

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

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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 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.

This literature review will provide an overview of implementing the culture of blended learning, its impact on learners, and the importance of teacher ownership for classroom support and effectiveness.

Beyond the Brick and Mortar: Blended Learning Explained

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 not only enable them to continually acquire new tips, tricks, and techniques in their profession but also 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 our 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.

The Blended Advantage: New Teacher Training That Impacts Student Learning

Our goal is to meet the needs of our new teachers, allow room for feedback, and establish flexible communication methods within our blended learning platform. These are the dreams of a perfect induction program, but what is the big picture that is woven into our purpose? Not only do we want to grow teachers, but we also want to grow classrooms. Using technology in the classroom is a shift that is here to stay. When the teacher implements the technology without rigor or a plan, the authenticity of the teacher fades away in the classroom. For educational change to be effective, educators, the key agents of change, must be at the heart of the planning process (Farah, 2019). By using the blended learning model in our new teacher academy, the teachers will feel comfortable with the platform and be willing to use it successfully in their own teaching. According to Farrah, (2019),

When implemented effectively, our instructional model allows educators to facilitate a classroom that efficiently and effectively focuses on student learning and on personalizing instruction to meet the unique needs of every student while retaining each teacher's pedagogical authenticity (Farrah, 2019, para. 7).

By incorporating blended learning into their coaching of new teachers during induction, instructional coaches can demonstrate firsthand how to integrate online and in-person learning experiences effectively within the classroom. Teachers can see modeled platforms of how their roles in the classroom can change. Blended learning transforms teachers from solely delivering knowledge to acting as coaches and mentors. The way the instructor sets up learning activities has a big impact on what students actually learn. Students learn best by doing, so the tasks and experiences teachers choose will determine what knowledge and skills students gain (Jeffrey et al., 2014).

Conclusion

Implementing blended learning in our new teacher mentoring program will benefit not only the new teachers who are eager to learn and grow but also the students they will see all year. This platform will help increase response time for teachers in their time of need and also build the gaps that we see in our everyday classrooms by creating a new structure of growth. We want more than just to show new tools in the hope

of implantation; we want to foster a culture that is a safe space for new teachers that, in turn, will be useful in teaching practices.

What better way to facilitate COVA for students than to model it for our teachers? The factory-style methods of teaching have been adapted, and the needs of the learners are evolving. Our blended learning plan will give teachers a chance to see the change in the classic learning models by embracing the amazing engagement opportunities in their own classrooms.

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