

# Students Prefer a Blended Approach to Learning

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## Background

In South Asia, 430 million children were affected by school closures during the COVID-19 crisis. In 2020, more than 170,000 children were affected in Bhutan, 24.93 percent of the population.<sup>1</sup> As schools reopen, we must look at the resilience of our education system, preparing for future closures and promoting high-quality online learning.

This is a brief study of the Bhutanese experience, looking at the existing system and the potential evolution of learning primarily forced by the COVID crisis. It looks at the advantages of blended learning for situations like the pandemic and, more importantly, building a lifelong learning culture. With this backdrop, the purpose of this research was to capture learners' preference and relationship between online learning and face-to-face learning, through action research, describing different literature, implementing action research plan and finally, the discussion.

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

- Which mode of learning do students prefer?
- What is the relationship between online learning and face-to-face learning?

## Literature Review

### Blended Learning and its Impact

Many academics have tried to define blended learning. It can be described as a mix of technology and traditional face-to-face interaction.<sup>2</sup> Another

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF. (2020). <https://www.unicef.org/bhutan/press-releases/unicef-urgent-need-secure-learning-children-across-south-asia>.

<sup>2</sup> Butnaru, L., G., Nita, Valentin & Anichiti, A. (2021). The Effectiveness of Online Education during COVID 19 Pandemic—A Comparative Analysis between the Perceptions of Academic Students and High School Students from Romania. *Sustainability*. 13(9). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13095311>

qualitative study identified several benefits and challenges of blended learning.<sup>3</sup> The results showed that students appreciated the accessibility and flexibility that defined blended learning. Some benefits included greater freedom in planning, better grasp of content, and better understanding of the method. Despite some drawbacks, like late feedback and poor Internet connection, participants were generally positive about blended learning.

One study revealed a significant difference between students in the self-learning group and the lecture group.<sup>4</sup> Students in the self-learning method achieved more satisfaction than the lecture group, in independent learning and other learning outcomes. The ideal modern learning environment is a design chameleon, accommodating the teacher at the blackboard and gathering around smartphones to investigate new assignments as a group.

A blended course has anywhere between 30 percent to 79 percent online content delivery.<sup>5</sup> The remaining content is delivered in a non-Web-based method, such as face-to-face instruction. However, effectively implementing composite techniques is difficult, especially when the goal is educational change rather than augmenting established practices.<sup>6</sup> Some challenges in content delivery are linked to students' readiness to learn in a blended environment<sup>7</sup> and teachers' commitment and capability to teach through blended approaches.<sup>8</sup>

## Situation in Bhutan

The gross enrolment rate is 96 percent for primary education and 67 percent for tertiary education. The literacy rate is substantially higher in urban areas at 81.7 percent than in rural areas with 58.3 percent. Only 28

<sup>3</sup>Smyth, S., Houghton, C., Cooney, A & Casey, D. (2012). Students' experiences of blended learning across a range of postgraduate programs. *Nurse Education Today*. 32(4). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2011.05.014>

<sup>4</sup>Mahmoud, F., N. (2015). The Effect of Self- Learning Package Versus Lecture Method on Students' Intended Learning Outcomes. *World Journal of Nursing Sciences*. 1(3) .10.5829/idosi.wjns.2015.89.99

<sup>5</sup>Allen, I., Seaman, J, Richard, G. (2007). *Blending In: The Extent and Promise of Blended Education in the United States*. Sloan Consortium.

<sup>6</sup>Tshabalala, M. et al. (2014). Implementing Blended Learning at a Developing University: Obstacles in the way. *The Electronic Journal of e-Learning*. 12(1)

<sup>7</sup>Wright, N. (2010). *E-learning and implications for New Zealand schools: a literature review*. Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education. Retrieved from <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/ict/77614>.

<sup>8</sup>Parkes, S., Zaka, P., & Davis, N. (2011). The first blended or hybrid online course in a New Zealand secondary school: A case study. *Computers in New Zealand Schools: Learning, Teaching, Technology*, 23(1), 1-30. Retrieved from <http://education2x.otago.ac.nz/cinzs/>.

percent of the population qualify for higher secondary school.<sup>9</sup> Where do the remaining numbers end up? School dropout rates steadily increased due to the pandemic, but even before that, children left school due to poverty, lack of facilities, and household commitments.

Classrooms in South Asia are predominantly teacher-centred and memory-based, crowded with general problems of indiscipline, irregular attendance, and low performance<sup>10</sup> because our learning mode cannot cater to every student's demands. For teachers, making content delivery enjoyable is a challenge. Teaching-learning processes that emphasise increased involvement of students, like pairing up, games, and brainstorming, would make students more active learners.

Quality education is still a far-sighted goal for Bhutan. As of 2016, the national average for the student-to-teacher ratio was 38:1. It reached a maximum of 41.7 students per teacher in 1992.<sup>11</sup> Because of the instructional limitations with large classes, more students come to class less prepared and are generally less willing to participate. They seem content to sit and passively absorb information.<sup>12</sup> The instructor often adopts a one-way manner rather than facilitating the learning.

## Accessibility

Providing equal opportunities and resources to urban and rural schools has been one of the disparities in the country. Education can play a vital role in rural development. Increasing connectivity for rural youth does not have to be a whole-school model (which might not be feasible either). It can simply be using connection-based learning, whereby teachers connect their students to experts, peers and organisations to learn from each other.<sup>13</sup> Using social platforms such as LinkedIn and Slack, teachers can talk about an area of expertise, and stay connected to students through instant messaging apps such as Whatsapp, TalkingPoints, and Remind.

<sup>9</sup>Ministry of Education [MoE]. (2020). Annual education report 2019-2020.

<sup>10</sup>UNICEF. (2020). Education: UNICEF committed to ensuring all children in South Asia have access to inclusive and equitable quality education. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/what-we-do/education>

<sup>11</sup>MoE. (2018). Annual education statistics.

<sup>12</sup>Gyamtsho, C., D & Maxwell, T., W. (2012). Present Practices and Background to Teaching and Learning at the Royal University of Bhutan (RUB): A Pilot Study. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. 24(1). <http://www.isetl.org/ijtlhe/>

<sup>13</sup>Lister, J. (2018). Connections-based learning should be the future of education. Retrieved from <https://hundred.org/en/articles/connections-based-learning>

## Methodology

A major systemic weakness came to light when we found our students and teachers facing an unusual setback, dealing with the many complexities of online learning during the pandemic. There is a need for empirical evidence to understand how we can integrate online learning and physical classes to adapt to the new normal. Therefore, action research was conducted in a college in central Bhutan with 54 students [Sample size from population =  $181/100 * 30$ ]. The participants were a portion of the population that had gone through both blended learning during the lockdown and traditional teaching. Hence purposive sampling was used to conduct the study. The action research focused on three broad domains:

- Learners' preference for blended learning, online learning and face-to-face learning
- Relationship or interactions between online learning and face-to-face learning
- Accessibility to online learning

## Results

### Learners' Preference

This section asked the respondents about their preferences in terms of the context today: Online learning, face-to-face learning, a combination of both online education and face-to-face learning. Results revealed that 56.7 percent of the participants preferred blended learning, 35.1 percent preferred face-to-face learning, and 8.2 percent chose online learning.

### Relationship between Face-to-Face and Online Learning

In this domain, six statements on a 6-point Likert scale were designed to explore relationships between face-to-face learning and online learning. Most of the students (78 percent) agreed that face-to-face learning assisted online learning while making it more effective and exciting. Similarly, there was a positive attitude towards online learning, where 76.5 percent of the students agreed that online learning made face-to-face interaction more effective.

## Accessibility to Online Learning

In this case, accessibility meant allowing all students, regardless of disabilities, to use the content, with educational technology. One of the promises of technology is to expand access to under-served students by providing resources and experiences to people who otherwise might have limited access to education.<sup>14</sup> This domain asked students how well they could access online learning, ranging on a 6-point Likert scale. Most students could find online exercises (41 percent), followed by logging in (28 percent), technical assistance (15 percent), and activity instructions (11 percent), while the lowest percentage was for checking grades (5 percent). Learners found it very easy to review procedures and follow instructions for online tasks, but they had trouble receiving support and checking grades.

## Discussion

Blended learning presents opportunities and difficulties that we cannot fully anticipate. In this study, we have looked into students' preferences in terms of the context right now: Online learning, face-to-face learning, and blended learning in the first domain. More than half of the students preferred blended learning, which is synonymous with previous research mentioned above. However, the traditional approach was still popular among 35.1 percent of the students.

- The second domain describes interactions between face-to-face learning and online learning. This study proved that students prefer blended learning because they complement each other, making learning effective and enjoyable. Classroom activities and teacher consultation add more depth to the lessons. Therefore, face-to-face learning is an essential component in fulfilling communication needs.
- Blended learning, however, must pay attention to (1) combining flexibility, (2) stimulating interaction, (3) facilitating student learning processes, and (4) encouraging an effective learning environment for a success rate.<sup>15</sup> According to the survey, online learning environments allow individualised learning, by addressing the challenges presented by learners of mixed ability levels. Traditional lecture-based teaching methods fall short of supporting individualised learning. Online

<sup>14</sup> Dziuban, C., Graham, C.R., Moskal, P.D. et al. Blended learning: the new normal and emerging technologies. *Int J Educ Technol High Educ* 15, 3 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-017-0087-5>

<sup>15</sup> R. Boelens, B. De Wever, and M. Voet, (2017). Four key challenges to the design of blended learning: A systematic literature review. *Educ. Res. Rev.* 22. 10.1016/j.edurev.2017.06.001.

learning is more likely to provide learners with an individualised and adaptive learning experience by developing learner-centred environments, promoting learning more effectively.<sup>16</sup>

- In terms of accessibility, students had a hard time checking their grades, maybe because teachers do not follow up constantly on assessment and feedback.

## Conclusion

Ultimately this paper has looked into which medium of learning was preferred by students, and the relationship between online learning and face-to-face learning. Numerous empirical and theoretical concepts point to the fact that blended delivery has an advantage in fulfilling the demands of students with a diversity of learning styles, since it enables students to learn and access information in a variety of ways. Blended learning improves individualisation, personalisation, and relevance, without compromising face-to-face contact, resulting in improved learning for students, because both instructors and students have more flexibility and accessibility.

## Way Forward

The practical implementation of blended approaches is complex, especially when aiming for educational change rather than supplementing traditional practices. Research mentioned above indicates that some challenges are students' readiness to learn in a blended environment and teachers' commitment and capability to teach through blended approaches effectively. Given the growth of online learning and the complexity of education due to ICT, further research is needed at such a time when the government is implementing systematic change, and the need to discover flexible learning becomes more crucial, especially in the light of the pandemic.

## A Culture of Self-Learning

When the motivation to learn is intrinsic, it ceases to become a chore. The art of self-learning is a vital but neglected skill in the Bhutanese educational system, yet it is imperative for effective learning and success in exams. When children self-learn, they do so at their own speed, and assume

<sup>16</sup> Yang, C., Chuang, C., Li, L., C & Tseng, S., S. (2013). A blended learning environment for individualized English listening and speaking integrating critical thinking. *Computers & Education*. 63. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2012.12.012>.

responsibility for their learning and progress. Many arguments for distant education recognise the benefits of a blended approach that combines “the best of both worlds”, providing the convenience and flexibility of online courses without sacrificing classroom engagement, as long as both instructions follow acceptable pedagogical norms.

### **Context-specific Curriculum**

Tailoring the curriculum to the learner’s environment can achieve more efficient learning outcomes. Students will be able to grasp concepts quickly and apply what they have learned to their current situation. This would aid in the development of cognitive and analytical skills, hence improving learning outcomes. Researchers define contextualised learning as a practice that aims to connect theoretical notions taught to a practical, real-world context. Instead of testing their ability to complete specific activities mindlessly, learners should be expected to demonstrate what they have studied by applying it to real-world problems.

### **Creative Systems to Maintain Learning**

Curriculum standards have been raised to reflect what young people need to know as they grow into adults in a more sophisticated culture. The aesthetic of learning spaces in the 21st century has a significant impact on brain function and influences how youth feel in school and how they perform. School systems and educators are enhancing and increasing students’ important hard and soft skill sets, while better situating children for future success in any endeavour they pursue by providing creative, engaging and collaborative learning spaces. For example, SmartLab Learning completely revolutionises STEM subjects and seamlessly integrates standards-aligned math and science curriculum, educator development, learning kits, and learning environments for students. Another learning management system, Thai MOOC, collaborates with leading universities abroad to provide an online learning management system.

### **The Right Platform to Speak Up**

There are various ways to address this issue. One is to create spaces and interventions for youth to identify the system’s flaws. It is important to work with stakeholders and students so that they can play a role in allowing such

spaces in schools, institutions, organisations and society. The stereotype of youth as having all energy and no commitment leads to a lack of trust in their capabilities, and eventually to youth's unwillingness to take ownership of the learning process. If young people do not set the indicators for quality education, are they then equal partners in the developmental process? Youth cannot be confident leaders if they have never been taught how to make their own decisions. Not being part of the process is what makes youth feel disempowered. The youth should be invited into the process of change and given responsibilities to implement it.