



## Creating Successful Blended-Learning Classrooms

By **Bill Tolley**

We all know the feeling of having our class finally approach cruising altitude—only to hear that our peers, administrators, and the Internet at large have just discovered the next best way of ensuring student success.



For some educators, blended learning—that is, learning that combines face-to-face instruction with online work—is turbulence in their flight path. Peter West recently **addressed the challenges** that experienced educators face when considering a blended model. When teachers embrace blended-learning environments, they have to relinquish authority over content and time—the comfort of cruise control—in exchange for an asynchronous, individualized, and **messy process**.

But I've found that the sacrifices are worth the benefits. If teachers want to remain relevant, there's really no alternative in a world where modern learning can easily outpace traditional teaching.

### What is Blended Learning?

Blended learning means many things to many people. The education technology company Knewton suggests that a blended-learning environment has **six different models**: face-to-face driver, rotation, flex, online lab, self-blend, and online driver. It also states that "blended learning refers to any time a student learns, at least in part, at a brick and mortar facility and through online delivery with student control over time, place, path or pace."

The six models are just clay to work with, not pre-set molds. A blended-learning model should never be left out to harden—it's important to keep the clay malleable and ready to respond to environment, innovation, and student need. I originally developed **my blended-learning style** through an interest in flipped learning. Having viewed the video work of **Jon Bergmann and Aaron Sams**, I became intrigued by their method and slowly started adapting my classroom to function like theirs (though I never did find time to create my own videos).

If you want to explore blended learning but avoid the whiplash and frenzy that often accompany new learning trends, break your blended-learning model into three essential components: online delivery, student control, and the "brick and mortar" experience. Then choose elements that you are comfortable with and curious about—and start tinkering. Here are some suggestions for getting started.

## Tech-Inclined? Start With Online Delivery

The nexus of any blended-learning course will be an online platform that supports content delivery, administration, and asynchronous learning. The technology of an effective blended-learning environment will be defined far more **by its infrastructure** than by some “app of the day.”

Whichever platform you choose, don't be afraid to regard it as a continuous work in progress. You will always be tinkering here and there, adjusting details, and updating policies. (The personal pages I have hyperlinked in this article are in an ongoing state of “under renovation.”)

Most schools provide some of the functionality of an online-learning environment) or learning management system)—at the very least for grading, attendance, and other administrative aspects. If your school doesn't provide class space for content delivery and you feel comfortable with blogging, try **Edublogs**, **Google Sites**, or **Wordpress** for creating a core class site. All have free versions and extensive support databases. Keep in mind that blogs aren't just online journals: They also offer the option to create static pages that can link to content.

You can also gently bend toward the blend via online-assessment tools and strategies like **Juno** or **Google Forms**. These allow you to deliver assessments online and asynchronously. They also offer a number of methods to collect and analyze student data. If you're feeling a little more daring and you want to assess concrete details and data (and abandon some of your summative-style quizzes in favor of memory-building activities), try **Memrise**. Memrise utilizes visual aids and memory games to develop long-term memory of key terms and concepts in a fun community atmosphere that is easily gamified. Students buy in immediately, cheating becomes moot, and the results are impressive. Who said learning couldn't be fun?

## Social Justice Advocate? Start With Student Control

Remember how enthusiastically you discussed student control of the class in your teacher education program? Now it's time to put your money where your mouth is—and be amazed by the results.

Of course, adopting a blended-learning model doesn't mean immediately turning over the asylum to the inmates. As **Suzie Boss argues**, students need to be carefully taught how to work in a messy learning setting. The invitation to participate should be regarded as a measured democratic apprenticeship and not a ticket to mob rule.

To ease students into their roles as democratic participants in their own development, ensure that you provide them with a **definition of a social contract** with **clear expectations**. Then work on **project content**. But always remember (and remind your students) that control is a privilege of negotiation, not a popularity-sanctioned right.

Students will not just cotton on and take responsibility for their own learning—they will buy in to a process that they co-create and co-own with you.

## UDL or PBL Guru? Start With Brick and Mortar

When I was serving as the instructional coach at my last school, our guidance counselor, who was preparing to teach a literature class for the semester, asked me during a meeting, “What percentage of the time should I be talking, and what percentage should they be talking?” I replied, “Ideally, you should both be speaking 100 percent of the time.” I adhere to this standard for most class time—but the only way it can be managed is by giving up teacher control of the stage, and the best way to do that is by decentralizing the classroom.

Imagine a classroom in which students are broken up into four groups. One group of four to six students is actively working on research/homework, chatting occasionally but largely on task. The second group is peer-editing one another's essays.

The third group is at a whiteboard drawing a graphic depicting the change in technology and strategies between World War I and World War II. The final group is seated around a small table with the teacher, discussing the unit's essential questions and devising new ones. Welcome to my 100 percent-100 percent classroom.

Brick-and-mortar schooling doesn't mean what it used to. Teachers no longer need to be sages, gatekeepers, and assembly line leaders. Instead, we can be coaches and tutors who not only guide our students toward content mastery but democratic community building. Of course, students will need training for this kind of group work as well. The [Peeragogy Project](#) and the [Mazur-based peer-instruction](#) blog [Turn To Your Neighbor](#) have ideas, resources, and helpful communities ready for your explorations.

Not surprisingly, a successful foray into blended learning resembles blended learning itself. The tinkering, messiness, and serendipitous, asynchronous, and engaging learning that you will experience while bending into the blend will mirror that of your students' learning.

To that point, let me make a final suggestion: Always capture the learning in your classroom via photo and video, and wherever possible, [share your work online](#) with parents and colleagues. The blended-learning environment is only suspect as long as it is an unknown equation. Show yourself and your stakeholders the math, and its benefits will reveal themselves.

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