Joseline Sanchez

Creating a Collaborative Learning Environment through Rotational Blended Learning

Introduction

In recent years, the education system has undergone significant changes, many of which were driven by the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the most noticeable impacts has been the learning gaps that have become clear, especially in foundational areas like reading and writing. These gaps have been particularly evident as students adjust to post-pandemic learning environments. Despite these challenges, the traditional "one-size-fits-all" approach to teaching still exists, often failing to meet the diverse needs of students. While teachers play a vital role in student learning, it is no longer realistic to expect that students can learn solely from direct instruction. A collaborative learning environment, where students engage with and learn from one another, is essential for their success.

A more effective approach could be blended learning—a model that combines face-to-face instruction with online learning. According to Horn and Staker (2015), blended learning allows teachers to become facilitators and designers of personalized, flexible learning experiences, while also creating a more collaborative environment where students can learn from one another. This article will explore the concept of blended learning and how it can help bridge the learning gaps created by the pandemic, fostering a student-centered, collaborative approach to education.

What is Blended Learning?

Blended learning is a student-centered approach that combines online content delivery with traditional in-person instruction, creating a collaborative learning environment where

students can engage and learn from one another. They will be learning through digital tools such as videos, books and interactive tasks to supplement the direct instruction led by the teacher (Shoukat et al., 2024). Students will also have some control over time, place, path, and/or pace over their learning (Horn & Staker, 2012). This approach provides students with a more personalized learning experience, giving them greater choice and ownership over a significant part of their education. Blended learning not only allows for personalized instruction but also creates a collaborative environment where students can work together, share ideas, and learn from one another, both online and in-person. While blended learning can be implemented in various ways, this article will focus on the Rotational model, in which students rotate through a variety of activities. These activities will include independent work, teacher-facilitated instruction, and a collaborative station where students can engage and work together.

Rotational Model of Blended Learning

Blended learning can be applied to any subject, but it holds particular promise for focusing on writing. While reading understandably takes priority, writing is a fundamental skill in which many students struggle. The rotational model of blended learning provides an effective way for students to strengthen their writing abilities. Through this model, students can practice key writing skills—such as grammar, punctuation, and composition—while also developing essential digital literacy, including typing skills that are crucial in today's society. In rotation, students will engage with interactive videos on platforms like BrainPop, complete independent practice on programs such as Typsey, and work directly with the teacher on developing their ability to craft short and extended constructed responses, which are critical for success on standardized state exams throughout their academic careers. Additionally, through collaborative

rotations on platforms such as Google Docs and Jamboard, students will have the opportunity to work together to create coherent responses to texts, further developing their writing and critical thinking skills in a collaborative environment. Not all stations will be digital, students will also collaborate in groups to grade sample student responses, work on worksheets to correct sentences, and draft responses on paper, allowing them to continue practicing handwriting skills while reinforcing key writing concepts.

Creating a Collaborative Learning Environment

Collaboration in the classroom is essential for developing key skills such as critical thinking, communication, and teamwork. Students have diverse learning needs that may not always be fully addressed through traditional teacher-centered instruction. However, by working in collaborative groups, students can learn from each other, share knowledge, and support one another's growth. For example, in a bilingual classroom, students acquire language through authentic communication and real-life experiences with their peers. When students work together, they are exposed to diverse perspectives, which helps deepen their understanding of concepts and encourages creative problem-solving. Through blended learning for writing, students can expand their vocabulary, practice new words, and learn how to assess and give constructive feedback to each other. This peer review process will not only strengthen their writing but also develop their ability to evaluate others' work and communicate suggestions effectively.

Blended Learning in Action

In their case study, Truitta and Ku (2018) examined the experiences of 31 elementary students in a third-grade classroom at a Title 1 school who participated in a Station Rotation blended learning model. The classroom was designed to facilitate easy transitions, with computers placed at tables in the back for independent work and desks arranged in small groups of 4-6 students to encourage collaboration. The teacher divided the class into three groups: one group worked directly with the teacher, engaging in activities such as learning new content or reviewing prior concepts. The second group worked collaboratively or independently on assignments related to the concepts being taught, while the third group interacted with digital curriculum to further explore the material. At the end of the study, students participated in focus group interviews to share their perspectives. Many students reported that the best aspects of blended learning were the engaging content, the use of technology, the opportunities for hands-on learning, and the fun, collaborative activities they enjoyed with their classmates.

Digital Tools for Blended Learning

The digital tools used in the blended learning initiative are carefully chosen to support specific learning goals, helping students acquire the skills they need to succeed both in school and in the real world.

- BrainPop- an engaging online platform with animated videos, quizzes, and activities that help students learn writing skills like punctuation, capitalization, grammar, and sentence structure. The platform includes pausing points to check for understanding at crucial points. By incorporating BrainPOP into blended learning, students can independently learn and practice essential writing skills while the teacher monitors their progress.

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- Typsey- an online tool designed to help students improve their typing skills through interactive lessons, exercises, and engaging games. It offers a step-by-step curriculum focusing on finger placement, speed, and accuracy, with exercises that gradually increase in difficulty. The platform also includes interactive videos that demonstrate proper typing techniques and provide guidance throughout the learning process.

- Google Docs- a free online word processing tool that allows users to create, edit, and collaborate on documents in real time. Multiple users can work on the same document at once, leave comments, and make suggestions, making it perfect for students to collaborate.

- Jamboard- an interactive whiteboard tool from Google that allows users to create and collaborate on visual projects in real time. Users can draw, write, add images, and use sticky notes on a shared digital canvas, with real-time collaboration, students can work together seamlessly, providing feedback and editing content as they go.

Conclusion

In conclusion, blended learning provides an effective framework for creating a collaborative classroom environment where students can engage in both independent and group-based learning. By combining traditional face-to-face instruction with digital tools, blended learning offers students greater flexibility and opportunities to collaborate with peers, share ideas, and support each other's growth. This approach is particularly beneficial in classrooms with diverse learning needs, as it allows for personalized learning while fostering a sense of community. Through collaborative activities such as peer feedback, joint problem-solving, and skill-building exercises, students not only improve their academic skills

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but also develop essential communication and teamwork abilities. Ultimately, blended learning

empowers students to succeed both in the classroom and in the fast-paced, tech-savvy world they

will encounter beyond school.

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