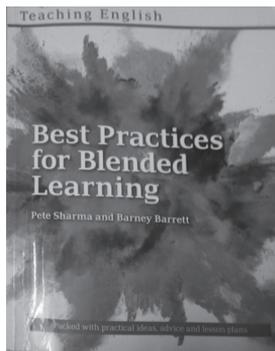


Best Practices for Blended Learning



Reviewed by Tasneem Shahnaaz

Sharma, Pete & Barrett, Barney. (2018). *Best practices for blended learning*. East Sussex, UK: Pavilion Publishing and Media Limited. (254 pages)

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You may have often heard this instruction in the classroom “open your book and begin reading the first chapter.” With advances in technology, this sentence could very well be replaced by “Open your laptop, click on the link provided and follow the instructions.” Welcome to the world of ‘Blended Learning’ (BL), which is now a familiar term for most of us. However, it can have different meanings for different people. The common meaning is that blended learning combines face to face (F2F) classroom teaching with an online content. With this definition in mind, Pete Sharma and Barney Barrett approach the topic of BL from different aspects. Their book, *Best Practices for Blended Learning*, provides a comprehensive and insightful overview of the topic at hand. Not only does this book give a brief history of BL, the research conducted on the subject, the different models that schools/colleges/corporations have adopted, the challenges and the success factors, it also provides a framework for creating a BL course supported by various platform options.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section provides a brief overview of the history of BL, its theoretical underpinnings and its pedagogy in language teaching. The second section deals with practical ideas for BL in the English language classroom to teach grammar, vocabulary, listening, speaking, reading and writing. Of course, if skills are taught, can testing/assessment be far behind? There is a sub section which informs readers about how to use technology for formative assessment and e-portfolio for summative assessment. In the index of Practical ideas, there is practical idea no. 18 (p.147), which speaks of self-assessment surveys that enable students to track their progress as language learners.

Section 3 contains valuable resources for evaluating technology, and offers practical advice for training teachers in the use of BL. It describes the developments in the area of BL such as mobile learning, adaptive learning (the aim being “to provide the best possible learning content and resources for students’ needs at a particular time,” p. 214), augmented reality (AR) apps, virtual reality (VR), etc. The moot question though—whether AR or VR can help in language teaching and learning—is yet to be answered. Other developments such as Learning Management Systems, Robot-assisted language learning (RALL), intelligent speech recognition software, Artificial Intelligence (AI), are mentioned as current “trends to keep an eye out for.” (p. 216) But wait, this is not all. The concluding pages of the book contain extremely useful photocopyables, which include a BL planning sheet, a flipped classroom planning sheet, a framework for creating a BL course, evaluation sheets for a checklist of multimedia software, and similar helpful sheets.

The book describes different kinds of BL courses depending on how much time and space is allowed to each component of the course. For instance, a “hybrid” model will have equal time and space for face to face teaching and online work. Another interesting model is the “flipped classroom” approach, in which online input on the lesson is provided to the students before they come for the class. In class, the teacher follows up on the input through discussion and questions. This means that online input forms an integral part of the learning process. It is no longer seen as a supplementary exercise. The flexibility inherent in this form of delivery enables the teacher to re-think where and how to focus the learning activities. It also helps the student to take charge of her/his own learning and develop learning skills and digital literacies on their own.

This book would be ideal for any teacher who is interested in using innovative teaching methods through the use of technology in the language classroom. It also gives information about the prevalent technologies in running a BL course. Furthermore, it offers ideas and activities on how learning can be made more effective by using technology. Lastly, it reviews the impact of technology on language teaching methodology, in general.

The pre-reading tasks and activities in each chapter make the text interesting and readable. They help to reflect on one’s own teaching practices and systems, and the way forward. At times, a lay reader (like me) might not fully comprehend the technical details of software and hardware. Having said that, the book achieves what it claims to do, “to systematically explore this very rich area [of BL]

and provide a comprehensive practical handbook of use to language teachers, academic managers, teacher trainers and institution heads around the world.” (p. 8) True, 254 pages is a lot of reading, but it is valuable and useful, and the suggestions doable. I would go so far as to say that this book is a must-have for any serious teacher, institution and library.

‘Tasneem Shahnaaz is Associate Professor of English, Sri Aurobindo College, University of Delhi. She is interested in English language teaching, South Asian studies, translation studies, and feminist and cultural studies. She has published four books, many reviews and literary articles in several scholarly journals and critical anthologies.

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