most part, students learn entirely at their own pace.

4. "Online Lab"

The online lab model delivers an entire course to a student digitally, but within the confines of a brick-and-mortar lab, generally on an existing school's campus. The students are supervised, but not actively "taught" within the classroom.

5. "Self-Blend"

This model most closely resembles what many people think of when they envision online learning's use in the world of higher education. Students take these courses, remotely and on their own time, but still attend traditional brick and mortar schools.

The key element to all of these learning models is the mixture of learning technologies with traditional teaching.[1]

Benefits of Blended Learning

The benefits of blended learning are numerous, chiefly in that they provide an alternative to traditional classroom learning, which might not be the most ideal learning modality for all students. Over the last several years, a number of programs have cropped up around the country demonstrating this.

One such program demonstrating the strength of in the classroom blending is Austin's own Acton Academy. The Innosight Institute profiled the school in 2011; at the time it was serving students in grades 1-5. Innosight highlighted the structure of the day-to-day at the school, emphasizing the presence of individual and group work stretches:

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- 8 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. Arrival
- 8:30 a.m. to 9 a.m. Morning Group
- 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. Individual Work
- 11 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. Free outdoor play (3x per week)
- 11:30 a.m. to noon World History (3x per week)
- 11 a.m. to noon P.E. (2x per week)
- Noon to 1 p.m. Lunch and personal time
- 1 p.m. to 2 p.m. Art (2x per week) or Writing Workshop (3x per week)
- 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. Group Work/Lessons
- 3 p.m. to 3:15 p.m. Closing Group

The group and individual work sessions are where the students are given a chance to learn using technology. One of the missions of Acton is to avoid having students learn strictly through lecture.[2] The learning technologies, they claim, allow for a much more interactive experience. The direct benefits of blended learning visible at Acton are the following:

Self-Pacing

One of the chief benefits of blended learning is that it allows a student to work for at least part of their day at their own pace. Where traditional classroom lecturing forces everyone onto more or less the same schedule, learning technologies can let a student slow down or speed up during a lesson as their needs dictate.

Classroom Flexibility

At full capacity, Acton will operate as one, 36 student classroom. That's quite large by elementary standards, particularly when one takes into account the fact that the average K-4 class-size in Texas is 19.4 students.[3] Using learning technologies, however, the teacher effectively manages to "shrink" the classroom, allowing a portion of the classroom to work with the available technology while the teacher can work more directly with a much smaller portion of the class. This approach is common in schools that have the resources to bring technology into their classrooms; the KIPP Academy Charter Schools, for example, frequently divide their classroom time between lecture and learning technologies.

Results

While the added flexibility to the classroom environment is beneficial, the surest way to measure whether any academic program is succeeding is whether there are demonstrable academic gains. The gains at Acton were significant:

> On average, the Acton Academy's first group of students gained about 2.5 grade levels in the first 10 months. Because they were already about one grade level above their age cohort when they entered, most are 3.5 grade levels above their age-group now.[4]

These results are not unique to Acton. Blended learning programs in other states have shown the ability to push students who are at grade-level in reading and mathematics to achieve higher standards, as well as demonstrated an ability to bring students who are trailing their peers up to grade level.[5]

This is not to say that learning technologies are necessarily for all students. Acton, while it has technologies readily available, does not mandate that any student use it. However, for some learners, blended learning represents a superior alternative to traditional classroom lectures.

Going Forward: Blended Learning Growth in Texas

Two key changes need to be made to Texas education law to maximize blended learning's use in Texas public classrooms. Additionally, four changes to the manner in which Texas handles its online learners could also serve to grow blended learning in the state.

Remove Seat Time Requirements

The Texas Education Code is explicit: students must be provided a minimum of 180 days of instruction. To receive credit for the school year (or a given course if the student attends a higher grade level), the student must attend at least 90 percent of the days the class meets. While some students need as much time in the classroom as possible, others can self-pace and work through a course much faster, especially if they use online and blended learning approaches as described above.

This would require a change in the manner the state funds its students; currently, school districts receive their dollars based on the number of students in the classroom. For the purposes of growing and maximizing the potential learning technologies, allowing public schools—or at the very least our public home-rule charter districts—to be funded based on active participation in blended learning courses would generate more flexibility in this arena.

However, the cleanest way to execute a change in this arena would be to block grant school districts all or a portion of their operating dollars, so that they can be used to educate students in said district with maximum flexibility. The current structure of funding—based on average daily attendance or "ADA"—require that students be physically in seats for school districts to receive their funding for a given day.

Moving away from a model that requires as much toward one that allows public schools to certify that they are taking responsibility for the education of their students over the course of a school year would allow school districts to be funded based on enrollment rather than in-seat attendance. While this would represent a radical change in the manner in which Texas funds its public schools, it could substantially incentivize not only the use of learning technologies, but cooperation between school districts and, at the higher grade levels, institutions of higher education.

Remove the K-4 Class-Size Cap

The K-4 class-size cap raises the costs of public education significantly. The Office of the Comptroller, in its 2010 F.A.S.T. (Financial Allocation Study for Texas), explained clearly the manner in which the cap harms Texas education:

> Many school officials believe the "22:1" limit interferes with their ability to staff campuses cost-effectively, asserting that classes with up to 25 students can operate without any loss of instructional effectiveness. Some suggest that the 22:1 requirement be based upon average class size rather than applying to all classes, giving districts more flexibility to set class size, allocate resources and limit costs.
>
> For example, a district with 66 students in second grade currently must have three teachers, but the addition of just one more student would require the hiring of another teacher plus the acquisition of additional classroom space. [6]

The K-4 class-size cap ultimately ends up artificially reducing class-sizes, forcing administrators to hire more teachers than they need for a given grade level. In 2010, the comptroller calculated that, based on average teacher salaries and the number of K-4 students in the state, removing the cap could save Texas as much as $558 million.[7] Further, it could give local administrators much greater flexibility with their budgets, allowing for an investment in technological infrastructure for their school districts.

Give School Districts Control of Digital Courses

Currently, all digital content provided by public schools in Texas must run through and be approved by the Texas Virtual School Network. While the network served an initial purpose of launching online learning in the state, it becomes less and less relevant as learning technologies become increasingly prevalent in modern K-12 classrooms. At this point, Texas school districts should be allowed to freely generate and use their own digital courses.

Creating more flexibility in this area could, in turn, result in blended learning methods being used more frequently in Texas classrooms. Digital courses would potentially be more widely available, particularly at the lower grade levels, and it would be easier for school districts to digitize course work to the specific needs of students in their districts.

Fund Digital Learners on a Per-Pupil Basis

One of the challenges Texas continues to face in incorporating learning technologies into its classrooms is that of funding its online students. A 2009 iNACOL report noted the following:

> Funding is the single most important policy issue in online learning. Online schools are full-service public schools with many of the same costs as their brick-and-mortar counterparts, including salaries, benefits, initial training, and ongoing staff development. Online programs do not incur the same level of facilities and transportation costs as traditional districts, but they have significant technological components, with associated costs for hardware, bandwidth, and the like, which are critical to supporting the teaching and learning process.[8]

The report goes on to suggest that finding ways to fully fund virtual learners is vital to growth of digital learning in every state. While funding digital learners on a per-pupil basis could certainly serve to spur digital learning in Texas, it could, in a similar vein to letting school districts run their own virtual shops, drive expansions in blended learning through content availability.

Conclusion

Learning technologies are becoming more and more prevalent in both the K-12 and higher education ranks. Their potential to "shrink" classrooms and allow students to self-pace and self-instruct could enhance the learning experience of successful students and, as demonstrated by multiple case studies, improve the performance of students currently achieving on the lower end of the academic spectrum, is tremendous. Texas must make it possible for our public schools to invest in these technologies by removing laws that restrict the manner in which a school district may deploy its funding resources. These technologies are a resource our schools and educators could tap to make rapid improvements in Texas classrooms. Let's give them the flexibility to do so. ✯

Endnotes

[1] James Golsan, "Virtual Education and the Future of Texas Education," Texas Public Policy Foundation (Mar. 2012).
[2] Michael B. Horn and Heather Staker, "The Rise of K-12 Blended Learning," Innosight Institute.
[3] Texas F.A.S.T. Report.
[4] Michael B. Horn and Heather Staker, "The Rise of K-12 Blended Learning," Innosight Institute.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Texas F.A.S.T. Report.
[7] Ibid.
[8] "Funding and Policy Frameworks for Online Learning," iNACOL (July 2009).

About the Author

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Prior to joining the Foundation, James completed his Master's of Arts degree in English at Texas Tech University. His article, "The Detective as Superhero: A Note on Robert Parker's Spenser", was published in the Spring 2010 edition of *South Central Review Journal for Literary Criticism*.

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