

Empowering New Teachers: The Impact of Blended Learning in Mentorship Programs

A Review of the Literature

By

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November 2024

Introduction

School districts face new challenges each year that, in turn, affect learning development for our students. The issue of high teacher turnover rates and its impact on districts is a significant challenge in education. It is critical to find effective ways to retain and support teachers. Many teachers find their way out of the classroom due to a lack of support, changes in innovation, or factors that have shifted since the pandemic. When COVID-19 struck in the US, teacher instruction was disrupted, and learning gaps are still spreading across three school years. The pandemic majorly shifted the world of education with sudden changes in teaching styles, technology platforms that took time to learn, and personal health worries. These extra pressures threatened to shrink teachers currently in the classroom and discourage new ones from joining the profession (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2023). As a member of the teaching and learning team in my district, our focus in our new teacher academy needs to shift to a platform that creates a culture of learning that mimics the new structure of education. A new teacher mentoring program that applies blended learning, featuring online models for the foundations of teaching and collaborative learning, blended with in-person coaching for targeted support, can prepare a culture of endless learning among new teachers by fostering collaboration and promoting teacher ownership.

As a seasoned educator and instructional coach, I have witnessed firsthand the challenges faced by new teachers. Despite our district's efforts to provide comprehensive professional development through face-to-face workshops and mentor programs, I believe that a more robust and personalized approach is necessary. By embedding blended learning in our new teacher academy, we can bridge the gap between theory and practice, fostering a

more engaging and accountable learning experience. This comprehensive plan will be implemented across the entire district to support all new teachers. To ensure targeted support, new teachers will be organized into distinct cohorts based on their teaching experience: 0 years, 1 year, 2 years, and 3 years. This cohort-based approach allows for the delivery of tailored professional development and mentorship opportunities that address the specific needs and challenges teachers face at each stage of their early careers.

This study is particularly meaningful as it aligns with my experiences as a new teacher. I recall the overwhelming feeling of being thrown into the classroom with limited support and resources. By implementing blended learning, we can empower new teachers with the tools and strategies they need to succeed, ensuring a smoother transition into the profession.

This research aims to examine the effects of professional face-to-face learning, online mentoring, and offline growth on the success of new teachers. It seeks to address the challenge of balancing traditional and digital learning methods. The findings will offer valuable insights for educators, administrators, and policymakers, helping them to create more effective and engaging learning experiences. This research is especially relevant as it tackles a critical issue in modern education: finding a balance between technology-driven instruction and the value of face-to-face interaction and personalized learning. Ultimately, this will contribute to teachers' and students' overall academic development. Green, Toker, And Wycoft (2017) state,

K-12 education stands at its greatest inflection point—a collision course with irrelevance, or the opportunity for reinvention. By the actions and

decisions it makes over the next few years, each district, each school, each teacher will choose whether to meet the needs of today's learners or not.

Review of Literature

What is blended learning?

Blended learning is a personalized approach that combines online learning experiences with traditional face-to-face instruction. Blended learning, when used correctly, can have multiple benefits for both the instructor and the learner. This instruction technique allows for the digital world and the physical classroom instruction to intertwine together to provide an educational experience that engages all students. Blended instruction empowers students by offering a personalized learning approach that caters to different learning styles (*Shoukat et al., n.d.*). Using this model for new teachers in our academy would provide them with tools they could utilize outside the meetings and modelings that we have face-to-face. According to Stangl(2023),

Adding support to a traditional professional development session, along with example lessons and ready-to-use templates, can create an environment where teachers feel more comfortable trying out new strategies. Creating opportunities for teachers to work through new learning and share ideas through discussion sessions with other teachers and within their professional learning

communities promotes a higher level of collaboration and support (Stangl, 2023, para. 5).

Establishing a culture of blended, flexible learning for new teachers in our district will enable them to continually acquire new tips, tricks, and techniques in their profession, help them collaborate with their peers in the program, and reflect on their own practice.

Collaborative Learning

Collaboration plays a crucial role in supporting new teachers who are just starting out in the profession. Collaboration can be understood simply as active engagement and interaction within a group of people with the aim of achieving a common goal (Nokes-Malach et al, 2015). A common goal is to encourage teachers to approach our program with an open mind. Some teachers who enter a classroom for the first time may not have had the opportunity to observe and learn from experienced instructors, especially if they completed an alternative certification program. This can be an intimidating experience for them, and finding time to connect with a mentor may be challenging due to the crazy schedule at the beginning of the year. The blended learning model fosters a culture of collaboration by building on the needs of the new teachers who can access help and guidance on their timelines. According to a recent article, digital learning removes time constraints, unlike traditional classrooms. Students can access materials and complete tasks at their own pace whenever it best suits their schedule. This flexibility can significantly enhance overall productivity, allowing them to learn more effectively within their available time. (Venkateswari, 2022) The rise of digital tools has sparked creative new ways for teachers and

students to work together. Taking technology and using it effectively, educators can now engage with students in richer and more diverse ways, fundamentally changing how we learn. (Johler, 2022) In our blended learning model, teachers would be able to learn from instructional coaches and mentors who could post themselves leading a teaching model and help guide new teachers on the steps to take to implement it in their own classroom. Learning by doing is key, and that's true for coaching, too. Both in-person and online coaches can help you by putting your learning into practice and having discussions with someone who has expertise in their field (Crawford et al., 2021).

Personal Growth

The world around us has shifted in the aftermath of the pandemic, and it's had a notable impact on how our schools operate. As educators begin our new teacher program, we take a moment to reflect on these changes and dive right into creating an environment that encourages personal growth and development. By using blended learning within a new teacher program, teachers often want their learners to develop strong thinking skills, solve problems effectively, and work together to build knowledge in a particular area. This approach values both independent learning and teamwork (Page et al., 2008). Teachers are thrown in many different directions when starting out in the classroom. Blended learning can make the teachers feel less overwhelmed and leverage a Moment of Need learning aspect to help guide them in their teaching journey(Prasad, 2023). According to Dr. RK Prasad 2023,

Moment-of-need learning is a strategic approach that
recognizes learning as an ongoing process tailored to address immediate

challenges. This paradigm shift emphasizes improving proficiency by leveraging learners' strengths and refining weaknesses precisely when needed. By focusing on moment-of-need learning, training is accessible just in time, enabling individuals to acquire knowledge at the moment they require it and in the context most relevant to their work (Prasad, 2023, para. 2).

Studies have also found that this approach to blended learning can be tailored to a responsive learning environment that promotes engagement and allows the learner to take ownership of their growth and learning (Prasad, 2023). Choice and ownership make a big difference in the engagement and autonomy of our lessons. If we want to help learners, we must give them choice, ownership, and voice by creating significant learning environments inside the classroom (Harapnuik et al., 2018). By being a stakeholder in your own learning, the level of support that new teachers are exposed to will make or break our teacher retention crisis.

Professional Learning Accountability and Data

Professional learning integrated into a new teacher program is a valuable concept. However, how can we assess the effectiveness of this program to ensure that both teachers and students succeed in the classroom? Several measurable factors can be considered when analyzing the data that informs a blended learning new teacher program.

Observable Interactions

In a blended learning approach, observable data will serve as a key method for evaluating new teachers within the program model. New teachers will be introduced to specific instructional strategies or techniques during face-to-face professional development sessions. They will then be tasked with applying these strategies in their classrooms and documenting their implementation through video recordings or other artifacts. Mentors will review these submissions, providing targeted feedback on the teachers' application of the strategies. Additionally, mentors will conduct in-person classroom observations to assess how the teachers implement the techniques in real time. Kaufman and Grimm (2013) mentioned that effective observation is accessible to anyone with a genuine desire to help, a commitment to diligent data collection, and a willingness to engage in open dialogue regarding those findings. By combining these methods, the research can gather qualitative data on the effectiveness of the blended learning approach in enhancing the development of new teachers.

Student Data

Collecting student data is crucial to the importance of a new teacher academy. While supporting and encouraging new teachers by equipping them with tools is essential, demonstrating student growth and success through the use of these tools creates a full circle moment. Gathering student data allows us to assess the effectiveness of the blended learning approach in improving student outcomes. By analyzing student achievement data, we can determine whether new teachers who participated in the academy are better equipped to implement effective instructional strategies and whether these strategies positively impact student performance.

Student data can also provide valuable insights into students' specific needs, informing targeted interventions. By identifying students who may be struggling, mentors can guide and support teachers with additional resources. Furthermore, this data can help identify areas for improvement within the new teacher academy itself. Progress feedback, which highlights effort, is believed to foster a growth mindset, suggesting that increased effort can lead to future success (Skipper & Douglas, 2015). By analyzing student performance, we can ascertain which aspects of the program are most effective and which areas may require further development.

Video Reflections and Feedback

Video reflections and feedback offer several advantages for new teachers. Firstly, they provide a tangible record of instructional practices, allowing teachers to review their own performances and identify areas for improvement. By watching themselves teach, new teachers can gain valuable insights into their teaching style, classroom management techniques, and student engagement strategies. Secondly, video reflections and feedback facilitate targeted and actionable feedback from mentors. Mentors can provide specific suggestions for improvement., such as adjusting questioning techniques, pacing, or classroom organization. This personalized feedback can help new teachers refine their skills and develop their professional practice. Additionally, video reflections can be used to foster a collaborative learning community among new teachers. Ostrosky, Mouzourou, Danner, and Zaghlawan (2012) explain in their research of video feedback as that call microteaching:

While discussing their microteach with peers, preservice teachers are able to acknowledge and challenge values or assumptions that characterize their practice as manifested in their actions.

By sharing their videos and receiving feedback from peers, teachers can learn from each other's experiences, build confidence, and develop a supportive network. Overall, video reflections and feedback can be a powerful tool for supporting new teacher development and improving student outcomes.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Blended Learning

Blended learning presents a compelling approach to new teacher mentor programs. By seamlessly integrating face-to-face interactions with online learning, this model offers a flexible and personalized learning experience. Online resources and modules can expand the range of learning opportunities, while data-driven insights can inform tailored support. According to Mukhtaramkhon (2022),

There are many benefits of blended learning. The first is that the practice offers more flexibility in the learning process. Rather than assuming that all students need the same information and skill building simultaneously and in the same way, blended learning allows for various learning activities, teaching approaches, pacing, and student groupings.

Additionally, blended learning can foster a sense of community among new teachers through online discussions and collaborative feedback from mentors.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the potential challenges associated with blended learning. Technical difficulties, limited access to technology, and the risk of isolation are significant concerns. To mitigate these challenges, it is important to provide adequate technical support, ensure that teachers have access to technology, and prioritize opportunities

for face-to-face interaction. By carefully considering these factors, we can best harness the power of blended learning to create a supportive and effective new teacher-mentor program.

Ultimately, the success of a blended learning approach hinges on a thoughtful balance between online and face-to-face components. By strategically designing the program and providing ongoing support, we can empower new teachers to develop the skills and knowledge necessary for success in their classrooms.

Summary

This research advocates for the implementation of a blended learning approach in mentor programs for new teachers. It highlights the challenges that new teachers face and proposes that a blended program—combining online learning with face-to-face interactions—can offer a more effective and personalized support system. The program would be implemented district-wide and tailored to accommodate new teachers with varying levels of experience, specifically those with 0 to 3 years in the profession.

We explore the concept of blended learning and highlight its benefits, including flexibility, personalization, and the potential to promote collaboration among new teachers. It further discusses the significance of collaborative learning in supporting these educators. Additionally, the role of blended learning in facilitating this collaboration is examined, particularly how it eliminates time constraints and allows for peer interaction through online platforms. Teachers' voice and choice within the blended learning model help to provide ownership of their learning, allowing them to apply what they have learned in their classrooms.

The research emphasizes the importance of data collection in evaluating the effectiveness of blended learning within a new teacher program, focusing on accountability. Data will be gathered from multiple sources. New teachers will document their implementation of learning strategies through video recordings and artifacts. Mentors will review these materials, provide feedback, and conduct in-person classroom observations. Additionally, student achievement data will be collected to assess the program's impact on student learning outcomes. This data can identify areas where students might require additional support. Video recordings of new teachers' lessons will be used for self-reflection and to receive targeted feedback from mentors. Sharing these videos with peers can also promote a collaborative learning environment.

Every implementation of a new strategy or platform comes with both advantages and disadvantages. Blended learning offers a range of benefits, including flexibility, personalized learning, a sense of community, and data-driven insights for tailored support. However, it also has its drawbacks, such as potential technical difficulties, limited access to technology, and the risk of social isolation. The research suggests solutions to mitigate these disadvantages, such as providing technical support, ensuring access to technology, and prioritizing face-to-face interactions.

Conclusion

Implementing blended learning in a new teacher mentoring program will benefit not only the new teachers eager to learn and grow but also the students they will teach throughout the year. This approach will enhance response times for teachers when they need support and address the gaps we observe in our everyday classrooms by establishing a

structured path for professional growth. The goal is more than simply introducing new tools; it aims to create a culture that serves as a safe space for new teachers, which will subsequently enhance their teaching practices.

What better way to facilitate Choice, Ownership, Voice, and Authenticity (COVA) for students than to model it for teachers? Traditional, factory-style teaching methods have evolved, and the needs of learners are changing. Our blended learning plan will provide teachers with the opportunity to experience this shift in classic learning models while embracing exciting engagement opportunities in their classrooms.

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