

The Definitive Guide to Building a Great Blended Learning Program

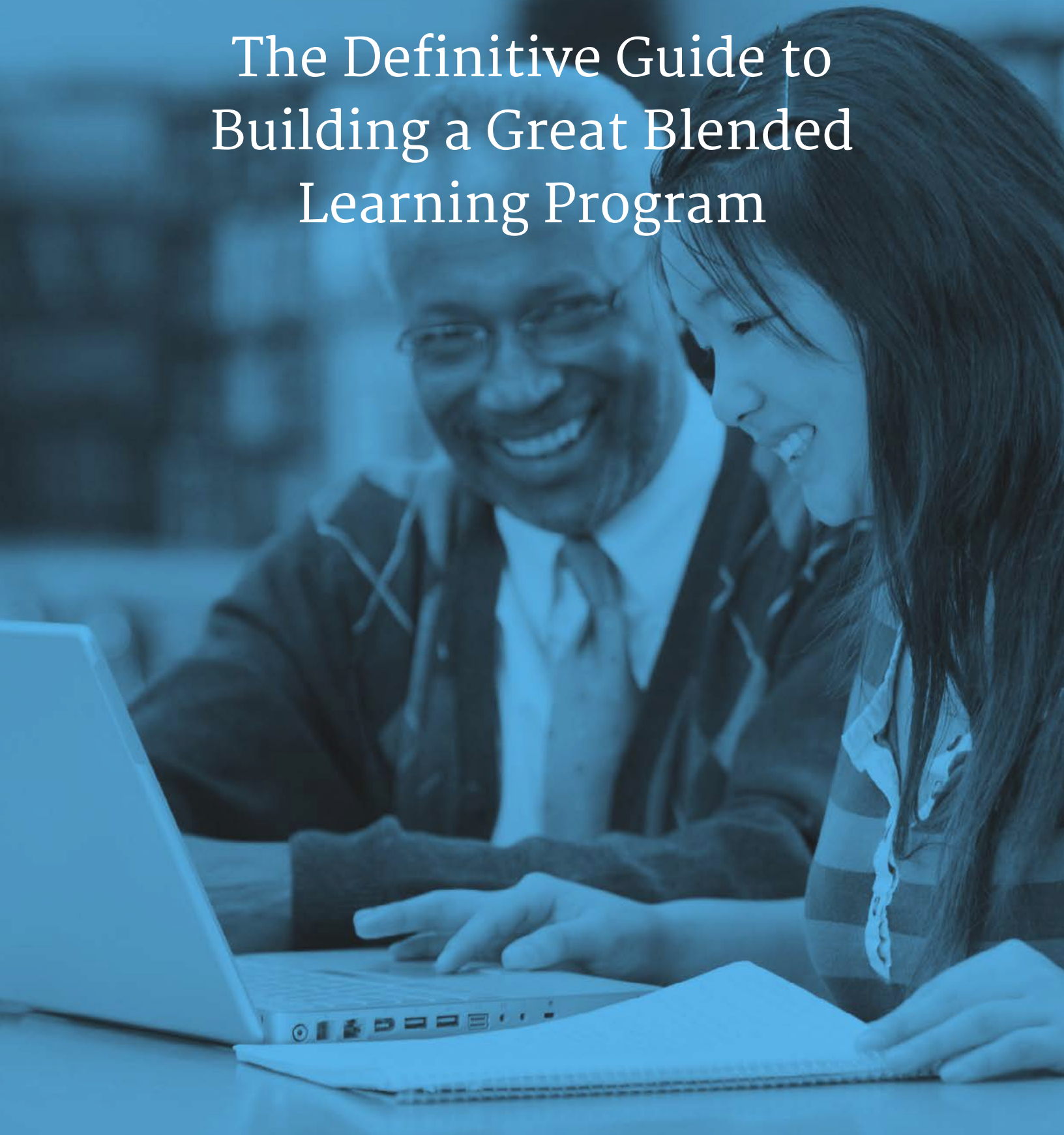


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What is Blended Learning Really?

By definition, blended learning is a pedagogical strategy by which students learn via a mixture of face-to-face and digital instruction. That's a pretty broad definition, so let's dig a little deeper.

Blended learning is, in many ways, a collaboration between educators and their students with the goal of improving the learning experience. It's a mindset of experimentation, evaluation, and continual improvement through the use of technology, which is why many successful blended programs look so starkly different.

When done well, blended learning transforms education. It engages students and encourages deeper learning. It helps instructors save time, enabling them to focus on their students and the learning experience. Put simply, blended learning improves the quality of interaction between students, educators, administrators, and other stakeholders.

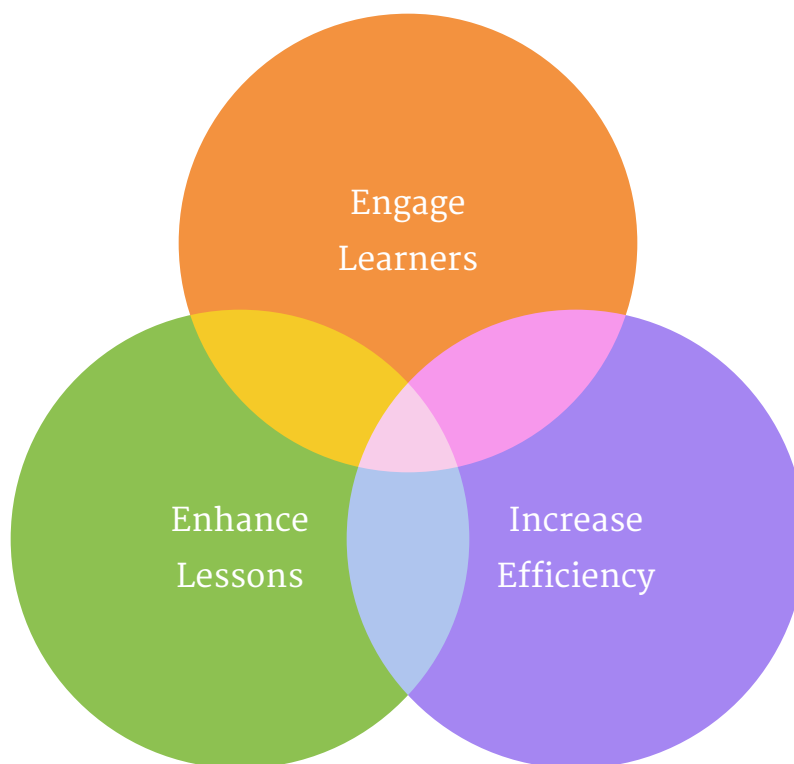
But even though there's no silver bullet for success, all the best programs boil down to three core concepts: engage students, enhance lessons, and increase efficiency. We call these the Three E's, and we consider them to be the foundation of successful blended learning programs.

In this guide, we'll explore these core concepts, what they really mean, and how they translate to the classroom. Each section also includes tips to help you put these insights into practice.

The Three E's

If you were to stroll from class to class observing a school or district's blended learning program, you'd no doubt see multiple strategies being employed. The fact is, educators have different strengths and methodologies that, if forced into a box, wouldn't achieve the same quality of results.

So how do you build a blended learning program that is consistent, yet flexible enough for this kind of variation? It's simple. Build your program on evidence-based core concepts that apply to any educational strategy like the Three E's—engage learners, enhance lessons, and increase efficiency.



The Three E's are great for providing consistency while allowing educators the freedom to find what works best for them and their students. Let's dive in and explore each of the Three E's in detail.

A warm, orange-toned photograph of two young women sitting together, looking at a laptop screen. The woman on the left has long blonde hair with bangs and is smiling. The woman on the right has long dark hair with a braid and a flower accessory, also smiling. The text "Engage Learners" is centered over the image in a white serif font.

Engage Learners

Engage Learners

As the first of the Three E's, student engagement is arguably the most crucial factor in the success of your blended learning program. If students aren't engaged, your program will go nowhere. It's that simple.

At its core, engagement comes down to the level of interaction students have with the instructor, the curriculum, and each other. The more back and forth that interaction facilitates, the better the engagement and the more active students become in the learning process.

So as you start to think about building (or revamping) your blended learning program, focus on strategies that encourage active learning, communication, and collaboration.

4 Tips for Engaging Learners in the Classroom

Tip #1: Use Online Discussions

Discussions are a great way to get students involved in learning. Discussions allow students to answer questions, respond to their peers' comments, and receive graded feedback from the instructor. When left open, they can even keep students engaged well after the bell rings, extending learning beyond the classroom and the curriculum.

The great thing about online discussions is that they **can be enhanced through digital media**. Having students find and post images, videos, and other media gets them thinking creatively and makes the discussion all the more engaging.

The screenshot shows a Schoology interface for a Biology course. The discussion is titled "DISCUSS: Photosynthesis" and is due on Thursday, September 25, 2014, at 1:15 pm. The question is "What do you know about Photosynthesis?". The discussion was posted on Tuesday, September 2, 2014, at 5:24 pm. There are 100 posts and 6 comments. The discussion is sorted by "Newest".

The first comment is from Ken Bien, dated Monday, October 7, 2013, at 7:00 pm. He says: "Plants absorb sunlight through their leaves." Below his comment are links for "Reply" and "Like".

The second comment is from Arnav Dayal, dated Monday, October 7, 2013, at 7:19 pm. He says: "Right. Because 'photo' means light! Check out this cool video I found about photosynthesis:". Below his text is a video thumbnail showing a green plant with leaves. Below the video are links for "Reply" and "Like".

The third comment is from Gordon Benoit, dated Monday, October 7, 2013, at 7:21 pm. He says: "That's a very helpful video, Arnav. Thanks!". Below his comment are links for "Reply" and "Like".

The fourth comment is from Katie Bien, dated Monday, October 7, 2013, at 7:40 pm. She says: "Photosynthesis helps plants make food out of water, CO₂, and sunlight. Just like in this pic." Below her text is a diagram showing the process of photosynthesis. The diagram includes labels for "Inputs" (Water, CO₂, Light Energy) and "Outputs" (Glucose, O₂). It also shows the chemical equation: $6\text{H}_2\text{O} + 6\text{CO}_2 \xrightarrow{\text{Light Energy}} \text{C}_6\text{H}_{12}\text{O}_6 + 6\text{O}_2$.

Tip #2: Let Students Take Ownership of Their Learning

In your lessons, try to incorporate ways for students to personalize the learning experience for themselves. You can do this by allowing (or requiring) them to take notes, do Checking for Understanding quizzes, study in groups, and simply have fun with the material.

Another tactic is what we call “choose your own adventure” assignments. These are open-ended activities that encourage students to choose how they show their understanding of a topic—i.e., through an essay, art, breaking news update video, etc. This requires them to plan and execute their projects rather than just complete them.

- *“Active learners take new information and apply it, rather than*
- *merely taking note of it. Firsthand use of new material develops*
- *personal ownership. When subject matter connects directly with*
- *students’ experiences, projects, and goals, they care more about*
- *the material they seek to master.”*

- Craig Lambert in Twilight of the Lecture, Harvard Magazine, 2012

Tip #3: Individualize Learning Plans

Individualized instruction is **an excellent strategy for engaging students** in a way that best suits their needs. And hands-down the most effective tool for this is an LMS, such as Schoology's Education Cloud, because it provides the data and insights you need to tailor learning.

4 Simple Ways to Individualize Learning

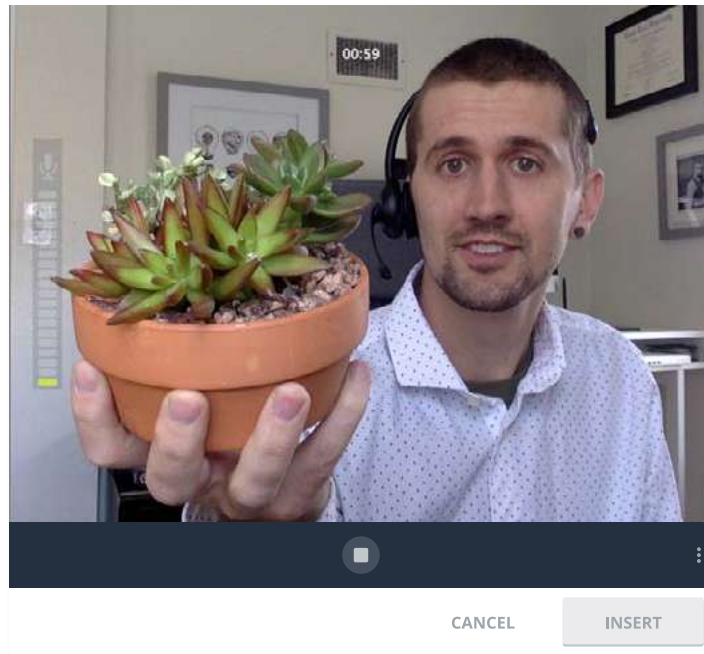
- Adjust instructional content to align with learning styles—e.g., more videos for visual learners
- Organize students in groups based on learn style
- Make your lessons self-paced
- Offer “choose your own adventure” assignments (described on the previous page)

: “My second level programming class had students from four
 : different intro level classes that all ended at dramatically
 : different spots with the material. Once I assessed the students’
 : prior knowledge, I was able to break them into four/five different
 : groups; build individualized learning plans; and assign lessons,
 : assignments, and tests individually.”

- David Mikesell, Professional Technology Instructor, Portage Township Schools

Tip #4: Add a Personal Touch to Content

Blended environments are more meaningful when the instructor builds and creates the content. When you do, you're establishing a relationship between you and your students, which makes the learning experience feel more personal.



A Few Tips for Building Your Own Content

- Design content around the learner and his or her access to technology.
- Record your own video lessons (when possible) to make them more personable.
- Make sure your content aligns to your learning objectives.
- Consider your resources, or in other words, don't design a lesson for iPads in a Chromebook classroom.
- Work within your technology comfort zone, but don't be afraid to try something new.
- Keep copyright laws in mind. It's good practice for you and your students.
- Know that though this takes quite a bit of time upfront, it saves time in the long run.



Find and tailor resources made available by your PLC or an OER library such as **Schoology's Public Resources** to save time.



Enhance Lessons

Enhance Lessons

The second of the Three E's is all about enhancing lessons. This is a big one because blended learning is only as successful as the quality of the lesson that is at its heart. The good news is you don't have to start from scratch.

Enhancing is less about changing and more about increasing opportunities for interaction and learning. Any lesson can be enhanced through small tweaks by incorporating technology creatively. A series of notes can include links to resources for further reading. A list of definitions can become a randomized quiz. A hands-on lab can be recorded.

Think about how texts can be more exciting or impactful with embedded videos or checks for understanding. Imagine what your students might discover when they work on digital assignments in groups instead of individually.



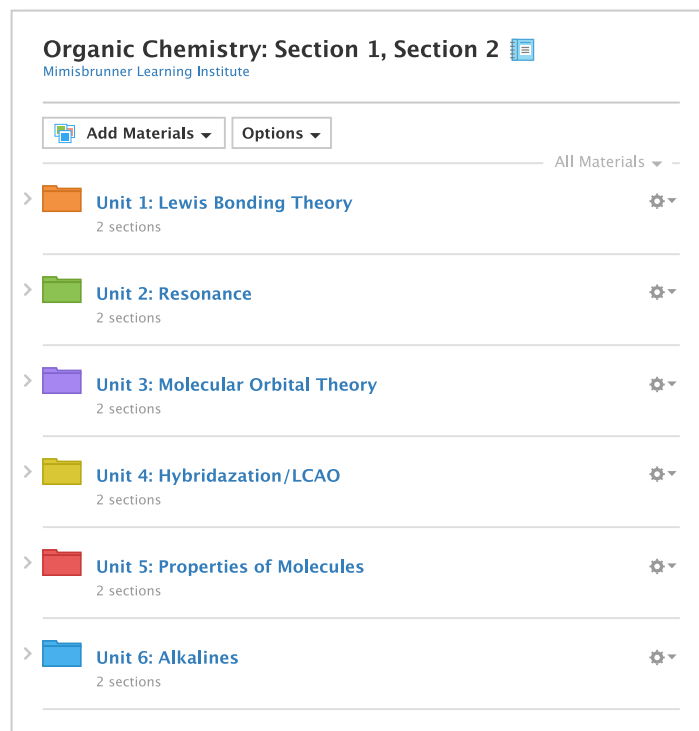
As with all of the blended learning practices described in this guide, start with small wins and work your way towards bigger ones.



4 Tips for Enhancing Your Lessons

Tip #1: Use an LMS to Enhance and Deliver Lessons

One of the great things about an LMS that other platforms, such as Google Classroom, don't provide is a way to organize content and lessons in a cohesive plan. Plenty of tools enable you to make great content. But an LMS gives instructors the ability to better structure lessons and apply real pedagogy.



Now let's take a step back to look at the benefits of an LMS beyond the course. Using an LMS like Schoology makes it easy to share ideas and resources with peers across institutions and even around the world. If one educator can build great lessons, imagine if she were able to share them with her professional learning community (PLC), make them better, and save everyone time and effort in the process.



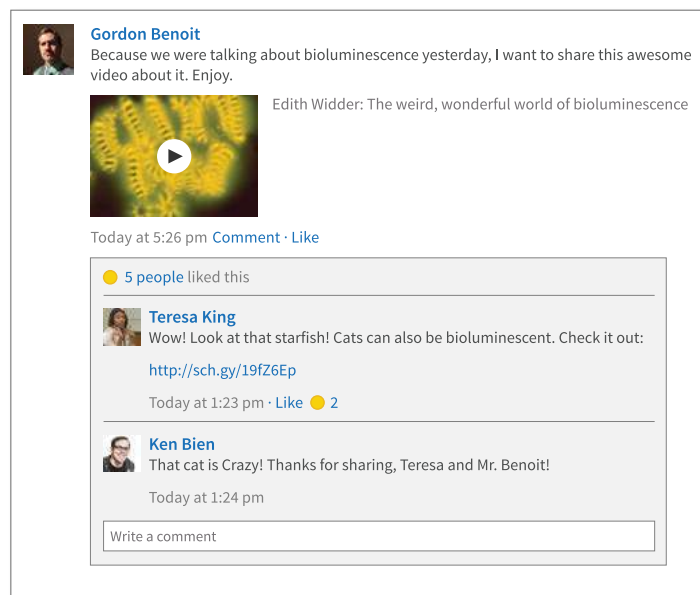
When structuring your courses, organize your lessons in subjects or units rather than dates. This strategy simply makes your courses easier for you and your students to navigate, especially as you add in more content.

Tip #2: Make Lessons More Interactive

Increasing the opportunities for students to interact with their lessons will increase their engagement level and, in turn, their performance. One way to do this is through the use of video. Just remember—the shorter the video, the better. The longest a video should be is 3-5 minutes so that students do not lose attention.

Also, don't forget to have fun when picking or making your videos. Fun is infectious and your students will no doubt be more engaged when you show your creativity and humor.

Another great way to make lessons more interactive and increase student comprehension is by including Check for Understanding quizzes throughout your lessons. Formative assessments like these break up the material and help educators and their students gauge depth of understanding instantaneously.



Consider tools that provide banks to store assessment questions. They simplify test and quiz creation, enable performance tracking, and save you tons of time.

Tip #3: Use Variety for Deeper Learning

A common oversight instructors make when blending for the first time is not offering variety for those who need it. Changing up your class activities to hit some of the other points in [Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Theory](#) (Kinesthetic, Natural) can help boost student engagement and improve learning experiences.

Within class activities, consider offering these four “class modes”:

- Independent Learning
- Together Learning
- Independent Work
- Together Work

Tip #4: Structure Your Lessons for Maximum Impact

When you are building out lessons, try to incorporate both lower level and higher level learning. Take [Bloom's Taxonomy](#), for example. Think about how you might cover the different levels of learning—e.g., Remembering, Understanding, Applying, Analyzing, Creating, and Evaluating—in one lesson.

For example, you could focus your lessons on the lower parts of the taxonomy, such as reading a chapter, and reserve class time to focus on the higher parts, such as group analyses of the content. This is great for those who practice flipped learning, but may not be the best option for everyone. You'll just need to find what works best for you and your students.

An Example Lesson Incorporating Bloom's Taxonomy

Let's say you are creating a lesson on the study of leaves and plan to follow the low-to-high strategy described above. Using Blended Learning to hit all six areas of Bloom's Taxonomy, your lesson could look like this:

Remembering

Remembering basic, concrete data is the most important part of learning. This can include:

- creating interactive lessons that have facts, pictures, and videos
- Uploading worksheets, presentations, and PDFs.
- Uploading other videos
- Including links to other websites

Science 101: Section 1 ▶ Leaf Studies ▶ Different Kinds of Leaves

Maple Trees

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Sugar Maple

⚙



The Sugar Maple tree is known as one of the prettiest trees come fall time with it's beautiful colors.

The Sugar Maple grows in the northern regions of America, ranging from the New England states over to Minnesota, down to Tennessee and Missouri. Any of the southern states that have Sugar Maple trees do not see theirs until 3,000 above sea level.

They can survive in temperatures ranging from -41 degrees F to +100 degrees F. (Can you?)

The leaf characteristics include that they are broad and flat. Notice how they do not puff out. It is a very simple, yet effective design.

When the leaves come in in the spring, they will come in green. In late September and early October, the chlorophyll breaks down in the leaf and the colors turn orange and yellow. Additional chemical reactions cause them to turn red.





Sugar Maple Trees

▶

Understanding

The Understanding looks at a basic level of compare and contrast for the subject matter. In this example, there are three maple leaves that we are comparing. Other examples include:

- Videos showing a difference
- Comparison question on a practice quiz
- Comparison worksheet
- External website

[Science 101: Section 1](#) ▶ [Leaf Studies](#) ▶ [Different Kinds of Leaves](#)

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Maple Trees

⚙️

Maple Leaf Relationship

Just like your family, raw different maple leaves share many of the same characteristics but do not look exactly the same. For this example, we will look at three different maple leaves: the Red Maple, the Sugar Maple, and the Black Maple.



Red maples
Brilliant Scarlet



Sugar maples
Orange, red



Black maples
Glowing yellow

The most noticeable similarity between the three are the flat, pointed shape and the visible vein formations.

Notice how the Red Maple only has three points with a large gap in between. Meanwhile, the Sugar Maple has many different points that go all over the place. Yet the vein count is still the same.



Applying

In this example, students are going out in the woods behind their schools to apply their knowledge of leaves. If it's raining or students are absent, post a video of a previous walk in your LMS. Other ideas could be:

- Trying out the new material in something already constructed
- Getting “hands-on” with the new material
- Testing Scientific Theory
- Relating the material back to our everyday lives

Science 101: Section 1 ▶ Leaf Studies



[Leaf Activities](#)

School Leaf Exploration

As a class, we are going to go for a walk into the woods.

You will need:

- Your iPad or a Notebook
- Shoes that can get muddy
- To wear jeans/longer pants that day.

Assignments:

As we are walking, write down the different kinds of trees and leaves we see. Within this, write down the following:

1. What type of tree it is:
2. The classification of the tree:
3. The leaf type:
4. Describe the leaf:
5. How much sunlight it needs:

You must have at least 10 different trees. Submit when complete.

IF YOU ARE ABSENT/IF IT IS RAINING:

Watch this video from a walk I took last week to complete the assignment.



Analyzing

The students will be able to analyze a couple of different ways through blended learning, such as:

- Submitting an assignment for hands-on material (example)
- Have discussions that debate the material in question
- Look for further patterns across a broader perspective
- Submit analysis reports
- Use spreadsheets to interpret data

Science 101: Section 1



Leaf Studies

Leaf Comparison Assignment

You will need:

- 3 different leaves from the woods.
- Your iPads to complete the chart below.
- A partner to work with.

The Assignment:

Go back into our woods and pick three different kinds of leaves. Use the table below to complete your analysis:

Leaf:			
Type of tree:			
Type of leaf:			
Similarities between all three			
Difference between the first and second/third			

Creating

In a digital environment, creating can be the most fun ... and scary.

- ☐ Online media albums (see example).
- ☐ Videos explaining material
- ☐ Videos interpreting material
- ☐ Online project/collages
- ☐ Printable or deliverable documents
- ☐ Prezis
- ☐ Web pages
- ☐ Anything else in the imagination

Science 101: Section 1

Leaf Studies

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Dave's Leaf Collection

Add Media

⚙

This is my leaf collection taken outside of my house. Isn't it awesome? Click on each picture to read about the type of leaf.



This is a red maple leaf that fell off the ...



This is a bush that has evergreen needles ...



This plant has a single leaf per nod ...



This plant also has a single leaf per nod ...



This plant ended up being a darker leaf ...

Evaluating

Evaluating is the highest order of thinking in Bloom's taxonomy. Use your LMS to:

- Post comments on other student's work that gets a discussion or peer critiquing started (see example).
- Submission of a live Google Document as a reflection journal
- Recording a group reflective discussion
- Surveys

Science 101: Section 1

Leaf Studies

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Photo Album Critique

You will need:

- Yor iPad

The Assignment:

Once you have completed your leaf Photo Album, click to other Photo Albums in the class. Look at each person's collection. Make a comment either in the general comment section or on a particular leaf for each person. **Remember our rules for doing this: Be kind but critique.**

Criteria	Grading Scale				
Discussion Post Made it Each Album	5 Student successfully commented on every album with something kind yet critiquing the work.	4 Student successfully commented on most albums with something kind yet critiquing the work.	3 Student successfully commented on half of the albums with something kind yet critiquing the work.	2 Student successfully commented on under half of the albums with something kind yet critiquing the work.	1 Student did not adhere to the kind yet critiquing rules or did not post at all.
Thought Process The student will demonstrate a thorough thought process in examining and critiquing peers work.	10 Student successfully demonstrate a thorough thought process in examining and critiquing peers work.	8 Student mostly demonstrate a thorough thought process in examining and critiquing peers work.	6 Student sometimes demonstrate a thorough thought process in examining and critiquing peers work.	4 Student tried to demonstrate a thorough thought process in examining and critiquing peers work.	1 Student failed to demonstrate a thorough thought process in examining and critiquing peers work.

A young man with short, light-colored hair is shown in profile, looking down at a tablet computer. He is wearing a dark lab coat over a light-colored shirt. His hands are on the tablet, which is placed on a laboratory bench. To his right is a compound microscope. In the background, another person is visible, working at a similar station. The entire image has a blue tint. The text "Increase Efficiency" is overlaid in the center in a white, serif font.

Increase Efficiency

Increase Efficiency Over Time

The last of our three core concepts is all about continually streamlining your workflows. Blended learning isn't just about the destination—i.e., enhanced lessons and engaged students. It's also about how you get there, the mechanics of your instructional process. You should seek to maximize the opportunities for learning while also minimizing the time and effort spent doing so.

More efficiency translates into more time to spend with students who need it, more time to build great content, and more personal time for you. In many ways, this comes down to two elements—the tools you use and the strategies you employ.

Let's assume, for the moment, that you use efficient tools. What if you then started communicating with all your students at once via mass updates? And what if you encouraged students to support each other in a forum dedicated to homework help? The opportunities are endless.

2 Tips for Increasing Your Efficiency

Tip #1: Choose Tools that are Easy to Use and Meet Multiple Needs

As you start your blended learning program, you'll no doubt begin to incorporate new tools into your daily workflow. As you do, just remember that features aren't everything. All the features in the world rolled up in a clunky platform will only decrease your efficiency.

As you experiment with other tools, pay close attention to the user interface (UI), the layout and feel. Some tools immediately feel familiar or straightforward. They make it easier to dive in and start using them without all the hours of training and trial and error.

It's also important to lean towards tools that meet a multitude of needs, such as an LMS. One well designed LMS is worth many single-function tools and eliminates all the back and forth.

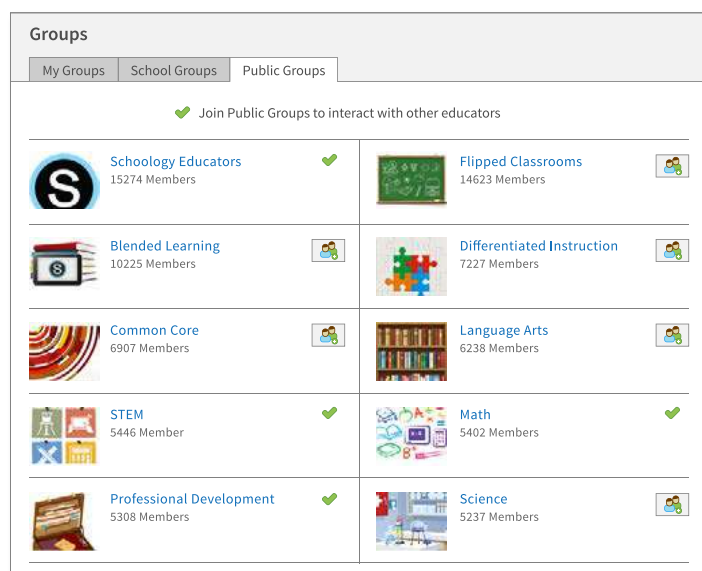
Three Considerations for Choosing Great Blended Learning Tools

- Prioritize Ease of Use—The less time spent learning how to use a tool, the better.
- Consider Integration Capabilities—When your tools work well together, your whole process becomes more fluid and efficient. Seek out tools that have pre-built integrations with those you already use on a regular basis.
- Think Broad—Take a step back and look at how a tool fits into your overall strategy and scope. Platforms that serve more than one purpose help you reduce the number of tools you need and streamline workflows.

Tip #2: Collaborate with Professional Learning Communities

As the saying goes, “Two heads are better than one.” Imagine if 50 or even thousands of heads were working together. A strong professional learning community (PLC) is arguably the most powerful force in education, and you need to connect with one. There’s simply no better way to find answers to your questions, remedies to your problems, and great shared content.

There are numerous ways to get involved in PLCs. Schoology, for example, enables you to **plug into a global community of educators** to share content and ideas. Social media is another great way to connect with peers.



A photograph of three people—two women and one man—smiling and looking at a tablet. The image is overlaid with a solid blue color. The text "Things to Remember" is centered in white.

Things to Remember

Things to Remember as You Start Blending

Change is not an event; it's a process. This is a great mantra to have as you develop your blended learning program. After all, Rome wasn't built in a day. Finding your groove and improving your strategy takes time, focus, and constant evaluation.

Sometimes the road will be hard, but that's because change is hard. For this reason, we wanted to end this guide with some insights that will help you keep a constructive mindset, avoid common frustrations, and understand you are not alone. We are in this together.

Set Realistic Goals

By definition, blended learning requires that you utilize digital tools, so knowing your own technological limitations is crucial. Building a great blended learning program is a systematic shift in everyday thinking, so setting unrealistic goals or expectations will only result in frustration.

In the beginning, start small. If the most you can handle at first is putting your instructional resources into your LMS, great! If you feel confident enough to try posting lessons along with interactive materials, such as assignments, discussions, or quizzes, awesome!

We recommend blending a single lesson and evaluating how it goes. Afterwards, you'll have the insights you need to set goals and start pursuing them.

Expect to Spend More Time Preparing

Time management is a key component to the success of your blended learning project. When you begin building out lessons, whatever time you believe it will take you, multiply it 1.5 to 3 times.

Just remember that the time you spend planning and developing your course will pay off in more engagement and ultimately better learning experiences. Also, digital lessons can be reused, so you're really saving time in the long run.

Where Do You Spend Your Time?



Time Saving Tips

- Utilize the internet—e.g., YouTube, Vimeo, Khan Academy, etc.
- Plan to reuse the content you've created in multiple course sections
- Split the work up by collaborating with a colleague or your PLC.
- When choosing digital tools, consider the importance of ease of use in terms of time management.

On average, instructors spend $\frac{1}{3}$ of their total work time planning and grading.

: “The increased time commitment involved in a blended course
 : is regarded as the number one challenge by faculty (Dziuban
 : & Moskal, 2001). Johnson (2002) stated that planning and
 : developing a large enrollment, blended course takes two to three
 : times the amount of time required to develop a similar course in
 : a traditional format.”

- Norman Vaughan in “Perspectives on Blended Learning in Higher Education”

Model the Way Your Environment Will Be Used

When you start blending, it's easy to assume students will be “naturals” in your new learning environment because they have grown up around technology. This is simply not the case, especially if they have never taken a class like yours.

A few common hurdles students struggle with are:

- Time management for online and face-to-face activities
- The responsibilities of active learning and owning the outcomes
- The accountability that follows transparency into the learning process (no more “I forgot”)

In the first few days of class, walk your students through your expectations, your tools, and your process. Have at least one day where you practice online learning—e.g., turning in assignments, taking tests/quizzes, and navigating the material.

This will set the tone for the semester and curb most frustrations before they start.

Teach Your Students How to Learn

People are naturally good at picking up and applying information. But in a day and age where we are inundated with information at every turn, it can be hard to decipher the useful from the flat out wrong. One of the best skills you can teach your students, then, is how to learn.

In 2011, Education Week published an article called *Teaching Secrets: Teaching Students How to Learn* that analyzed three typical assumptions that instructors make about students' learning (George 2011). They are listed below.



Pitfall #1: Assuming students can identify important information and take useful notes.

With textbooks, teachers take the time to help students find the key information, learn how to read the textbook, and take notes. You set up your content similar to that of a textbook by bolding keywords, having an online glossary, and making keywords stand out in videos.

Pitfall #2: Assuming students know how to study.

Help students study by weaving in Check for Understanding quizzes that cover lower end and middle level concepts, encouraging good note taking practices, and building (or having them build) review games.

Pitfall #3: Assuming students understand the link between studying and academic performance.

Students who don't have good study habits may not see the value in them. Have students set personal learning goals and guide them through the process so they can see the impact studying has on their learning.

Believe in Your Process

Early on, students and other stakeholders may fight this change because well, we all fight change! If you truly want your blended learning program to succeed, you have to be dedicated to seeing the project through.

Be clear about your expectations right at the start. Tell your students and their parents or advisors exactly what they need to do to be successful in your course. You may even want to educate them on blended learning and the benefits it provides.

This will eliminate confusion and engender a culture that complements your strategy instead of combatting it.

Conclusion

This is an exciting time to be in education. You are embarking on a journey to discover how technology can help transform teaching and learning as you know it. And we hope you will continue to find this guide useful along the way.

If done well, blended learning will help you better engage your students, improve their learning experience, and free up more time for you to spend with each student. It will take time to get your program going and make it successful, but the payoff is worth it.

Just remember that you are not alone. Thousands of educators around the world are on a similar journey, and if you collaborate with them, there's no telling what amazing things can happen.

Also, if you liked this guide and want more of our Best Practice Series, check out [our Resource Center](#). It's filled with tons of great articles to help you on your way.

Happy blending!



Sign up for a [free Schoolology instructor's account](#) or [request a demo](#) to learn more about our school and districtwide solutions.

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