

What Blended Learning Looks Like in Practice

By Heather Clayton Staker

Expect to see less whole-class, teacher-led instruction and a greater mix of learning modalities in a blended classroom or program. Blended learning varies from one school to the next, but this guide shares observations about patterns. Most of the ideas for this guide are from the book by Michael B. Horn and Heather C. Staker, Blended: Using Disruptive Innovation to Improve Schools (San Francisco: Wiley, 2015), published with the support of the Clayton Christensen Institute.

Is it blended learning?

Educators use the term “blended learning” to describe any education program with three characteristics:

*Students learn at least in part through **online learning**, with at least some control over time, place, path, and/or pace.*



The word “control” is important in the above sentence. Blended learning lets students control some or all the lesson themselves because some of the lesson is online. Not all classrooms with technology are blended. Many so-called technology-rich classrooms have devices like Smartboards and tablets, but they do not shift control of the lesson from the teacher to the student. It’s important to distinguish between technology-rich classrooms and blended learning.

*Students learn at least in part in a supervised **brick-and-mortar location** away from home.*



Blended learning is not the same as fully virtual learning. Blended learning involves students having brick-and-mortar schooling experiences. Students who are learning online at home without coming to a physical campus are not blended learners. They are online learners, but not blended.

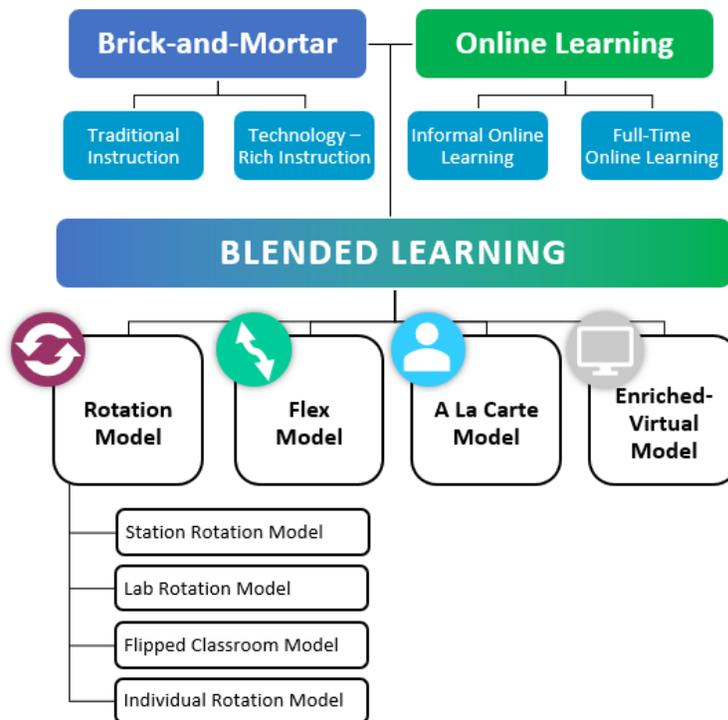
*The modalities along each student’s learning path within the course or subject are connected to create an **integrated learning experience**.*



This characteristic means that the online and face-to-face learning activities are connected to create an integrated course. A teacher or software uses data to actually “blend” the various modalities together to result in a unified experience for the learner.

Four main models—and many combinations

Schools are implementing four models of blended learning: Rotation, Flex, A La Carte, and Enriched Virtual.



Source: [Clayton Christensen Institute](#)

The next sections provide an overview of each of the models.

Rotation models

The first blended-learning model is the **Rotation model**. You'll spot this model when you see students rotating on a fixed schedule between learning activities, at least one of which is online learning. Sometimes this design takes the form of a **Station Rotation**, where students rotate within a contained classroom or group of classrooms. Sometimes it shows up as a **Lab Rotation**, where students rotate to a computer lab for the online-learning station. Sometimes it's a **Flipped Classroom**, in which students do the online learning as homework and then attend brick-and-mortar school for face-to-face activities. And sometimes it's an **Individual Rotation**, in which each student has an individualized playlist of learning activities.

Rotation models free up teachers' time to meet with small groups of students or one-on-one. They allow students to drive their own learning during the online activities. Many teachers are reinvigorated with their profession as they discover fresh ways to engage students, connect with them, make use of face-to-face classroom time, and give more targeted instruction.

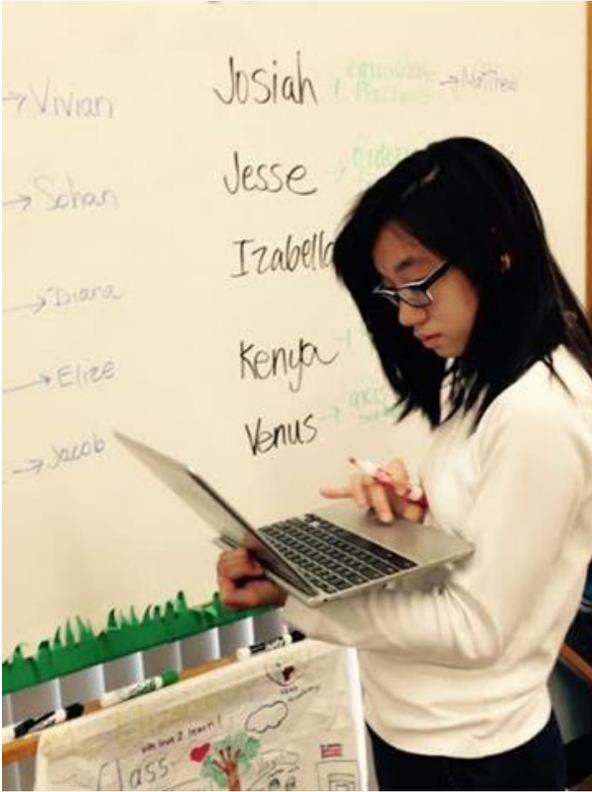
These photos below are from a Station Rotation at Burnett Elementary in Milipitas, Calif., where fourth-grade teacher Alison Elizondo set up a Station Rotation for math.



Ms. Elizondo writes the schedule for her rotation plan on her whiteboard. Students complete Workshop 1, 2, and 3, then a Reflection station, before repeating the cycle. If they do not complete the full cycle during the math block, they continue the next day with where they left off the day before.



This student has the job of time keeper for the day. When it's time for students to rotate to the next station, she exclaims, "I'm ready to learn." Her classmates call back, "We're ready to learn, too!" and then walk to their next station assignments.



This student has completed her work and now has time to help her peers. Ms. Elizondo uses the whiteboard for students to sign up if they need help or if they can give help.



This student is showing the dashboard on her math program, which shows that she is close to completing the 4th-grade level of the software. The Station Rotation design freed her up to work at her own pace and get ahead.

Flex models

The second blended-learning model is the **Flex model**. When you walk into a Flex classroom or studio, you'll see students moving on a fluid, unchoreographed schedule among learning activities based on their individual needs and preferences. Flex models almost always use a learning-management system to deliver a variety of online and offline activities so that students can progress toward their individual goals. The teacher is on-hand to launch and close work sprints, provide individual help, and organize follow up activities to deepen the learning, humanize the experience, and connect the community.

The Flex model is growing in appeal, particularly at the middle and high school levels, to prepare learners for the dynamism and team-centered cultures of modern workplaces.

The following chart shows the basic student schedule for the elementary studio and middle school studio at Acton Academy, a network of 150 micro-schools that use a Flex model for

“Core Skills,” the learning block dedicated to online learning for math, grammar, reading comprehension, and spelling.

8:30	Morning Launch/Discussion
8:55	Core Skills
10:00	Break
10:15	Core Skills, continued
11:40	Lunch
12:15	Project Time, Civilization, or Art
02:45	Clean Up
03:00	Afternoon Reflection/Discussion
03:15	End of day

P.E. is Mondays and Thursdays for an hour before lunch.

These photos below show students at Acton Academy engaged in the learning blocks that are listed in the schedule above.



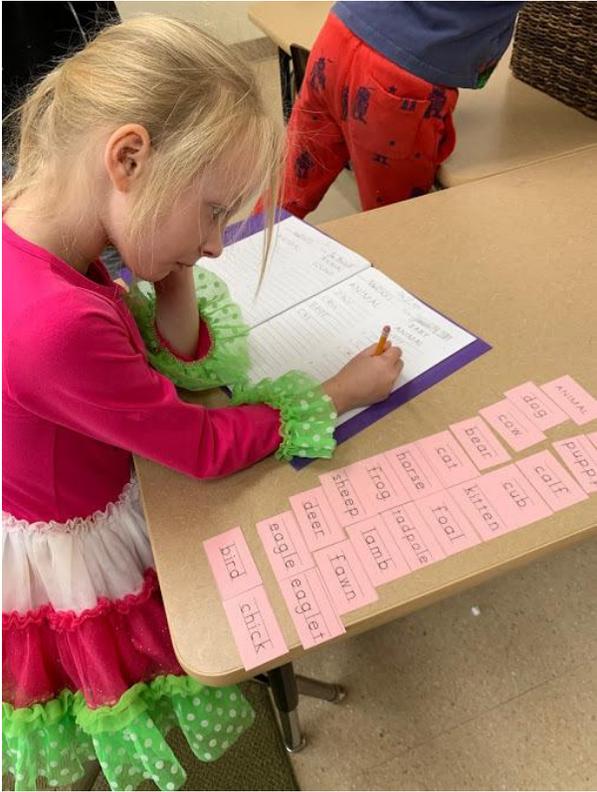
Morning Launches feature Socratic discussions that connect the community, equip the learners with skills they need as they head into the next work sprint, and inspire them so that they are ready to focus.



After 1-3 hours of independent or group work, the whole group reconvenes to reflect and close out the learning activity.



Students work independently during Core Skills time, but they can ask for help from and give help to the members of their squad.



Core Skills time includes a variety of online and offline activities without chalkboard-based lessons.



Most of the projects require teamwork. The Flex model is not only independent online learning. It often involves offline learning activities and face-to-face collaboration.



During public exhibitions for family and friends, students share the final drafts of the projects, art, and civilization challenges that they completed during the session.

A La Carte models

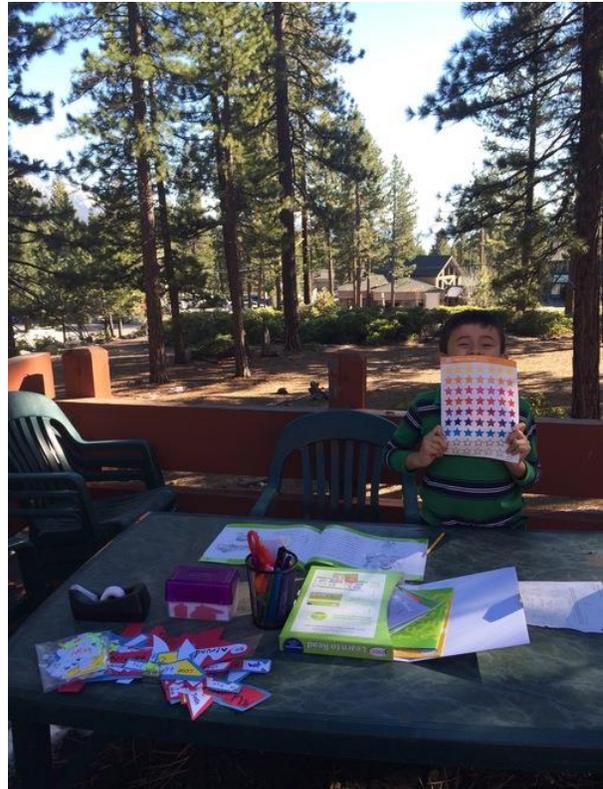
The third model is the **A La Carte model**. If you've ever taken an online course with an online teacher, you've participated in this model. Students take online courses on campus and or off-

site. Common reasons for taking A La Carte courses include to access courses that the local school does not offer, fit another course into a busy schedule, fulfill college admissions requirements, or simply have a different type of learning experience.

The following photographs show the I-School, an innovative nonprofit school located across the street from a public school in Incline Village, Nevada. Students walk across the street from the public school to take A la Carte online courses in the comfort and under the adult supervision that the I-School provides.



Parents pay for the online courses that their students take through the I-School. The school is open seven days a week, 12 hours per day. Students like that it's close to their public school so that they can walk over and use it during free periods and after school.



Students and families like that the school provides a safe, nurturing place to complete A La Carte online courses as well as offline homework.

Enriched Virtual models

The fourth model is the **Enriched Virtual** model. This category includes any time students have required face-to-face learning sessions with their teacher and then are free to complete their remaining coursework online, remote from the teacher. This model has the benefit of ultra-

flexibility for both the student and the teacher, while providing face-to-face check-ins as necessary.

The following photographs show Clark Street Community School, a public charter school in the Middleton Cross Plains Area School District in Middleton, Wisconsin.



This brick-and-mortar campus, which serves students in grades 6–12 and is located across the street from the traditional public high school, provides a more personal approach by allowing students to complete coursework on an Enriched Virtual basis.

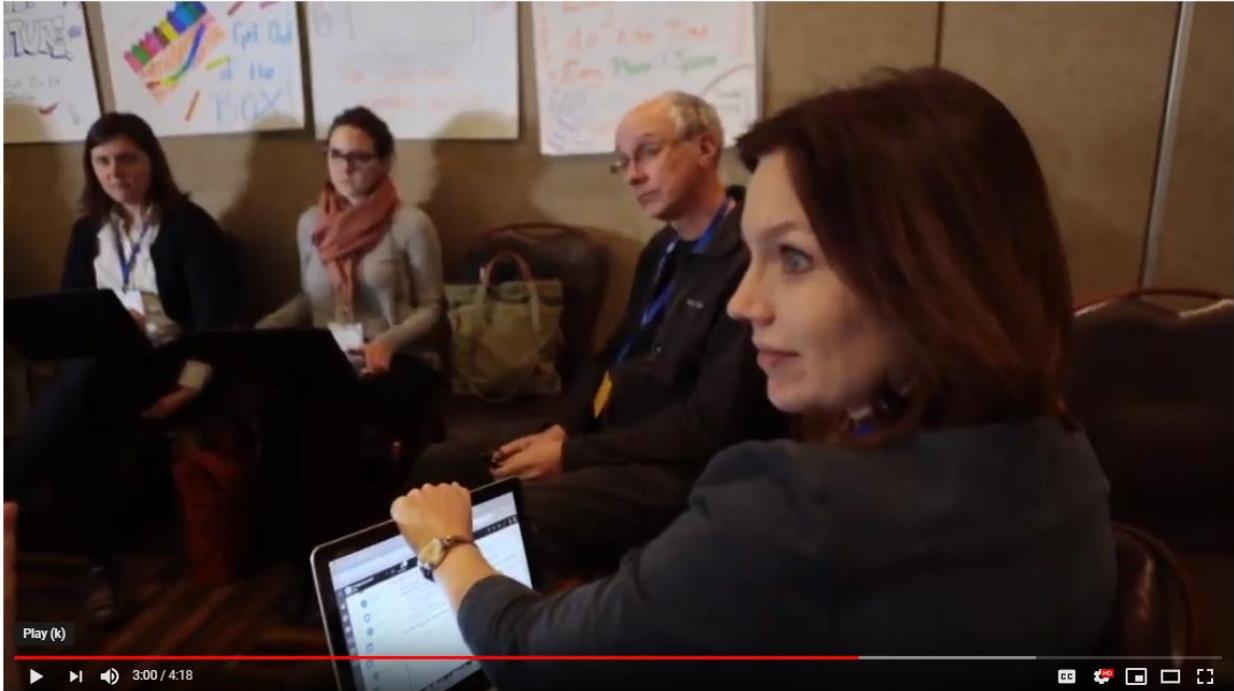


Kecia’s passion is to work as a program leader for the Madison School & Community Recreation after-school program. The flexibility of her school schedule allows her to attend the brick-and-mortar campus part-time and complete the rest of the coursework online off campus, which frees her up for her program leader job.

Blended learning for adult learners

Adult learners can benefit from a blended-learning model as well. For one example, at “Blended Learning Live!” professional-development workshops, adults experience each of the blended models and feel for themselves what it’s like to control the time, place, path, and/or pace of their own learning.

The following Welcome Video that participants watch at the beginning of Blended Learning Live! provides a glimpse of what adult learning looks like when it’s designed in a blended format. Click the YouTube link to play the video.



YouTube link: <https://youtu.be/FB6yWZXsxYg>

Which model is best?

Which blended learning model has the most benefits? The answer truly depends on the circumstances. Teachers and instructional designers choose different models, or a combination of models, depending on whether they are seeking to engage learners, maximize flexibility, target their instruction based on formative assessment data, instill agency, free up their time, provide an out-of-reach course, give students the flexible scheduling that they need, improve professional learning, or capture any of a number of other benefits.

Heather Clayton Staker is a researcher and author in the United States who has spent 15 years studying innovation in education. She is the co-author of the Amazon bestseller *Blended: Using Disruptive Innovation to Improve Schools* (San Francisco: Wiley, 2015); *The Blended Workbook* (San Francisco, Wiley, 2017); and the report *How to Create Higher Performing, Happier Classrooms: A Playbook for Teachers* (Christensen Institute, 2017). Follow her at www.readytoblend.com.