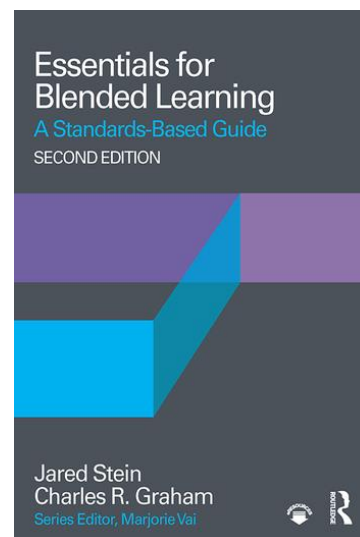


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# Essentials for Blended Learning

A Standards-Based Guide. Second Edition

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Review by Giorgia Andreolli

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The second edition of *Essentials for Blended Learning: A Standards-Based Guide* provides teachers, instructional designers, and educators with an accessible and practical guide to blended course design. Today, Blended Learning (BL) constitutes a major area of research within the field of education and is recently facing a renewed interest due to the unprecedented conditions imposed by COVID-19, which forced institutions worldwide to turn to this delivery format as an aspect of emergency remote teaching (ERT). As a bottom-up phenomenon, implemented through a variety of models and localized practices, BL has been defined in various ways; while this heterogeneity may allow for greater flexibility in the classroom, the ambiguity of the term has been much debated in the past because of its intrinsic vagueness. First emerged in the corporate field (as noted by Sharma and Barrett 2007), BL changed in format when applied to English Language Teaching, where is now “used to refer to any combination of face-to-face teaching with computer technology (online and offline activities/materials)” (Tomlinson and Whittaker 2013, 11). Technology is, beyond doubt, a unique resource which is able to guarantee continuity and preserve the right to education during the ongoing emergency. However, as Stein and Graham argue in the book, “technology is simply a tool” (17) and its effective application demands transformation of both methods and practice. While some teachers are ready to embrace change and its challenges, others might struggle to let go of

practices and beliefs – often constructed over years of teaching experience. Throughout the book, Stein and Graham emphasize the role of pedagogy over technological innovation in the development of effective activities: technology, despite lying at the core of any type of blend, does not by itself advance learning. On the contrary, a technology-centered approach might limit the scope and effectiveness of course design. In reiterating the centrality of pedagogy, the authors address one of the major issues of BL, namely the “thoughtful” integration of traditional face-to-face teaching with technology (Tomlinson and Whittaker 2013, 132). By means of a brief glance at the introduction, the reader has the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the argument made by the authors and their choices in structuring the book. This edition comes with a new organization of the chapters, now divided into two overarching sections, namely “Understanding Blended Learning” (Part One) and “Designing Your Blended Course” (Part Two). The chapters are connected to specific research-based standards, formulated according to empirical findings, and visually presented as a checklist. Each standard appears three times in total: at first, within the text, immediately after its discussion; secondly, at the end of each chapter, together with the summary. Lastly, the Appendix contains a comprehensive list of all the standards divided by chapter for an easier consultation.

The first part of the book is dedicated to the theoretical underpinnings of Blended Learning and consists of four chapters. Chapter 1 offers a brief yet functional overview of the main models (hybrid, Flipped Classroom and hyflex), alongside a list of the common benefits which may be obtained thanks to the implementation of “a purposeful design process and appropriate standards” (13). The theory is concise, the authors’ intention explicitly being addressing practical issues—which makes the book well-suited for educators interested in improving their teaching. Nonetheless, further references for reading are included at the end of each chapter. As in the previous edition, Chapter 2 presents detailed examples of blended courses across different disciplines; their main features are illustrated through screenshots taken from a real Learner Management System (LMS), the online environment where the course is hosted. Particular attention is devoted to blended rhythm, organization, activities, and assessments. The examples are introduced by a set of questions which encourage critical reflection and highlight the choices involved in both building a blended course and in creating its online space. Before delving deeper into course design, however, the third chapter is dedicated to a central topic: the affective and cognitive domain of the learner. Engagement is presented here as a critical element of any instructional experience, and even more so in the integration of the online and offline modalities. Overcoming the respective weaknesses (especially those related to emotion, feedback, and access to content) seems possible by becoming aware of the different

types of interaction and transmission of knowledge. Doing so, educators are enabled to choose what best fits their course, setting and modality and to capitalize on the corresponding strengths. The types of interaction originally formulated by Graham (2006) are included in the chapter as they still represent, to date, a point of departure to tackle the issues related to transactional distance.

As far as design is concerned, Chapter 4 leads the reader into the core part of the book through the presentation of the “backward” design approach (61), a learning-centered design process composed of three main stages and aimed to the creation of blended courses. The point of departure of the approach is the identification of desired learning outcomes; afterwards, assessments are determined and, only at the end, single activities are created. Instead of looking for one-size-fits-all solutions, Stein and Graham recommend setting clear educational goals and planning one lesson at a time to allow for continuous improvement or “iterative development” (67). This may facilitate teachers in facing the complexity of BL design. The process is broken down step by step in the second part of the book, “Designing Your Blended Course,” which comprises the majority of the chapters (from Chapter 5 to Chapter 10). In particular, Chapter 5 to Chapter 8 are dedicated respectively to outcomes, assessments, and online and offline activities. The fifth chapter illustrates goals and objectives and how they are best formulated in the ‘backward’ design approach starting from a general course description. Once again, the importance of including outcomes related to cognitive and affective aspects is stressed. In addition, goals from sample courses are exemplified and intertwined with practical tips and reflection boxes. The formulation of course outcomes guides the choice of assessment methods, which provide the means for measurement and evaluation. Variety, frequency, authenticity, and feedback are listed in Chapter 6 as the main components of blended assessments. Readers are encouraged to reflect upon what types of assessment stood out in their academic careers as the specific advantages of the onsite versus the online environment are explored in relation to them. The types of assessments covered include, among others, presentations, quizzes, collaborative and peer assessments, and rubrics. Afterwards, the focus is narrowed down to the development of online and onsite activities adequate to the requirements of the selected outcomes and assessments. In Chapter 7, teachers are advised to reframe the activities they already have in the light of what students will be expected to master by the end of the blended course. Adaptation of already existing activities and materials is therefore favoured, despite the resistance it might encounter due to time-related constraints. The chapter is rich in practical suggestions surrounding the creation of digital content (such as web pages, video and audio contents, and presentations). A section is dedicated to layout and formatting, with a particular

attention to accessibility; then, some major topics presented in previous chapters are reiterated, including engagement, active learning, and self-assessment. According to the authors, the in-built redundancy of the book is aimed at reaching an increased awareness of the standards presented. Although the repetitions might impact upon readability, the revised concepts are continuously enriched with worked examples and detailed how-to guides.

Chapter 8 deals with the development of blended onsite activities and attempts to answer the question of how to leverage onsite time to maximize face-to-face interaction. Bridging onsite and online discussions is fundamental to create a sense of continuity and help students navigating the two environments. In this process, one major challenge for teachers might be reconsidering their assumptions on traditional face-to-face classes and how they should (or should not) be constructed. The “design map” (157) built thanks to the ‘backward’ approach will facilitate the selection of activities and, at the same time, function as a blueprint for the organization of the course site. Chapter 9 shows how to structure an LMS, from writing the course introduction and objectives to the use of hyperlinks for additional resources and the course schedule. For a better instructional experience, two main suggestions are given: first, it seems necessary to provide clear and comprehensive instructions and, at the same time, manage learners’ expectations. While this happens also in traditional face-to-face education, blended environments might be more complex for teachers who are not used to managing their own expectations and assumptions. “Messages of explanation and encouragement” (171) can be used to prepare and motivate learners, yet the shift to Blended Learning needs a significant investment on the part of the teacher’s motivational system as well. In this process, we should welcome imperfection and embrace ongoing improvement, as the authors conclude in Chapter 10. A cycle of designing, engaging, and evaluating allows to progress slowly and add small revisions after each iteration. Furthermore, LMSs usually provide various tools to monitor courses, including the observation of participation and attrition (or drop-out rate), learning analytics and feedback surveys.

One of the strengths of this book lies in its richness in step-by-step guided examples, often related to different disciplines, which can appeal to a wide audience. Stein and Graham seem to have considered one frequent request coming from teachers, that is the need for practical suggestions from real classes, as opposed to lengthy theoretical explanations. On the other hand, as has been argued above, the reiteration of the standards might not be of interest to all readers. Blending is presented as “a way of questioning the status quo” (111) in that it can inspire teachers to challenge their assumptions about learning and open their minds to new approaches; the potential for inclusion, however, is only incidentally touched upon. In spite of this, the

'backward' model illustrated in the book can be a useful tool for universal design at all levels of education.

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