



# Position Paper on Blended Learning in Adult Education

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### INTRODUCTION

Since our beginning in 1998, AlphaPlus has been committed to increasing the use of digital technology and online learning in adult education. Our mission is to help adult education providers understand and adopt digital technology solutions that increase learner success, enhance the education experience, and strengthen organizational capacity and performance. AlphaPlus supports literacy workers to use blended learning approaches through our technology coaching services, face-to-face and online training, and tech support. This position paper describes our understanding of blended learning, its benefits and how adult basic education programs can be (re)conceptualized using a blended learning approach to best support learner success.

### DEFINING BLENDED LEARNING IN ADULT EDUCATION

Blended learning is widely seen as a combination of face-to-face in classroom and technology-mediated learning using devices such as computers, smartphones, tablets and other mobile devices with an internet connection.<sup>1</sup> These devices may be provided by programs, or learners may be free to bring their own device. Our position is that blended learning in adult education is not only about the use of tools and resources. Instead, it is a way to think about program and curriculum development, including learning design and delivery. Using digital technology in a blended approach is not just learning how to operate digital devices and navigate the internet. These are important skills that enable participation in a blended learning program but, by themselves, are not necessarily blended learning. A blended learning approach is one that enhances and extends the application of adult learning principles to meet the changing needs of people learning, working and engaging in 21<sup>st</sup> century life.

The term blended learning was first used in relation to higher education in the late 1990s, a time of rapid increase of computer and internet use.<sup>2</sup> It was not long after that adult education practitioners and researchers were exploring the relevancy of blended learning in adult education. Today, many learners are already online via their mobile devices. Adult education programs no longer view digital technology as supplemental to paper-based learning, and many educators have combined paper-based resources with digital technology in their teaching practices for quite some time.

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<sup>1</sup> Graham, 2006; Palalas, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Friesen, 2012.

Based on AlphaPlus’s experience in the field, most research and discourse about blended learning has been focused on changing traditional curriculum-based, course-based and group classroom-based educational experiences. This is not the way adult education delivery is done by all the adult education providers that AlphaPlus supports. Instead of relying on a fixed curriculum and course-based delivery for groups of learners, most adult education programs support learners one on one in achieving individualized educational experiences. This involves using paper- and digital technology-based resources and tools inside and outside the classroom so that learning can occur at times, at locations and in ways that best suit learners’ needs and intentions in building their literacy skills and knowledge. The discussion about blended learning in adult education needs to extend to the realities adult basic education programs that operate in an individualized educational context as well as those that are course-based and use a fixed curriculum.

Educators develop blended learning experiences by collaborating with learners to ensure that learning outcomes are aligned with real-world contexts and to enhance learners’ capability to be self-reliant.<sup>3</sup> This approach also helps people to become self-directed in learning. Many adult learners step in and step out of programs over time. Self-directed learners can continue learning within and outside of formal learning institutions. Blended learning can enhance the ability of educators to meet the needs of adult learners and work towards their goals as they become lifelong learners and balance learning with other demands in adult lives.

Blended learning is often defined as any combination of face-to-face and online instruction,<sup>4</sup> but not all combinations are blended learning. For example, in some adult education programs, educators support learners who are participating in online independent study courses that are designed and delivered by external organizations, without input or control over the content or delivery. While this can be an effective way to create a hybrid of learning environments that meets the need of learners who want to learn online and build their capability to learn remotely, it cannot be said to adhere to the principles of blended learning because the educators and learners are not actively engaged in creating and transforming the curriculum.

To properly articulate desired outcomes and implications for adult education providers, intermediary organizations and broader networks, and policy and program planning, an educational definition of blended learning is needed rather than an operational definition. Our definition of blended learning in adult education is as follows:

**Blended learning is an approach where educators leverage technology and digital access for learners to create, communicate, collaborate and apply critical thinking skills to construct knowledge in a connected world.**

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<sup>3</sup> Hase & Kenyon, 2001; 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Graham, 2006; Kennel & Moriarty, 2014; Palalas, 2019.

## THE PRESSURES ON ADULT EDUCATION PROVIDERS

Adult education providers face pressures integrating technology in their programs. Developing and maintaining a blended learning approach relies on sufficient investment of time, effort and resources. Digital tools change rapidly, and organizations need to keep abreast of new technology. It is important that adult education providers foster a culture of change and experimentation among their educators, provide them technological and pedagogical training and support, and encourage professional learning opportunities. This will help educators to be more open to change, have freedom to take risks and be confident using digital technology and troubleshooting technical issues.<sup>5</sup>

## PRINCIPLES OF BLENDED LEARNING IN ADULT EDUCATION

The principles of blended learning are the core tenets that are essential to a blended learning approach in adult education.

### 1. The program is learner-centred.

The focus of blended learning is on the learner, not the technology. When learners have access to online resources and networks, educators are afforded unique opportunities to deepen and broaden what learner-centred education looks like. As people learn how to use online resources and networks, they learn to curate personalized resource collections, collaborate with peers and experts, and communicate with authentic audiences. In this way, they become co-creators of their learning experience. Learner-centred does not mean outcomes-based. A learner-centred approach for adult literacy programming means that:

- The program incorporates the learner's knowledge and skills into the curriculum, including various digital and printed learning and assessment tools, and various teaching and learning strategies.<sup>6</sup>
- Learners are involved in the planning and decision-making processes about what, where and how learning will happen.
- Learning is meaningful and relevant to the learner's needs and goals.
- Learning values the learner's knowledge, skills and life experiences, and draws upon the learner's experiences as a resource.<sup>7</sup>
- Learning cultivates self-direction in learners.<sup>8</sup>
- The learning setting fosters a spirit of collaboration and uses small groups.<sup>9</sup>
- Emotional presence is recognized in the learning process, and educators ensure a safe, constructive, supportive learning environment, both face-to-face and online.
- There is a purposeful and thoughtful integration of face-to-face and digital learning.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Howard & Mozejko, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Mollins, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Saskatchewan Literacy Network, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Saskatchewan Literacy Network, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Saskatchewan Literacy Network, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Palalas, 2019.

## 2. Blended learning activities are relevant and useful.

Blended learning activities are relevant and useful for literacy and language skills development and for knowledge development. The main goal of a blended learning approach is not to make the technology exciting but to fit it seamlessly into the curriculum.<sup>11</sup> Content is chosen because it is meaningful to the lives of learners, and technology is chosen when it is appropriate to developing a skill or constructing and communicating ideas, opinions and knowledge.

## 3. The blended program has a strong teaching presence.

A central tenet of blended learning is that the educator is an essential part of the educational experience in the classroom and online, be it face-to-face or from a distance, and in synchronous or asynchronous engagements. Literacy workers draw on pedagogical, content and technological knowledge in order to implement a blended learning approach and they are at the centre of the decision-making process. Blended learning requires knowledge, planning and strategizing. It depends on resources, time and, perhaps most importantly, educator expertise.

## THE BENEFITS OF BLENDED LEARNING IN ADULT EDUCATION

Educators and learners equally benefit from blended learning in adult education. In a high-quality blended learning environment, learners find increased flexibility and diversity in learning opportunities and gain a greater sense of what's possible with technology. Educators connect to more learners where they are at, find the right mechanisms to recognize and respond to learner needs, and put innovative and responsive curriculum into practice.

Below are ways that blended learning as AlphaPlus has defined it can be of great benefit to adult educators and learners. To reiterate our definition:

**Blended learning is an approach where educators leverage technology and digital access for learners to create, communicate, collaborate and apply critical thinking skills to construct knowledge in a connected world.**

## 1. Blended learning supports learners' self-confidence and self-reliance.

In a blended approach, learners use digital technology to engage in critical thinking and reflection, to be creative and exploratory, and to develop communication and problem-solving strategies. Learners build digital literacy skills, critically analyze information for relevance and trustworthiness, and build self-advocacy skills. Using technologies can change power dynamics in learning relationships between learners and educators.

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<sup>11</sup> Bersin, 2004.

As learners and educators co-create the curriculum based on the learner's goals and curiosity, learners start to see themselves as people who can learn and make decisions about their own learning. After being in basic education programs, many adult learners state that they experience a change in how they see themselves. Their self-identity shifts after intentionally engaging in learning. A blended learning approach increases the potential for learners to continue to practise using technology and build their literacy and language skills when they are not in literacy programs.<sup>12</sup> This may increase the chances of learners meeting their goals as they relate to their future employment and further education.

## 2. Blended learning encourages social connections and collaboration.

Blended learning incorporates online social interactions, information-seeking, exploration, entertainment and many other reasons people use the internet into learning activities. There is collaboration both in face-to-face classroom group work and online group work. Through online social communities and connections, adult literacy learners build their networks, expand their circle of learning beyond the classroom and discover those with similar experiences around the world.<sup>13</sup> Learning in the digital age happens within and across networks rather than within an individual, and learners are leveraging these networks to learn, create, communicate and collaborate in all the ways available to them.<sup>14</sup>

## 3. Blended learning provides flexibilities.

Our experience in the field with adult basic education programs has taught us that adult learners have time constraints due to work and family responsibilities and that they require flexibility in their studies. Blending online learning with classroom learning offers more choice and provides flexibilities for scheduling, setting practice times, and flipped classrooms (where learners get instructional content, usually online, before class and then focus on applying that knowledge in the classroom). It is also more responsive to the way adults learn, beyond the narrow definition of learning styles, and better reflects the complex relationship between learning processes and knowledge construction.

## 4. Blended learning helps to manage systemic inequalities.

Addressing digital inequity is a particularly pressing issue because governments are increasingly requiring people access public services (such as healthcare, social assistance benefits and taxes) online. This will likely be experienced as a barrier to receiving services for some people. Social class, for example, is a significant factor in internet accessibility.<sup>15</sup> Disparities in access to an internet connection and the necessary equipment, compounded with a lack of online problem-solving skills and access to

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<sup>12</sup> Reder, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Mollins, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Siemens, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Greig & Hughes, 2012; Pinsent-Johnson & Sturm, 2017; Smythe & Bershears, 2017.

learning supports, create a double bind for vulnerable adults and exacerbate the digital divide.<sup>16</sup> Many adult learners are at risk of digital inequality as they already experience social and economic inequality related to age, income, education, location and immigration status.<sup>17</sup>

Blended learning can help to manage socially structured digital inequalities<sup>18</sup> resulting from access, literacy and connectivity barriers. It encourages self-empowerment by building digital literacy skills. Educators play a vital role in learners being able to access online public and consumer services by offering situated learning opportunities where learners build confidence navigating and evaluating online environments.<sup>19</sup> Building digital technology skills and knowledge helps learners manage high-stakes use of technologies (such as online interactions and form-filling tasks).

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BLENDED-LEARNING PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Blending location (inside and outside the classroom) with paper- and digital technology-based resources and tools is more than a set of teaching and learning practices — it is a way to think about how we develop adult education programs. When planning to use digital technology in an adult basic education program, literacy workers and administrators should consider the following critical components of blended learning programming. These recommendations apply to the adult education learning context and include the delivery of individualized educational experiences as well as programs that are course-based and use a fixed curriculum. We hope that these recommendations will support literacy organizations and adult education providers to better apply a blended learning approach in their programs and will empower them to request the necessary professional development and funding.

### 1. There should be more system support for adult educators.

While a blended learning approach is being effectively implemented in some adult basic education programs, there are limited opportunities for educators to connect and learn from each other and to express their leadership as they explore, experiment and evaluate innovative blended learning practices. Literacy workers have an essential role in the development and delivery of blended learning, and they should be afforded training, professional development and additional remuneration as their jobs change. Technologies are changing at a rapid pace, and having ongoing support for curriculum-planning, technology-planning and technology-related skill development will help to make the system sustainable. Service providers and intermediary organizations collaborate to mobilize educator leadership and build program capacity, and this work should be

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<sup>16</sup> Pinsent-Johnson & Sturm, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Haight, Quan-Haase & Corbett, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Greig & Hughes, 2012; Pinsent-Johnson & Sturm, 2017; Smythe & Bershears, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Lave & Wenger, 1990.

strengthened. There should also be support for the development of communities of practice that meet regularly and engage in reflective practice to ensure the evolution of educator knowledge and to advance the challenging process of reconceptualizing learning experiences for blended learning.

## 2. Blended learning programs should take a people-first approach.

A people-first approach is the conceptual infrastructure that holds up all blended learning programs. Behind every decision made in a blended learning program, consideration of the needs of the people involved — both the educator and the learner — must come first. A people-first approach acknowledges that learning is based on relationships. Literacy learning is a social experience. Programs using a blended learning approach value the social relations among learners and educators to co-create learning activities.

We are recommending an increase in program support and investment in tools and resources; however, this will only be effective if we focus on people, not on systems and operations. Educators should not carry the burden of change alone. It takes a great deal in the background to effect real change and support that change in a sustainable way. A people-first approach is key to enabling blended learning in adult basic education to happen.

## CONCLUSION

A blended learning approach provides access to diverse and flexible learning environments and nurtures enriched literacy and learning. Learners who experience blended learning will see the world as they know it reflected in the programs where they learn and will deploy critical thinking skills to participate in a society where we are required to create, collaborate and communicate in digitally mediated networks.

By creating a system of support that puts people first, adult education providers will work responsively to ensure educators are equipped with the knowledge and resources they need to create high-quality, collaborative learning experiences where learners develop confidence and competence using technology for learning, for work and in their daily lives.

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