



# **UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING Blended Learning Teaching Practices**





**Unlock the potential to  
PERSONALIZE LEARNING**



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This paper from Education Elements is the first in a series on innovative education practice and leadership organized by iNACOL.

# introduction

Education Elements has been privileged to work with schools from coast to coast that have fundamentally changed the student experience by shifting to a model that enables personalized learning. These schools have transformed learning by leveraging technology and blending learning to better meet students needs. Blended school models couple adaptive digital curriculum with powerful data-driven teaching to better address the varied needs of learners in schools today. Blended learning too frequently has been seen as simply adding computers to learning. Through our work with hundreds of schools, we've seen time and time again that skillfully employing blended learning models to begin to personalize learning requires thoughtful shifts in pedagogy.

In this paper we will discuss the pedagogical shifts and skills that blended learning requires, as well as the ways in which school and district leaders can support teachers in making these shifts. We will provide an introduction to our blended learning teaching rubric and explain the benefits of aligning professional development to this framework. Over the next few months we will publish additional tools to support your use of this framework.

With increasingly larger class sizes due to budget pressures, the ability of a teacher to reach every student and meet their individual needs is becoming more challenging. Before the emergence of blended learning, teachers had to “teach to the middle” because, with limited time and resources, it is nearly impossible to do otherwise. Blended learning changes that. Given the time, the tools, the training, and the support, teachers can now enable personalized learning for every student by allowing students to move at their own path and pace. They can focus on small group differentiation based on easily accessible data, and they can push students to take ownership of their learning in ways previously possible only in limited settings.

As former educators, what's most inspiring to us about blended learning is that it empowers teachers to maximize quality instructional time, differentiate learning, meet the needs of individual students, and generally feel (and be) more effective. Far from the misconception that technology replaces the need for quality teachers, blended learning instead allows great teachers to have an even bigger impact.



*Blended Learning leverages technology to enable personalized learning environments for students and allows teachers to have the opportunities, resources and time to **differentiate small group instruction** supported by **data-rich feedback loops** and **sustainable school models**.*

Students in blended learning classrooms outperformed students in non-blended classrooms by 57% in reading and 26% in math.



## The Promise of Blended Learning

Four years after the term “blended learning”<sup>1</sup> was coined, it has become part of many educators’ lexicons. It is the subject of articles, webinars, and countless conferences. The question whether to “go blended” is debated in the teacher’s lounge and the district board room alike. In such a short time frame, there is still too little data to convince its biggest skeptics. But while we may need more time to gather more data, the early results are promising. In our clients’ schools - kindergarten through high school, rural, suburban and urban - we are seeing positive results in statistically significant samples that merit attention. For example, in a Race to the Top district serving 7,200 students and planning to personalize learning in all schools over four years, students in blended learning classrooms outperformed students in non-blended classrooms by 57% in reading and 26% in math.<sup>2</sup> A 40,000 student school district in South Carolina saw 6th grade students jump two Lexile Levels in just one year. In a survey of teachers across districts working with Education Elements,

over three-quarters of teachers reported they felt blended learning made them more effective and better able to meet their students’ needs. Other results we’ve seen include:

- **Improved student academic outcomes**<sup>3</sup>
- **Increased student ownership of learning**
- **Increased student engagement**
- **Improved teacher satisfaction**<sup>4</sup>
- **Increased teacher retention**

The last two outcomes above are most often overlooked, but also among the most important. Teacher satisfaction and retention are on the rise in blended learning classrooms, because teachers have more capacity to impact students’ learning. They are getting to focus on what they love most – helping students learn and succeed, and the result is higher job satisfaction and retention. The impact of blended learning, when well supported, is both significant and positive.

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<sup>1</sup>While blended learning is only one way to enable personalized learning, we believe that personalization cannot be done at scale without integrating technology into curriculum. We also find that blended learning as a way to personalize is the most common starting place for schools and districts and has garnered traction quickly. We have therefore focused specifically on blended instructional practices rather than a more general personalized teaching practice.

<sup>2</sup>Jenkins, A. (2014, August 19). *U.S. Department of Education Race to the Top District (RTTT-D) Winner Enlarged City School District of Middletown Shows That Personalized Learning Works*. Retrieved from <http://www.prweb.com/releases/2014/08/prweb12095059.htm>

<sup>3</sup>Several examples exist:

- Gingrich, N. (2014, August 1). Get Schools Out of the 1980s. *CNN Opinion*. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2014/08/01/opinion/gingrich-schools-blended-teaching-technology/>
- Du, L. (2014, May 21). The Scorecard on Blended Learning. *EdSurge*. Retrieved from <https://www.edsurge.com/n/2014-05-21-the-scorecard-on-blended-learning>
- Jenkins, A. (2014, August 4). *Seton BL Schools Outpace National Average for Student Growth in Math and Reading*. Retrieved from <http://www.prweb.com/releases/2014/08/prweb12059211.htm>
- Jenkins, A. (2014, May 27). *Ed Elements and Landmark Announce Significant Increase in Student Achievement*. Retrieved from <http://www.prweb.com/releases/2014/05/prweb11875998.htm>

<sup>4</sup>Quillen, I. (2012, October 23). L.A. School First in KIPP Network to Embrace Blended Learning. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/10/24/09el-kipp.h32.html>

# 87% of teachers agree they are able to differentiate more

## Data-Driven Instruction: Before and After

A typical teacher in a traditional classroom already relies on data to guide his or her instructional decisions, but today this data takes far too much time to generate and interpret. For example, scores from homework assignments, quizzes, and tests can help a teacher assess student progress, but creating the assignment or exam, grading it for dozens of students, and making sense of the results can take precious hours. The important work of developing lesson plans to focus on the right set of concepts to re-teach the following day, week, or unit is often shortchanged by the workload of grading assignment and tests.

Blended learning enables teachers to make a fundamental shift towards higher-value responsibilities. When adaptive digital content is integrated into the classroom, teachers achieve both operational efficiencies and increased opportunities for differentiation. Many digital content providers have quality basic skills and fluency assignments that are automatically graded. Further, tools exist to put teachers' existing assessments online, so that teachers can automatically receive information about completion and mastery and then streamline the process for giving feedback on written work. Opportunities for advanced differentiation in a blended classroom exist through digital tools. For example, a teacher can distribute a reading assignment at every student's individual Lexile Level, an activity that even if teachers stayed up all night would be nearly impossible to accomplish.

Now, more than ever before, technology tools facilitate teachers' ability to analyze and interpret data, so they can spend the bulk of their non-classroom time on feedback, lesson planning, communicating with parents, and relationship-building with students. In addition to enabling teachers to spend time more effectively outside of the classroom, blended learning lets teachers use classroom time more productively too. Instead of delivering direct instruction to a whole class of 30 students at once, teachers in the blended model can spend class time with small groups of students on a specific learning challenge while other students engage with digital content. Instruction time is maximized, teaching is differentiated, and learning is personalized.

“My students are excited to be able to have a choice about what they work on each day.” - *High school teacher*

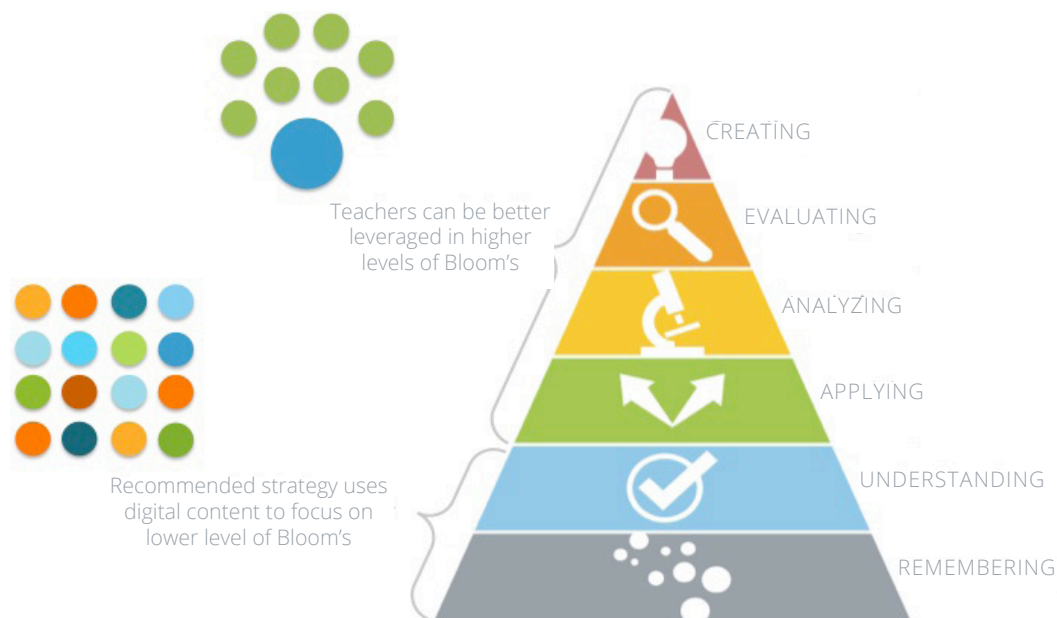
## Understanding Mindset & Pedagogical Shifts

For technology tools to have this positive impact, school leaders need to understand the implications for mindset and pedagogy to ensure that they adequately prepare teachers and schools for the transition. In many cases, the skillset for good blended learning teaching resembles what it takes to be a great traditional classroom teacher, but requires a shift in mindset, focus and a set of incremental skills.

First and foremost, successful blended teachers are entrepreneurial, constantly iterating on their practice. They adapt easily and use data to understand if what they are doing is working. They believe that students can own their learning and they value student voice and choice. They are determined to create a classroom in which stu-

dents understand easily how they are performing and understand how they can independently learn. (These beliefs are essential to creating a classroom culture which values blended learning. We speak to this more below in the rubric.)

Secondarily, because digital content can be effective at foundational levels of Bloom’s taxonomy such as practicing math facts or developing reading fluency, teachers in a blended environment can now focus more of their attention on their ability to push critical thinking and application of knowledge. This is one of the most rewarding parts of teaching and blended learning teachers are typically enthusiastic about deepening this part of their practice.

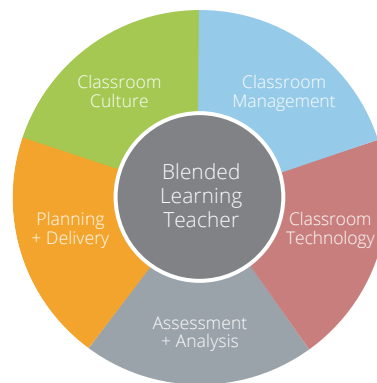


## Blended Learning Rubric

During our last four years helping teachers and schools implement blended learning successfully, Education Elements has identified the five domains of blended learning teaching practice and has used these domains to create a rubric for our schools, which compliments a traditional teaching rubric. As mentioned previously, teaching in a blended environment is about constantly iterating and improving. Identifying the key skill areas to emphasize is essential for a teacher new to blended learning. We use this five-domain rubric to help teachers create goals and self-assess their progress, and to help school leaders focus on key areas for coaching and supporting teachers. Our schools do not use the rubric for teacher evaluations, but instead use it as a tool for all stakeholders to better understand the set of skills that need to be developed and supported.

## Five Blended Learning Domains

- I. Classroom Culture
- II. Classroom Management
- III. Planning and Delivery
- IV. Assessment and Analysis
- V. Classroom Technology



# Domain I.

**Blended Learning Classroom Culture: Develop a culture that values students opportunity to learn and problem-solve independently**

- **Strand A.** Invest stakeholders (students, parents, fellow staff) in the value of using a blended learning environment to achieve personalized goals
- **Strand B.** Develop students' digital ethics and respect of digital property
- **Strand C.** Provide students opportunities to develop and master their personalized academic goals

## Blended Learning Culture

Successful blended learning teachers create a classroom culture that respects and values both online and offline learning, and fosters student-centered independent learning. Creating a blended classroom culture begins with teachers being transparent to all stakeholders about the purpose of the new model of teaching and taking steps to educate and gain buy-in from stakeholders. We often see teachers inviting parents to their classrooms to model the new style of teaching and giving families regular updates from online learning programs. Students in blended classrooms can clearly artic-

ulate why they are using technology and how. Teachers start with the basics of how to use hardware appropriately and stay safe online, however, the bulk of the work that requires perhaps the biggest pedagogical shift for most teachers is how we leverage technology to create more independent learners in the classroom. We ask teachers to think hard about how students know if they are off-track and how to empower students, through goal setting, to get back on track. This work is often a multi-year shift in pedagogy, in which over time, students come to own their learning process.



## Domain II.

**Blended Learning Management: Create systems and routines that maintain an effective blended learning environment**

- **Strand A.** Develop routines for efficiently guiding students through digital and non-digital work time
- **Strand B.** Empower students to efficiently address technology related challenges
- **Strand C.** Train students to effectively navigate digital tools and use digital tools purposefully

### **Blended Learning Management**

In many blended learning environments students are moving at different paces and paths through online and offline curriculum. Classroom management can become more challenging if students don't have clear guidelines and expectations in place for each activity, station, or for what the learning environment should look like and sound like. Developing routines for movement from digital to non-digital work, navigating digital content and tools, and solving technology issues become imperative to success. Many of our classrooms have adopted visual

signals to keep class procedures organized, such as posters describing tech troubleshooting routines. Additionally, progress charts to ensure students know how they're doing each class period in relation to their personal goals or other students in the class help students focus on outcomes of digital work and therefore work more purposefully. These simple techniques for classroom management enable teachers to create a learning environment where students can focus on learning rather than logistics.

## Domain III.

**Blended Instructional Planning + Delivery: Integrate digital curricula and flexible grouping environments to support student-centered instruction independently**

- **Strand A.** Use digital content to support the delivery of differentiated learning paths (grade level, remediation, or enrichment)
- **Strand B.** Incorporate all learning modalities and opportunities for higher order thinking across digital and non-digital content
- **Strand C.** Implement targeted and flexible learning environments based on individual or small group needs

### **Blended Learning Instructional Planning + Delivery**

Planning and delivery is the category where we ask the question, "How are you using digital content in conjunction with offline content to accommodate different modalities, support all levels of Bloom's taxonomy, and allow for personalized instruction?" Most of our schools will start to chip away at this complex question by first becoming familiar with the best uses of various digital curricula in order to be more targeted and thoughtful about which programs meet specific students learning

needs. Once familiar with the digital content, teachers can plan for multi-modal lessons that span various cognitive levels through flexible learning environments and the blending of online and offline resources. Eventually we start to see the control of the teacher transition to the students as they begin to understand their learning goals and value the discrete information they get around their strengths and weaknesses, thereby developing their ownership over learning.

## Domain IV.

**Blended Assessment + Analysis: Measure and analyze students' academic performance using multiple offline and online data sources**

- **Strand A.** Administer teacher-created and third-party assessments to accurately measure student proficiency
- **Strand B.** Utilize digital tools as an integral part of student assessment to streamline data collection and deepen analysis
- **Strand C.** Analyze data from multiple sources, both online and offline to identify students' individual learning needs

### **Blended Learning Assessment & Analysis**

Successful blended teachers thoughtfully incorporate both offline and online data to gauge student learning. Because of small group instruction, offline data in blended classrooms is incredibly rich; advanced teachers will take advantage of more intimate experiences with students to gauge overall understanding, observe metacognitive strategies, and catalogue interests in order to refine instructional planning. Online data is typically sourced from content providers weekly or pulled from formative or summative assessments quarterly. Of course, data is only valuable if it is used to take action. We encourage the teachers we

work with to adapt and differentiate their small group lessons based on formative data - to that end, Education Elements' Highlight platform helps teachers quickly gain insights across multiple online data sources. Beginning blended teachers may struggle to make sense of all the data available to them, so transparency is critical: grading and assessment policies should be outlined for students, parents, teachers, and administrators so that all parties are clear about the intention and importance of each learning experience in a blended classroom.

## Domain V.

**Blended Technology: Adopt technology solutions that improve the effectiveness of a blended learning environment**

- **Strand A.** Acquire the technical knowledge and skills required to successfully adopt and implement education technology solutions
- **Strand B.** Continuously learn about, reflect on, and evaluate the effectiveness of current education technology solutions

### **Blended Learning Technology**

Successful blended learning teachers adopt technology solutions that improve the effectiveness of their classroom; take the time and energy to learn how to master the technology solutions; and reflect on and adjust their use of these solutions. More technology does not necessarily lead to better academic outcomes. Education Elements often reminds clients that engaging online content and tech tools are important, but equally important is the data that the provider delivers to truly enable a differentiated

and personalized classroom. While teachers will start at different comfort levels with technology, blended teachers should continuously progress in their ability to choose solutions that enable greater personalization; their technical acumen to troubleshoot technology problems and maximize the benefits of their solutions; and their desire to continuously learn about the technology marketplace and choose appropriate solutions for their classroom.

## Blended Rubric Overview

**DOMAIN I. Blended Learning Culture: Develop a culture that values students opportunity to learn and problem-solve independently**

**Strand A.** Invest stakeholders (students, parents, fellow staff) in the value of using a blended learning environment to achieve personalized goals

**Strand B.** Develop students' digital ethics and respect of digital property

**Strand C.** Provide students opportunities to develop and master their personalized academic goals

**DOMAIN II. Blended Learning Management: Create systems and routines that maintain an effective blended learning environment**

**Strand A.** Develop routines for efficiently guiding students through digital and non-digital work time

**Strand B.** Empower students to efficiently address technology related challenges

**Strand C.** Train students to effectively navigate digital tools and use digital tools purposefully

**DOMAIN III. Blended Instructional Planning + Delivery: Integrate digital curricula and flexible grouping environments to support student-centered instruction independently**

**Strand A.** Use digital content to support the delivery of differentiated learning paths (grade level, remediation, or enrichment)

**Strand B.** Incorporate all learning modalities and opportunities for higher order thinking across digital and non-digital content

**Strand C.** Implement targeted and flexible learning environments based on individual or small group

**DOMAIN IV. Blended Assessment + Analysis: Measure and analyze students' academic performance using multiple offline and online data sources**

**Strand A.** Administer teacher-created and third-party assessments to accurately measure student proficiency


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**DOMAIN V. Blended Technology: Adopt technology solutions that improve the effectiveness of a blended learning environment**

**Strand A.** Acquire the technical knowledge and skills required to successfully adopt and implement education technology solutions

**Strand B.** Continuously learn about, reflect on, and evaluate the effectiveness of current education technology solutions



As an organization comprised mostly of former educators, we know that teachers are key to successful blended learning implementations.

## Supporting Blended Learning Teachers

Teachers cannot make such a significant pedagogical shift alone. Assessing how far each of your teachers needs to shift their practice at your school site is essential, and the more change that's required of each teacher during the transition, the more support they will need. Using this rubric from the beginning, as a way to define expectations, self assess and set goals, will help give leaders a baseline understanding of where each teacher is and where each teacher wants to go. This will help leaders map out the types of support needed. For example, teachers in an early elementary classroom implementing a rotation model may already be comfortable with station-style teaching. However, these teachers will likely need support introducing the concept and importance of computers to their students, honing classroom management around computer use, understanding the digital content, and using new data sources effectively. In contrast, a high school teacher accustomed to lecture-style instruction with more than 100 students each day may need more assistance shifting to small group instruction. The high school teacher may need additional support creating classroom routines and norms around group and independent work and need support developing lesson plans that emphasize student

engagement and daily checks for understanding. Offering opportunities for new blended learning teachers to observe master blended teachers, to participate in professional learning communities, and to access ongoing coaching are just a few of the ways that schools can provide support.

For teachers to develop in the five core areas of blended learning articulated in the rubric, coaches and administrators must, first and foremost, completely understand these practices and why they are important to a successful blended learning implementation. Coaches and administrators must also be able to understand how and why digital content is being used and appropriately give classroom feedback. Education Elements often helps school leaders and districts rethink walk-through tools and look-fors in blended classrooms. We've found that these tools are essential to align teachers and coaches on key skills and enables innovation, iteration and continuous improvement throughout the year as teaching practice evolves. Adequately supporting teachers gives them the confidence to take risks and to push themselves and their students to succeed in personalized learning environments.

## conclusion

Through our work with hundreds of schools around the country, we know technology can enable blended and personalized learning. However, as an organization composed mostly of former educators, we also know that teachers are key to successful blended learning implementations. While technology facilitates students moving at their own pace, provides rich data, and enables differentiated instruction, it remains the teacher's role to ensure that students are engaged, learn, and grow. It is the teacher that moves students from understanding and remembering to applying, analyzing, creating, and evaluating. As we shift to more personalized learning for students, it is essential we continue to not only recognize the importance of teachers, but also to support them as they transition to these new teaching and learning environments. It is imperative that all stakeholders work together to ensure that blended learning is not a technology fad, but instead a fundamental shift of instructional practice that improves student outcomes for future generations. We encourage you to join the conversation and share your takeaways and best practices by following [@edelements](#) [#BLTeacherRubric](#).

## About Education Elements

Education Elements partners with school districts to design and implement personalized learning. We provide professional services that include design consulting, digital content selection, and professional development. In addition, we provide software solutions to enable teachers, administrators, districts, and school networks to use data to facilitate effective decision-making.

## About the Authors

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Jane Bryson is the Director of Strategy and Learning at Education Elements, where she oversees the consulting work with districts and schools to personalize education. Prior to

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of any teacher to  
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