

The Changing Roles of Educators Series:

The Blended Teacher

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About Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute

In 2012, the Governor and Michigan Legislature passed legislation requiring *Michigan Virtual University*® (MVU®) to establish a center for online learning research and innovation, and through this center, directed MVU to work on a variety of projects. The center, known formally as *Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute*™ (MVLRI™), is a natural extension of the work of MVU. Established in 1998, MVU's mission is to advance K-12 education through digital learning, research, innovation, policy, and partnerships. Toward that end, the core strategies of MVLRI are:

- Research – Expand the K-12 online and blended learning knowledge base through high-quality, high-impact research;
- Policy – Inform local, state, and national public education policy strategies that reinforce and support online and blended learning opportunities for the K-12 community;
- Innovation – Experiment with new technologies and online learning models to foster expanded learning opportunities for K-12 students; and
- Networks – Develop human and web-based applications and infrastructures for sharing information and implementing K-12 online and blended learning best practices.

MVU dedicates a small number of staff members to MVLRI projects as well as augments its capacity through a Fellows program drawing from state and national experts in K-12 online learning from K-12 schooling, higher education, and private industry. These experts work alongside MVU staff to provide research, evaluation, and development expertise and support.

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Executive Summary

This study, the second in a series examining the shifts in the roles and responsibilities of K-12 educators as a result of evolving instructional models, focuses on teachers implementing elements of blended learning in their classrooms. The aim of this study is to understand better the ways in which teachers practicing blended learning think about their work with students and colleagues, the mindsets they adopt when implementing change within their settings, and the benefits they anticipate by applying blended practices in their classrooms. Interviews and focus group responses were characterized by:

- A level of comfort with risk and flexibility with regard to professional growth. Teachers felt that being willing to take risks and learning from mistakes were integral to the development of their practice.
- A focus on personalized instruction and attention for students. Being able to provide more individualized experiences for students as a result of more streamlined classroom practices is very important to this group of teachers.
- An emphasis on leadership that is supportive of change, allowing for the evolution of classroom practices. The teachers voiced the need for trusting leadership, either formal or informal, to help create a positive environment that granted them the ability to do things differently.
- A desire for applicable professional learning helps teachers continue to improve and refine their practice. It is important to ensure that professional learning consists of valuable resources, effective collaboration, and specific objectives.

Introduction

This report is the second in a series of studies focused on the changing role of educators resulting from the shift in instructional models in K-12 learning environments. The series examines various newly emergent positions and roles within the field of education and how the individuals who fill those roles approach their work. The first report in this series ([The Changing Role of Educators Series: The Blended Learning Coach](#)) focused on blended learning coaches, professional learning personnel who provide guidance on the development and implementation of high-quality blended instruction. This report focuses on teachers practicing elements of blended learning in their classrooms. Each teacher participating in this study has also participated in various professional development offerings concerning blended classroom practices, working from the [Clayton Christensen Institute's blended learning definition and framework](#), including training, consultation, and individual coaching. This study was carried out by conducting individual interviews with each teacher, as well as two separate focus group sessions, to gain an understanding of how these teachers conceptualize blended learning in their own context, what sorts of mindsets and approaches are necessary for implementing change in their classrooms and in their school settings, and what perceptions they have about the practice of blended learning and its potential.

Research Methods

This study, along with the others in this series, employs a form of heuristic research (Moustakas, 1990). Heuristic research “is a search for the discovery of meaning and essence in significant human experience...Heuristics is concerned with meanings, not measurements; with essence, not appearance; with quality, not quantity; with experience, not behaviour” (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, pp. 40, 42). For this study, heuristic research is applied to determine how blended teachers understand their roles within their own settings, how they experience their work on a daily basis, and how they interact with others in their field to develop and grow professionally. This study's intent is to more deeply understand the experience of being a blended teacher, focusing specifically on blended teachers' mindsets, thought processes, and philosophies in their approach to instructional practice. Discussion in interviews and focus groups was also centered on intent and goals for teachers as they implement blended learning in their settings. A total of nine Michigan public school teachers participated in this study: eight secondary teachers and one elementary teacher. Grades taught included 3rd and 7th through 12th, and subjects included science, math, social studies, and business. Each teacher participated in a semi-structured individual interview lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. Each teacher also participated in a total of two focus group sessions that included between three and five teacher participants at a time. The protocols for interviews and focus groups can be found in the appendix of this report. Interviews and focus groups were transcribed and coded by the author for the purpose of conducting thematic analysis of the data gathered. Member checks were also conducted with the participants when data analysis was complete (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data analysis revealed four distinct themes that were apparent in the teachers' thought processes and outlook regarding blended learning implementation. The next section delves into those themes and supporting data.

Results

Four themes were identified from analyzing interview and focus group data collected by the researcher. Exploration of these themes provided detailed understanding of how teachers approach their work in implementing change through the practice of blended learning. Each theme is listed below, followed by a description of the theme and supporting data.

- Comfort with risk and flexibility
- Focus on personalized instruction and attention for students
- Emphasis on leadership supportive of change
- Desire for applicable professional learning

Comfort with Risk and Flexibility

The teachers who participated in this study indicated that as they are developing and implementing their blended learning practices, one of the most important attributes to possess is a comfort with risk. The teachers noted that embarking on change will naturally pose a number of risks and challenges; and that by taking those risks, they are able to find effective strategies, techniques, or practices that they may not have found otherwise, helping them to become a better teacher. The teachers relayed that willingness to take a risk during a lesson that incorporates a new technological tool or strategy allows them to discover what that tool or strategy can offer and what its limitations are. One teacher noted, “I kind of look at [the classroom] as a lab. I’m going to see what works and what doesn’t and keep the stuff that works fine and toss out the things that don’t.” Teachers also felt it is important to be flexible when faced with challenges as a result of risk-taking and to model the idea of growth through adversity for their students.

Comfort with risk and even failure was indicated to be just as important as access to appropriate technology for blended learning implementation. While understandably having some regrets about lessons or strategies that did not go as planned, the teachers seemed to relish the opportunities to learn from their mistakes. When asked to reflect on things he’d do differently in his journey in blended learning, one teacher indicated that not only would he not change much, but that he would share more about his struggles along the way, because hearing from other professionals who have struggled has greatly helped him progress in his career. Likewise, when collaborating with colleagues who are working through similar change processes, teachers indicated the importance of hearing from others who have tried and failed at things. This level of openness and vulnerability helps to foster a trusting environment in which continuous improvement is highly valued. To that end, one of the teachers interviewed remarked that “it’s usually the crash and burn stories that you learn the most from.”

Many of the teachers also noted the importance of being adaptable when it comes to the unpredictable nature of technology use in the classroom. Even the “best laid” lesson plans can go awry when technology issue arises, so it’s important not to have every learning outcome of a lesson hinge upon technology that can be fickle. As one teacher remarked, “I mean it’s technology right? There are always going to be challenges. The Internet goes down, the laptop needs to restart and update, another screen goes black. There’s all kinds of things that can go wrong, so it’s just so

essential to be flexible and to not get tied down in the details and to be able to use alternate strategies.” Another teacher noted how important it is to collaborate with others, especially technology staff in the building or district, to ensure smooth use of technology in the classroom. This includes making sure that devices are capable of running certain software programs or that certain websites aren’t blocked by a firewall.

Taking this flexible approach with instruction and being comfortable when things don’t go as planned is an important behavior for the teachers to model for their students. Many of the teachers, especially those who teach in higher grade levels, reported that their students seemed to be accustomed to “doing school” in a particular way: receiving direct instruction, practicing skills, and then being assessed on their learning. The teachers interviewed in this study all incorporate more elements of student autonomy by allowing them to choose certain assignments or ways to be assessed. Additionally, the teachers use more of a mastery-based approach with certain assignments, forcing students to grapple with concepts until they master them before being able to move on. Therefore, modeling behaviors that show comfort with failure and flexibility in learning processes helps their students acclimate to a new way of doing things. Each of the teachers discussed ideas that in some way reflect the concept of a “growth mindset,” the belief that students can develop intelligence over time through effort, strategic thinking, and collaboration (Dweck, 2008). One teacher put it this way:

It’s hard for kids because a lot of my kids are really good at “playing school.” And that’s not a bad thing, they’ve worked well in the system that they’ve grown up in, and now I’m kind of changing the system around on them. But one thing that I have found is that while there’s some initial pushback, while kids kind of struggle at the very beginning, once they kind of get the feel for that autonomy and being able to move at their own pace, they really like it. So once they catch the vision, it goes really well. It’s just a matter of getting them to that point.

Teacher, personal communication, spring 2017

Many of the teachers indicated that they instituted specific support strategies for their students to help them with this shift in thinking. Among these strategies is a “perception survey” that students take to help the teacher gain an understanding of how students perceive their learning progress and their grasp of the material being covered. The survey is an opportunity for students to partake in an earnest reflection, roughly every six weeks, and consider their level of comfort with the systems and processes being used in this particular blended classroom. The teacher can then use the data from these perception surveys to initiate conversations with students to make sure that any uncertainties or areas of discomfort are addressed.

Another teacher noted that he spends a good deal of time at the outset of each semester focusing on non-academic skills and strategies with his students, which is especially helpful for those who have not been in a blended learning setting prior to this class. Areas of focus include time management because, as he put it, “kids are having to learn to take ownership of what they’re doing.” Helping

students understand how to best use class time in a setting where they are free to work at their own pace is crucial, he says.

Focus on Personalized Instruction and Attention for Students

Another often discussed topic by this group of blended teachers was the idea of personalized instruction or attention for students. Each of the teachers relayed that the practice of blended learning has allowed them to, in some degree, personalize the instruction or attention that they can give to each of their students. One teacher even mentioned that prior to implementing blended learning in her classroom, she considered leaving the field of teaching altogether because of the lack of individualized attention she was able to give her students. Blended learning sparked a new passion for her instruction and, in effect, freed some of her time during class to work individually with students to better understand, in more detail, how and why they were struggling with the material.

Many teachers noted that simply through the proliferation of different technological tools and digital content in the past few years, they have been able to more easily give students an individualized experience in practicing skills in the classroom. Online resources allow for varying lesson plans for different students depending on their pace or mastery of material. The chief reason for this is ease of use and time savings. One teacher noted that trying to differentiate for her students in years past felt like “trying to keep [her] head above water” because it was so time-consuming to create individualized lessons.

One teacher mentioned that throughout her career, a goal that she had often set for herself but did not meet was the ability to have “student conferences” with each of her students at regular intervals throughout the school year. Now, in her blended classroom, she can have a one-on-one conversation, every two weeks, with each of her 176 students. These conversations allow her not only to get to know her students on a more personal level but also allow for more detailed conversations about their learning. The opportunity for these student conferences exists because of the additional time this teacher is afforded by not being the sole source of direct instruction at the front of the classroom, attempting to ensure that all students are moving at the same pace.

With the notion of being flexible in mind, some teachers relayed that it’s important not to be too rigid with the use of technological tools when practicing blended learning. While some students may be immediately comfortable learning in new modalities, others may take some easing into the use of technology for completing assignments or participating in assessments. Individualizing instruction for those students with some pen-and-paper assignments may be necessary. One teacher, who considers himself a very tech-savvy person, noted that “just because [technology] would've helped me learn better, maybe, when I was in school, it doesn't necessarily mean my student feels the same way... It's okay sometimes to simplify it or even try a strategy that seems maybe more low-tech that for some reason just clicks with them.”

Emphasis on Leadership Supportive of Change

Every teacher participating in this study mentioned the support that they receive from their building or district administrators. Though the level of administrative involvement in blended

learning efforts differs for each teacher, there is at least a baseline of understanding from every teachers' school and district leaders and trust in the teachers to manage change in the classroom for the sake of student outcomes. Teachers indicated that this trust and freedom given by their administrators helped give them the confidence to continue to experiment and make changes in their classrooms. The level of engagement from leadership in each of their contexts dictates how they decide to grow their practice and push for improvement with regard to blended instruction.

One teacher pointed out that not only is her administration supportive, they even granted her some extra leniency to take additional preparation days to tweak the design of her blended classroom further. By allowing her to have a substitute in her class for those days, this teacher was able to work with blended learning coaches through a professional development initiative and spend time on preparation so that the class would be set up for success throughout the whole school year. This arrangement came about as a result of the teacher expressing interest in blended learning initiatives and the administration acquiescing to that request. Now, this teacher has made it her mission to see that her program succeeds and gets more attention, and she has begun "recruiting" other teachers in her building to start exploring possibilities of blending their own classrooms.

Though the leadership that teacher encountered came in a more passive form, it still created an environment in which this teacher felt comfortable enough to innovate and try new things. Other teachers with a similar administrative standpoint echoed this sentiment. While they were thankful for the freedom and general support that their districts offer, they would like to see more excitement and urging of buy-in to see blended learning gain more widespread traction. One remarked that "it goes beyond just voicing support. It's about walking that walk." Another teacher said, "it's gotta be more than just the bald guy in the science classroom who's saying 'Hey guys, you should try this out!'"

In the cases where district or building leadership is generally supportive but not necessarily hands-on, teachers noted the importance of being "teacher-leaders" in the effort to ensure intentionality in blended learning program implementation and achieve wider buy-in with staff. One teacher's district has instituted a practice of identifying "lighthouse teachers," those who are practicing blended learning in their classrooms and host other teachers to conduct observations, answer questions, and reflect on the practice as they grow in their roles as blended teachers. A teacher in another district commented that a lot of his colleagues "are very nervous about trying something new. If they don't know exactly what's going to happen the entire time, that makes them very nervous and very hesitant to try something different." As a result, being able to answer questions for his colleagues about the practice of blended learning is easy, but helping them think about mindset shifts is a much bigger endeavor that requires more thorough planning as they progress as a district. It can also be difficult, as one teacher mentioned, to approach the idea of change with some colleagues because the messaging may be interpreted as being "pushy." This teacher is wary of how he and his classroom practices are perceived by his colleagues and makes an effort not to appear judgmental of those colleagues who run their classrooms differently. Additionally, many teachers indicated that it can often be difficult to be effective teacher-leaders, as some of their professional development and coaching duties can keep them away from the classroom for

upwards of one or two days per month. Maintaining a healthy balance and not losing focus of the needs of their students is a priority for those teachers who are “spinning multiple plates.”

Some administrative teams have taken a much more hands-on approach, and have arranged for their staff to participate in some in-depth professional development to help guide the implementation of blended learning in their district. The teachers in that district felt that the messaging and emphasis from their superintendent resulted in a much higher level of buy-in from the staff overall. In fact, they relayed that “administrators show up at our [PD] sessions... and have gone through the blended learning [sessions] as students.” One teacher added, “It’s super important to have that administrative presence and support. I think it’s helped a lot in our district particularly because we’ve had that.”

Ultimately, these teachers want administrative leaders who foster the same environment that they want to foster in their classrooms: one supportive of the idea of “failing forward.” One teacher noted that teachers can’t “organically progress without having a leadership team that is open to trying new things and making clear paths” for their staff in that progression. He also went on to add that his own administration fully supports him and does not expect to see polished practice at all times, even in a drop-in classroom observation, because they’d rather see him “trying something that [he] think[s] is going to provide a better experience for [his] students, rather than just sticking with something that [he] know[s] will provide a middle-of-the-road experience.”

Desire for Applicable Professional Learning

The final prevalent theme to arise from conversations with these blended teachers was their recognition of the need for applicable professional learning opportunities to guide them in their practice and help them grow professionally. In discussions around their preferences for professional learning, these teachers indicated that they are able to connect with others and find many valuable resources online through social networks like Twitter, though each of them expressed a strong desire for collaborating with other educators face-to-face to reflect and build their practice. Additionally, these teachers appreciate the opportunity to discuss detailed questions and processes, exploring the mechanics of their blended classrooms and trying to tie outcomes back to specific decisions. Most of all, these teachers want to ensure that the professional learning that they’re engaging in is constructed with clear objectives and goals that can lead to application in their classrooms. Given the time constraints that teachers face today, they want to be sure, to the greatest extent possible, that their time will be well spent in professional learning opportunities.

Many of the teachers expressed that they can find excellent resources or ideas for their blended learning practices through online avenues. These include, as mentioned above, social media sites like Twitter and Pinterest, as well as teachers’ blogs documenting their work in blended learning. One teacher noted that if he has a question about a particular problem he is facing, he can pose that question on Twitter during specific community chats or with specific hashtags so that other educators can offer suggestions for him moving forward. While the teachers agreed that finding resources or ideas online is very valuable to them, they did have some concerns about the fact that online presences can sometimes be too polished or too surface-level to address some of the real struggles or intricate details that occur in blended learning practice. One teacher also noted the

potential for operating “within a bubble” by communicating with others who generally agree philosophically about their teaching practice. He remarked that it’s important to continually encounter different ways of thinking and be challenged to grow professionally. Another teacher, noting the personal connections that face-to-face learning facilitates, thought that the combative nature of online spaces makes it hard to challenge people in a sincere way and with good intentions, which leads to a lot of grouping of people who think similarly. He elaborated:

Twitter's great to connect, great for resources, but it's an echo chamber. Creative tension – the rubber band being pulled – you have to have that in order to move forward. That's really hard to do in an echo chamber...It's great to find somebody online that thinks similarly, has similar interests, and find resources and make connections; but as far as the depth, I don't think that really happens until you meet face-to-face and have your beliefs challenged.

Teacher, personal communication, spring 2017

There seemed to be general agreement among these teachers that while online spaces are valuable for finding and sharing professional resources or making surface-level connections, those practices effectively serve as a supplement to worthwhile face-to-face professional development.

The professional learning that these teachers find to be most valuable includes specific objectives that center on particular topics or questions related to blended learning. One teacher said that when talking to colleagues in his building about blended learning, he spends a lot of time discussing the “why”; when he gets the opportunity to connect with others at conferences, workshops, or online, he spends much more time discussing the “how,” helping him think more deeply about classroom strategies that keep students accountable and engaged. Conversations also typically involve a lot of discussion around context, as teachers think about what variables might be at play, including student populations and technology capabilities when developing strategies collaboratively. Within those face-to-face interactions, these teachers cited the need for openness, willingness to share and question, and pressing for application. One teacher summed it up thusly: “I think you've gotta find your people. Sometimes you're lucky and you find them in your building, or in your grade level, or on your team, and other times you run across them elsewhere.”

Summary, Implications & Future Research

This research project is designed to understand the experiences of blended learning teachers better as they go through the process of implementing change within their own settings, examining the mindsets and approaches that they employ in their work. The study revealed four distinct themes that represent the thinking and work of teachers implementing blended learning in their classrooms:

- Comfort with risk and flexibility
- Focus on personalized instruction and attention for students
- Emphasis on leadership supportive of change
- Desire for applicable professional learning

The observations and insights offered by these teachers can be helpful in thinking about creating environments that are conducive to change and innovation in the K-12 education setting. The ways that these teachers conceptualize their practice and consider what has been advantageous for their growth as blended teachers can be useful for others endeavoring in similar pursuits. Furthermore, those interested in how teaching as a profession is evolving, specifically as a result of instructional shifts thanks to the continued integration of technology, can learn from their experiences.

Opportunities for additional research on this topic might include more specific examination of the factors that lead to greater acceptance of risk, flexibility, and failure among teaching professionals. Also of potential interest may be further study of leadership traits in blended learning professionals, including teachers and administrators, to determine what attributes in leaders lead to effective staff development and positive outcomes for students. Future installments in this series will examine other roles that have been newly created or have shifted to reflect the changing K-12 instructional landscape.

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