

# Flexible and Blended Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic: New Norm in Teaching and Learning

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## Abstract

The emergent of COVID-19 prompted profound thinking into the design and approaches of teaching appropriate to all levels of education. This came into focus when the pandemic COVID-19 forced educational institutions to shift rapidly to distance and online learning to bring in flexibility and hybrid or blended learning. The pandemic forced the closure of learning institutions and teachers and students had to apply flexible and blended learning approaches when none of them had been sufficiently trained or even set psychologically to shift to this online mode of teaching and learning contexts. This phenomenon further propagated insightful thinking and debate on effectiveness of flexibility and blending in learning for institutions in Kenya. Flexible and blended learning is an inventive concept that embraces both traditional teaching in the classroom and Information Communication Technology supported learning including both offline learning and online learning. It also encompasses collaborative learning; constructive learning and computer assisted learning (CAI). Flexible and blended learning requires laborious efforts, right attitude, handsome budget and highly motivated teachers and students for its successful implementation. It incorporates diverse modes and therefore making it a complex project and difficult task to organize. The current paper explored flexible and blended learning approaches, design and implementation of flexible and blended learning approaches, relevance of flexible and blended learning approaches during the COVID 19 pandemic as a new norm in teaching and learning among institutions in Kenya.

**Keywords:** Flexible and blended learning, traditional teaching in the classroom, Information Communication Technology supported learning, collaborative learning, constructive learning, computer assisted learning

**DOI:** 10.7176/JEP/12-15-05

**Publication date:** May 31<sup>st</sup> 2021

## 1.0 Introduction

Since the entering of Covid-19 in Kenya in March 2020, the educational institutions rushed into implementing online teaching and learning policies to ensure the continuity of teaching and learning process. By then, it was apparently clear that the traditional teaching that is basically face to face interaction was impossible following the COVID 19 containment measures developed by World Health Organization which requires social distancing as key in minimizing the spread of the virus. The existence of the Covid-19 pandemic forced us to move faster in terms of learning innovation, especially technology-based learning which would enhance flexibility in learning. The deep lessons learned from COVID 19 experiences is that Kenyans institutions should fast track the implementation of flexible and blended learning approaches favorable for current situation and for future in case of emergence of other pandemics.

The flexible and blended learning approaches provides an opportunity for learners to exchange some of the face to face contact hours that normally occurs in the classroom for contact and interaction that occurs in an online or any other flexible setting. Such set up reduces a student's need to be at a particular place at a particular time to access learning. This can free the student from compulsory face to face interaction that is sufficiently bound within the school set up and even allow them pursue alternative goals, some of which might include work or other activities that are necessary or highly valued by the student but which are also more time and place bound (Shea, 2009). Shea (2009) further asserts that flexible and blended learning transits instruction to an online environment thus freeing up of classroom space and with enough blended courses, an institution may significantly increase capacity to serve additional students, assuming the availability of human and physical resources. The flexible and blended learning approach would have supported and sustained teaching and learning in Kenyan institutions when COVID 19 containment measures led to partial lock down of the country and closure of all learning institutions.

The central philosophy of flexible and blended learning approaches is to ensure access to education regardless of geographical location and time constraints. Deceptively, flexible and blended learning approaches was in existent for a significant number of learners in Kenya who would afford and sustain learning in some selected schools but majority of Kenyan may not live to enjoy this opportunity. The flexible and blended learning approaches positively discriminate towards the previously disadvantaged in order to deliver increased equity and inclusion (UNESCO, 2008). The learners who would never benefit from flexibility in leaning play an advantage in the event that institutions implement the flexible and blended learning. This would have not only ensured continuity in learning during COVID 19 pandemic period but also accorded all Kenyans the other benefits of flexible and blended learning. The flexible and blended learning approaches improves institutional

readiness to benefit from the efficiencies which may be gained by the use of Information Communication Technology in both administration and teaching, increased access and expansion of quality education programs.

The Kenyan institutions may adopt flexible and blended learning approaches to improve access to knowledge, resolve inequity in skills acquisition and integrate Information Communication Technology in the teaching and learning. Commonwealth of Learning helps institutions and ministries to define and contextualize effective models of flexible and blended learning approaches by ensuring that teachers, managers and policy makers understand how educational media and technology can be used effectively to improve access and expand education programs. The Commonwealth of Learning anticipates that the flexible and blended learning will achieve the objective of making the skills accessible to individuals who are locked out of the formal training institution due to some statuses. It also allows for the provision of learning opportunities that can be accessed at any place and time and effective use of Information Communication Technology in both administration and teaching. The closure of learning institution orchestrated by the containment measures of reducing spread of COVID 19 virus would have been saved greatly by flexible learning and the education programs would not have been interrupted significantly since all students would have continued with studies at home.

## **2.0 Design and Implementation of Flexible and Blended Learning Approaches.**

Flexible and blended learning has been defined in many ways but the most common is that which recognizes some combination of virtual and physical environments for example, Graham (2006), who describes the convergence of face to face settings, which are characterized by synchronous and human interaction, and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) based settings, which are asynchronous, and text based and where humans operate independently. Mason and Rennie (2006) extend this definition to capture other combinations of technologies, locations or pedagogical approaches while Garrison and Vaughan (2008) asserts that it is the thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experience emphasizing the need for reflection on traditional approaches and for redesigning learning and teaching. Blended e-learning changes the focus in learning design by shifting the emphasis from simply considering the face to face and online environments to that of introducing e-learning (Littlejohn & Pegler 2007)

As Garrison and Kanuka (2004) asserts that this combination of classroom and online settings has simplicity, but there is also a complexity to the concept which is evident in the wide variety of settings, diversity of the student population and consequent learning designs. Different blends of technology and pedagogy have been documented in both institution based and distance programs (Stacey & Gerbic, 2007). The advent of new learning technologies, for example, podcasting and vodcasting, internet based audio and video communication, e-portfolios and social networking tools including blogs and wikis create new blending potentials. The cultural diversity of the student population and the technology rich experiences of some network generation students raise further issues for blended learning design. Complexity is also evident in the extent to which Information Communication Technology has been incorporated or embedded within courses. Some writers like Vaughan (2007) argue that mere supplementation of a face to face course with online learning is not blended learning whereas others (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007) prefer to talk about ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ blends to indicate a continuum across significant to very small amounts of e-learning. Technology enhanced flexible and blended approaches can contribute to improvements in access, gender equality and efficiency indicators

The potential for technology to act as a catalyst in the transformation of traditional approaches to teaching is a concept that has been written about for some time (Reigeluth & Joseph, 2002). Garrison and Kanuka (2004) wrote about the potential for blended learning to transform higher education. The real test of blended learning is the effective integration of the two main components (face to face and Internet technology) such that we are not just adding on to the existing dominant approach or method. There are many reasons why technological innovations have had limited impact on transforming educational practices. Salomon (2002) describes three major barriers, one of which results from the consistent tendency of the educational system to preserve itself and its practices by the assimilation of new technologies into existing instructional practices. Solomon (2002) further elaborates the most powerful and innovative technology should be domesticated such that it does more or less what its predecessors have done or does it a bit faster and a bit better. A robust strategic planning and an enabling policy environment is critical as indicated by Garrison and Kanuka (2004), to the successful implementation of flexible approaches in educational programmes. To assist skills development, professionals use new technology enhanced approaches, policy makers, managers and teachers are offered a range of capacity building activities to support integration of technology and flexible delivery mechanisms (Alison; George & Rod, 2010). The institutions should prepare people to become effective members of a flexible, adaptable and competitive workforce.

Today’s theories of how people learn emphasize the importance of active participation in the learning process rather than passive observation (Olgun, 2009). Active learning requires students and teachers to join into a dynamic partnership in which they share the responsibility for instruction. According Maznevski as cited by Ellen and Jane (2011), active learning improves retention, as well as application of course content, and listening

to peers exposes students to different viewpoints and ways of interpreting and applying course material. More institutions are exploring the use of technology mediated teaching as a way to promote student learning and engagement. Hybrid or blended courses which combine online with traditional delivery of instruction can be better suited to classroom participation than just online methods.

According to Larima and Kiran (2017) flexible and blended learning is the concept that includes teaching design that incorporates both face to face teaching and teaching supported by Information Communication Technology with variety of content delivery mode like direct instruction, indirect instruction, collaborative teaching, individualized computer assisted learning. In application, flexible and blended approaches to learning include face to face teaching, student interaction with course content, peer group interaction, group discussion and exchange of ideas, accessing e-library, virtual classroom, online assessment, e-tuitions, accessing and maintaining educational blogs, webinars, viewing expert lectures in youtube, online learning through videos and audios, virtual laboratories. Majority of the flexible and blended learning approaches would have sustained teaching and learning during the period of the forced closure of learning institutions brought about by adherence to containment measures of COVID 19.

The flexible and blended learning approaches in higher education is helping instructors to change their teaching paradigms and making current practices of teaching more learners friendly. Much of teaching and learning in higher education is focused on transmission model with the lecture used by 83% of higher education instructors as the predominant teaching strategy. In distance education, there is often a similar problem of focusing on passing information rather than interactive learning strategies (Waddoups & Howell, 2002). The flexible and blended learning approaches has the potential of helping instructors re-conceptualize the teaching and learning relationship and transform their teaching practices away from a transmission model to a more active learning centered model. For example, use of course casting which allows students to download weekly lectures onto their iPods and skip attending face-to-face lectures all together (Tyre, 2005). It is important to understand the nature of blended learning practices in learning Institutions so that we can develop strategies and instructional models for harnessing its effectiveness.

Flexibility and hybrid (blended) in learning must incorporate the use of Information Communication Technology. The government of Kenya commits to equipping her citizens with Information Communication Technology skills in order to create dynamic and sustainable economic growth (Government of Kenya, 2018). The Kenya government holds that use of Information Communication Technology in education and training institutions plays a major role in disseminating skills to the wider society and thus creates positive impacts, in the economy (Government of Kenya, 2018). The skills learnt on the use of Information Communication Technology go to the society and hence put the society into the global village (Makau, 1990). We are already witnessing some of the significant social and economic consequences of Information Communication Technology and its impact in education thus the need to go full brown on the issue of flexible and blended approaches in learning to reap the potential benefits of Information Communication Technology.

### **3.0 Relevance of Flexible and Blended Learning Approaches of during the COVID 19 Pandemic**

Blended learning is done through ICT, online or offline mode and therefore teachers and students have more time in the classroom for creative and cooperative exercise. The learners acquire online learning and Computer Assisted Learning and become more techno savvy and they gain enhanced digital fluency. It may also contribute significantly to student's strengthened professionalism and enhanced self-motivation, self-responsibility, discipline. After the emergence of COVID 19, option of face to face interaction in learning was jeopardized and only institutions which could support online teaching continued uninterrupted.

Kenya education system is undergoing major reforms with the implementation of competency based curriculum of 2017 and among the competencies targeted by the new curriculum is digital literacy. Blended learning to some extent will help in achieving this objective. In Kenya the population in need of education is too large and the formal schools system is not able to offer sufficient accessibility to learning as well as provide equal educational opportunities to all. Flexible and blended learning will be a good option as it will make the area of educational opportunities wider and education will be able to reach to more population some of which may never access educational opportunities if it must be done within the boundary restrictions of a school. Similarly, the period of COVID 19 constrains the normal classroom processes and flexibility in the mode of delivery offers the sustainable solutions now and into the future.

The world is at the peak in technology advancements and innovations and therefore the learning proceeding in any education institution should keep pace with these rapid changes. Flexible and blended learning has its tenets built on use of information communication technologies which can motivate learners to aware of and adapt easily the technological changes in the world. The changes in the technology should accommodate the emerging trends in spread of communicable diseases like COVID 19 and school system should have anticipated challenges that were posed by such diseases and pandemics, and develop flexible modes of content delivery to learners.

The student's teacher ratio in Kenyan institutions is a major challenge to the effectiveness of teaching and learning. The number of students keeps increasing every year and very few schools achieve the appropriate teacher pupil ratio. The flexible and blended learning is a good option as online learning can be a substitute of teacher for very large audience.

#### 4.0 Implementation of Flexible and Blended Learning Approaches.

Implementation flexible and blended learning approaches require commitment on the part of educational authorities and managements of educational institutions. All the education stakeholders should be involved in its development and design. The ministry of education should be ready to adjust the budgetary allocation to the schools considering that this is an expensive venture. The management of Kenyan institution must be ready to accommodate the changes in learning and form right type of attitudes towards this ground-breaking concept in all those who are concerned within the education system. This may be achieved through seminars, awareness programs, discussion forums directed to the parents, community, teachers and students. The social media platforms and other mass media can provide an excellent option for the awareness programs. Teachers and other personnel should also be considered for in-service training on application of flexible and blended approaches to learning.

To a great extent, flexible and blended learning approaches can offer a variety of solutions to the prevailing challenges of teaching and learning in Kenyan institution ranging from issues of equity in access to learning, students teachers ratio, technological and innovation developments, dropouts concerns, contemporary concerns of pandemics and diseases that may constrain face to face interactions like the case of COVID 19.

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