

A close-up photograph of a person wearing a beige and blue striped knit hat and white headphones. They are looking down at an open book on a wooden table. The background is blurred, showing warm indoor lighting and what appears to be a library or study area with bookshelves.

Can you work with
Blended
learning?

Two schools Two approaches Two continents

Many educationalists – especially in the US – see blended learning as the best solution to today’s teaching needs. But the term is still largely undefined and many schools haven’t even heard of it. Despite this confusion, many schools are already putting blended learning into practice. We look at two very different schools to see how they are making blended learning work for their students

BLENDED LEARNING DEFINED?

“Any time a student learns in part in a supervised brick-and-mortar place away from home, and at least in part through online delivery, with some element of student control over time, place, path and/or pace.”

Michael B. Horn of Innosight Institute

Where students have the power to choose

For Wayland Public Schools, blended learning is all about two things: giving students the power to choose; and giving teachers the time to deliver individual teaching for students

As yet, the full vision of a blended learning approach is still some way in the future, but Wayland has taken clear steps along the path to a fully blended approach.

“Our vision is to have a fully integrated blended approach,” says Leisha Simon, Technology Director for Wayland Public Schools. “For us, this means a hybrid model of online content and resources that students can study at home or anywhere on our open campuses and classroom teaching.”

According to Leisha, the students would be the main beneficiaries of this kind of approach. Teachers would use the school’s new online learning platform, itslearning, to share learning texts, videos and podcasts, as well as details of assignments and projects – and students could study in their own time and at their own pace. This would then allow students to focus on the areas that they find most interesting, and it would give teachers more time to work with students who are struggling.

Does this mean teachers would take a back seat in education? “Certainly not,” says Leisha. “The teacher will always remain the heart and soul of education – but they would be able to offer students better help and more individualised teaching.”

A steady adjustment to technology

As yet, this vision is still in the future, but Wayland Public Schools has already taken the first important steps on the road to blended learning. A school district in a picturesque area of Massachusetts, Wayland runs three grade schools, one middle school and one high school with a total of around 2,600 students. Over the past year, the district has concentrated on allowing teachers and students to get up to speed with the technology needed for blended learning.

The school began by giving each teacher a laptop. In November 2010, the school invested

“The teacher will always remain the heart and soul of education”

in a new learning platform and has begun a year-long professional training course for teachers called Wayland RISES designed to help teachers make better use of the technology. “The biggest challenge is getting teachers to accept the change and adapt to the technology,” Leisha explains.

Learning through the eyes of the student

The district decided to introduce teachers to the concept through the eyes of students by running an interactive Web 2.0 training course with a blended approach. The course materials were placed on itslearning and the teachers were then asked to study under their own steam,



Leisha Simon, Technology Director for Wayland Public Schools, worked in the high tech industry before moving into education 14 years ago



Kevin Delaney is a history teacher at Wayland High School with 25 years' teaching experience

before going to the instructors for further help. “This was a huge success,” says Leisha. “It inspired a number of teachers to start running elements of their courses in similar ways.”

One such teacher is Kevin Delaney. A history teacher at Wayland High School with 25 years' experience, Kevin says itslearning and the possibilities it offers has “profoundly changed the way I interact with students.”

All Kevin's course materials are now available on the learning platform and students can go into the online site to find study materials, upcoming assignments and read other students' blogs. This has changed the way Kevin runs some elements of his course, including a mock trial he runs every year.

Taking John Brown to court

“The John Brown trial is a big part of my American History course's first quarter,” he says. “John Brown was a radical abolitionist in the 1850s who wanted to start a revolution to end slavery. But it didn't work, and he was captured and executed. Each year we run a mock trial with half the class working on the defence team and half on the prosecution. This year, I asked the team captains to create a project page on the learning platform where team members could share materials and team members created Google docs that they could work on together. The result was great. At the trial, you could see that each team had a unified theory and argument because they'd all seen and commented on each other's preparatory work.”

But Kevin admits that he still has a way to go before he fully embraces a blended approach.

“Right now, half the assignments I set are still on paper, but I'm asking students to work electronically and submit assignments online more and more,” he says. “The students really like the new style of learning, but it has taken a little bit of adjustment. They're used to having everything handed to them in the classroom – now the onus is on them to visit the learning platform to find their next assignment.”

“The students really like the new style of learning”

According to Leisha, the students at Wayland find the internet-based learning platform a very easy way to organise their work. They are enjoying working online, and the introduction of blended learning techniques is giving them an increased sense of entitlement and ownership in their work. This, she believes, will lead to greater motivation – and hopefully the acquisition of 21st century skills – in the future. →

Turning everyday people into health experts

With two main locations, one in Berlin and one in Dusseldorf, the AHAB-Akademie Certified Training Institute uses a mix of online and classroom-based learning to educate more than 2,400 people each year

The students have a wide range of backgrounds and ages – and a blended approach means they can work at their own pace and in their own style.

“Our students come from all walks of life, from young mothers who are looking to qualify as nutritionists to retirees who want to coach Nordic walking or former athletes who want to qualify as personal trainers,” explains Nicola Goltz, a fitness and physical education instructor at AHAB. “Our distance learning courses are split between online learning, which students do at home in their own time, and classes at our institutions. This means we need to make sure it’s simple for our students to get the learning materials they need.”

A four-step approach to learning

The Institute offers vocational training and certification to individuals, from personal fitness training certification to courses in occupational health. The longest distance learning course takes about one year to complete, while the shortest can be finished in around four months, but they all follow the same blended pattern. So how does it work?

Students begin by studying materials online in their own time. These can include online lectures, articles on the web, podcasts and instructive videos – and all the materials are made available through an online learning platform, itslearning. According Nicola, this approach is preferred by many students as it allows them to choose when and how quickly they study – an essential flexibility for people who are often working full-time jobs as well as studying.

When the teacher deems that the students are ready, they undertake assignments designed to test and stretch their new knowledge. These can be theoretical or practical (a Nordic walking assignment, for example, may include videoing yourself walking and uploading the video for the instructor to give feedback on), but the students can always contact the instructors or other students from the course to ask questions.

“Apart from older students who struggle with the online technology, our biggest challenge is ensuring that our students don’t feel isolated when working alone,” says Nicola. “At the start of each course, the teachers and students write a short introduction of themselves, and there’s always a teacher ready to respond to questions by email or phone or on one of the online chatrooms. We’ve also found that creating a weekly discussion forum helps. Each week the instructor posts a new question for the group to discuss together.”

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All students attend at least two weeks of face-to-face classes during a course



Nicola Goltz is a sports scientist who works as a fitness and physical education instructor and scientific assistant at the AHAB Institute. Together with chief scientific advisor Lars Deutschmann and scientific assistant Josephine Wartenberg, Nicola is working to continually improve the Institute's blended learning system

Moving from the internet to the classroom

After completing the online section of the course, every student has to attend classes in one of the school's two main locations, working directly with instructors and other students for two weeks. "These sessions can be very intensive," says Nicola. "If they're going to be productive, the student must have reached a good level before they come to the classes." On longer courses, the pattern is repeated, with more online learning followed by more face-to-face teaching.

The final stage in the course is a two-part certification. At the end of the face-to-face classes, the students sit an oral and written exam. But they are still not qualified until they complete a written assignment, covering a particular issue in-depth. According to Nicola, this part of the course can prove most challenging to some students, especially those who have been outside of education for a long time.

"Some students find the final assignment fairly straightforward – especially those who have only recently come out of formal education," Nicola explains. "But for other students it can be extremely hard to research and write an assignment and it's important that the instructors are always available. The students can contact us by phone or email, and we have a guarantee that we'll respond to them within 24 hours."

When asked if this approach works, Nicola is certain. "Definitely. Very often, by the time it comes to coming to Berlin for classes the students have already formed strong friendships and they often arrange to travel together. Many of the students also stay in touch long after the course is done."

Extending learning opportunities online

The Institute's next goal is to increase the variety of materials available for online study – specifically more podcasts, videos and webinars. Why? "The beauty of our blended learning approach is that students have the flexibility to choose when they study. But we also want them to have the flexibility to choose how they study," says Nicola.

ABOUT AHAB-AKADEMIE

Started in 2004 by three people, AHAB-Akademie is a simple idea that has grown into a thriving business. AHAB stands for applied human working and education sciences. Today, the AHAB-Akademie is the only institution in Germany outside universities that can offer such a wide range of training for individuals and companies.

THE AHAB-AKADEMIE HAS FOUR UNITS:

- AHAB Institute: running vocational training courses and certification
- Business: training for leaders and employees, and health promotion in companies
- Science: a research unit that works with universities in Germany
- Vital: in-house health courses, for example in yoga, tai chi and aqua-fitness