

Effects of Blended Learning on Educator Professional Learning

A Review of the Literature

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Introduction

In the ever-evolving landscape of education, the pursuit of effective and innovative professional learning (PL) for educators stands as a worthwhile endeavor. As educational paradigms shift and technology continues to permeate every facet of our lives, the concept of blended learning has emerged as a powerful and promising approach to enriching the PL experiences of educators. Blended learning, which is characterized by the strategic integration of online and face-to-face instructional modalities (McGee & Reis, 2012), offers a dynamic and adaptable framework for equipping educators with the skills and knowledge necessary to excel in implementing a new curriculum.

This topic is particularly of interest to my organization as we launch a new iteration of our foundational literacy curriculum. Utilizing blended learning in the realm of educator PL holds immense potential to transform traditional teacher training and support models. Its fusion of digital and in-person components not only provides educators with greater flexibility but also enables them to engage in personalized, self-directed learning experiences. This personalization is increasingly important as the teacher knowledge gap widens with high teacher turnover and alternative pathways to teaching.

This literature review embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the myriad ways in which blended learning has been conceptualized, implemented, and evaluated. This review seeks to understand the underlying theories and technological tools that underpin this approach and examine its impact on the professional growth and instructional practices of educators. The study of blended learning in the educator PL setting also necessitates an examination of the challenges and opportunities that come with its adoption.

By synthesizing the existing body of literature this review endeavors to shed light on the key factors that influence the success of blended learning initiatives for educator PL. I hope that by reviewing the literature related to blended learning through the lens of educator PL I can establish a solid foundation of background knowledge and information to build on as I conduct an action research study to determine how a blended learning approach to Reading Horizons (RH) PL affects K-3 educators' program knowledge and preparedness to deliver effective foundational literacy instruction.

Review of the Literature

Definition of Blended Learning

Blended learning has become increasingly popular in classrooms across the country since the Coronavirus pandemic forced schools to pivot to virtual learning in 2020 (Kovac, 2020). Before the pandemic, technology was becoming more integrated into education and many schools had already made the shift to digital classroom resources, necessitating the acquisition of sufficient digital devices for their students. In a post-pandemic educational landscape, it is common for schools to be 1:1 with student technology. This change lends itself to the implementation of blended learning, as it is the best of both worlds (Savage, 2021). It is crucial to embark on this look at the literature surrounding blended learning with a shared understanding of what blended learning is. In this review, blended learning is defined as “any formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace” (Staker et al., 2014, p. 34). This definition is consistent with similar definitions in the body of research (Graham, 2013) and is broad enough to apply to not only a traditional classroom setting but also to an educator PL environment.

Types of Blended Learning

Blended learning has revolutionized education by offering a dynamic approach that combines traditional classroom instruction with online resources. In a PL setting, this equates to combining traditional workshop-style PL with online resources that can provide ongoing support for educators. Among the various models of blended learning that have emerged, the rotational model stands out as it involves learners rotating between different learning modalities, such as in-class discussions, online activities, and group projects. In contrast, the flipped model flips the traditional classroom dynamic, where learners access content online asynchronously and engage in discussion and active learning experiences during face-to-face time. The enriched virtual model offers learners a substantial portion of their learning online, with periodic in-person sessions to enhance their learning experience. Finally, the a la carte model provides learners with the flexibility to select individual courses or modules online, allowing them to tailor their education to their specific needs and interests. Each of these models offers unique advantages in the realm of blended learning in a PL setting, catering to diverse learning preferences and needs (Savage, 2021).

Rotational Model

The rotational model of blended learning is a dynamic blended learning approach that combines traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning components. In this model, learners rotate between different learning modalities, ensuring a diverse and engaging learning experience. The station rotation is the most common way to implement the rotational model. In station rotation, learners move through various learning stations, including teacher-led instruction, collaborative group work, and self-paced online activities. Some rotations may be in a computer lab or other similar setting, focusing on online content (Staker et al., 2014). This

approach offers flexibility, personalized learning opportunities and the ability to cater to individual learner needs, making it an increasingly popular choice in modern education.

Flipped Model

The flipped model of blended learning is an innovative blended learning approach that reverses the traditional classroom structure. In this model, students are introduced to new content and concepts outside of the classroom, typically through pre-recorded video lectures or reading assignments, which they can access at their own pace and at a time of their choosing. In-person time is then dedicated to active learning activities such as group discussions, hands-on projects or peer-to-peer practice, where learners apply and deepen their understanding of the content (Savage, 2021). This approach leverages technology to provide learners with the flexibility to learn independently and enables PL facilitators to use precious in-person time more effectively for engagement and interaction. The flipped model not only promotes active learning but also allows for learner control over more aspects of learning (Keengwe & Onchwari, 2015).

Enriched Virtual Model

In the enriched virtual model of blended learning a significant portion of the learning takes place online, utilizing digital resources, virtual classrooms, and multimedia content to deliver educational material. However, what sets the enriched virtual model apart is the strategic integration of face-to-face interactions, typically through scheduled in-person sessions or real-time virtual meetings (Savage, 2021). These in-person elements are carefully designed to complement and enhance the online components, fostering deeper connections between learners and instructors, promoting collaborative learning, and providing opportunities for hands-on activities, discussions, and feedback. This approach maximizes flexibility, enabling learners to access content at their own pace while also benefiting from the social and interactive aspects of

traditional classroom settings. This is the model that the Lamar University ADL program aligns with most closely.

A La Carte Model

The a la carte model of blended learning is an approach that offers students a customized learning experience. In this model, learners have the autonomy to select and assemble various digital resources, modules, or courses based on their specific needs, interests, and learning pace. It combines traditional classroom instruction with online resources and tools, allowing students to personalize their learning journey. This approach promotes self-directed learning and empowers students to take ownership of their learning, as they tailor their content to align with their individual learning styles and goals (Staker et al., 2014). The a la carte model of blended learning harnesses technology to create an adaptive learning environment that caters to each learner's diverse needs.

Advantages of Using Blended Learning

Regardless of which model of blended learning is chosen, the literature reveals several compelling advantages when it comes to teacher professional learning. Firstly, it provides learners with greater flexibility and convenience. Teachers are stretched thin and spend time outside their paid hours working for the benefit of their students (West, 2014). Asking them to commit full days to professional learning can put undue strain on our already overburdened educators. The online component of blended learning gives learners agency and control over the instruction pacing and improves performance (Studnicka, 2020). This flexibility not only makes it easier for teachers to access valuable resources and ongoing training but also encourages self-directed learning, empowering educators to take charge of their own professional growth (Knoblauch, 2022).

Secondly, blended learning allows for in-person components of PL to be spent in active, rather than passive learning. Collaboration through discussion forums, connecting with peers through hands-on authentic learning experiences, sharing experiences and best practices, and reflection all enhance the quality of learning (Keengwe & Onchwari, 2015; Harapnuik et al., 2018; Santos & Serpa, 2020). Gulamhussein (2013) notes that in order for PL to be effective it must be engaging and include opportunities for learners to experience expert modeling of new instructional practices. Blended learning enhances the quality of PL by exposing educators to expert modeling and innovative teaching methods. Moreover, blended learning helps create a supportive learning environment where teachers can ask for advice, provide and receive feedback, and build lasting professional relationships (Thomas & Brown, 2011).

Lastly, blended learning facilitates personalized learning experiences. Teachers can choose the content and resources that align with their specific needs and goals, tailoring their PL to address areas where they need improvement. Teaching experience and teacher knowledge vary widely within schools and districts, therefore it is crucial that PL meets each learner where they are. This individualization not only increases the relevance of the training but also allows teachers to progress at their own pace, ensuring a more meaningful and impactful learning experience (Gulamhussein, 2013). Educator learning becomes even more targeted and personalized when blended learning is utilized within curriculum-based PL (Short & Hirsch, 2020). In essence, blended learning empowers teachers to take ownership of their professional development, fostering a culture of continuous improvement in education.

Barriers to Implementing Blended Learning

While blended learning offers several benefits to educator PL, it also presents a range of challenges in this context. First, ensuring equitable access to technology and resources for all

teachers can be a major hurdle. Not all educators across the U.S. have equal access to the necessary hardware, software, and internet connectivity, which can exacerbate disparities in PL opportunities (Graham, 2013; McGee & Reis, 2012). This digital divide can hinder the effectiveness of blended learning initiatives by excluding some educators from the learning process.

In addition, maintaining motivation among teachers in a blended learning environment can be challenging. The autonomy and flexibility of online learning, while convenient, can lead to feelings of isolation and disconnection, making it difficult to sustain teacher engagement. Teachers may also struggle to manage their time effectively in a blended learning setting, as the demands of their classrooms often take precedence (Hoffman, 2014). Without adequate support and a sense of community, they may find it challenging to stay committed to their professional development.

Lastly, assessing and evaluating teacher progress and learning outcomes can be complex in a blended learning context. Traditional metrics for evaluating professional development, such as in-person observations, may not align with the asynchronous and online components of blended learning. Developing meaningful assessments that accurately measure teacher growth and effectiveness can be a daunting task (Baum & McPherson, 2019). Additionally, collecting and analyzing data from various online platforms and resources to assess teacher performance can pose logistical challenges for educational institutions.

Summary

In summary, the literature clearly outlines various useful blended learning models that each combine traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning elements in different ways. Blended learning allows learners to access course materials and engage in activities both in an

in-person environment and through digital platforms. The literature sheds light on the clear benefits of utilizing blended learning that can be applied to the educator PL context. These benefits include increased flexibility for learners, personalized pacing, access to a wide range of resources, and the potential for enhanced engagement. However, blended learning also presents challenges that will need to be addressed and overcome, such as the need for robust technology infrastructure, effective integration of online and in-person components, and maintaining engagement and motivation to complete online components that may be viewed as optional (Hoffman, 2014). Based on this foundation of background knowledge, it seems that blended learning could be a viable solution to providing ongoing and effective curriculum-based PL. It will be enlightening to conduct an action research study to determine what effect, if any, blended learning has on K-3 educators' program knowledge and preparedness to deliver effective foundational literacy instruction using the Reading Horizons Discovery program.

This Review and the Field of Education

This literature review of blended learning significantly enhances the field of education by synthesizing and analyzing existing research, providing a nuanced understanding of how this approach can apply to the educator PL context. It helps educators, policymakers, and researchers gain insights into the effectiveness of blending learning, offering a foundation for evidence-based decision-making. This review not only identifies best practices and challenges but also highlights emerging trends and innovations in blended learning, ultimately fostering the advancement of teaching and learning strategies that cater to diverse learner needs and promote enhanced educational outcomes.

Strengths and Weaknesses of this Body of Literature

The body of literature around blended learning is rich and diverse. Its strength lies in its capacity to illuminate the different models of blended learning and their efficacy in various educational settings. While I only scratched the surface of the vast repository of research literature on this topic, I was able to uncover the benefits and challenges related to blended learning which I can learn from as I pursue my action research study. The literature serves as a foundation of understanding that allows me to learn from others' experiences, gain a deeper understanding of the topic, and imagine new possibilities for the future. Additionally, this body of literature constantly evolves, reflecting the changing dynamics of the world of education. It will be interesting to continue to monitor the trends and innovations that continue to emerge in blended learning.

The body of literature on blended learning, while quite robust, exhibits notable weaknesses due to its limited inclusion of comprehensive studies within the specific context of educator PL. This deficiency can be attributed to several factors, including the lack of research funding allocated to this critical area. Professional development companies may have resources to invest in studying the efficacy of their programming, but schools and districts do not have the means to always explore the various facets of educator development beyond simple feedback surveys. Furthermore, the existing literature tends to focus disproportionately on more generic professional development rather than curriculum-based PL. The literature surrounding adult learners has a propensity to focus more in-depth on blended learning in a corporate training or higher education setting. While this focus has the potential to translate well to educator PL it undermines my ability to develop strategies for innovatively incorporating blended learning in educator PL. I hope to contribute to the underdeveloped literature in this context that is essential

for the advancement of effective teacher development programs and improved educational outcomes.

Focus of the Current Study

The action research question for this study is “In what ways does a blended learning approach to Reading Horizons (RH) PL affect K-3 educators’ program knowledge and preparedness to deliver effective foundational literacy instruction?” To leverage blended learning research for the enhancement of my action research study, it is crucial to begin by thoroughly reviewing existing literature on blended learning models, strategies, and their efficacy within educational contexts. In my research, I will study the educator's experience and outcomes when utilizing an innovative approach to integrating technology and digital resources with face-to-face instruction throughout ongoing PL.

My action research employs a mixed methods design. I will collect both qualitative and quantitative data via a Google form survey that incorporates Likert-scale items and open-ended questions to understand educators’ experience with curriculum-based blended learning PL. While typically, my organization only collects data following in-person PL components, continuous data collection and analysis should be an integral part of the action research, enabling the organization to assess the impact of a blended learning approach on teacher program knowledge and instructional practices during program implementation. The synthesis of findings from both blended learning literature and the action research study will inform the development of a robust, evidence-based PL curriculum that adapts and evolves to meet the ever-changing needs of educators.

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