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Connecting Project-Based and Blended Learning

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This guest blog post was written by Brian Greenberg, Envision School's former Chief Academic Officer.

Don't listen to the current education reform rhetoric: There *is* more than one way to educate a child. In fact, sometimes very different approaches can yield terrific results when combined together.

Readers of this blog are likely familiar with project-based learning (PBL), but may be less familiar with the notion of "blended learning." Blended learning generally refers to incorporating online learning into traditional brick-and-mortar schools to create hybrid learning experiences for students. So how do the generally progressive ideals of PBL merge with the more reform-oriented blended learning approach? Beautifully, at least in theory.

Sal Khan of the much-acclaimed Khan Academy **(1)** personifies the blended learning movement. His team's herculean efforts to record thousands of videos, create practice problems, and build sophisticated back-end analytics are opening educators' minds to what is possible with online learning. As with any innovation, there is a growing army of critics who accuse Khan of being just more of the same drill-and-kill pedagogy. They ask, "Where is the deep and engaging curriculum that Ted Sizer championed?" It may surprise readers to know that Sal Khan himself is an advocate of projects and hands-on learning **(2)**, believing that using videos like his can free teachers' time and energy up for richer instruction focused on higher-order skills. So if Mr. Blended Learning embraces PBL, can the PBL community embrace blended learning, too?

As the former Chief Academic Officer of Envision Schools, I experienced the beauty and power of PBL **(3)**. But I also saw how PBL could sometimes create content-area gaps for students because of the focus on depth versus breadth. Few teachers can master all the challenges of teaching state standards, designing engaging projects, assessing all

students along the way, and intervening effectively when students don't master the material.

The Best of Both Worlds

But what if PBL teachers also had online resources to help students learn content and to provide better feedback on student outcomes? In this scenario, students might be learning content at home in the evenings or for some of class each day. The online learning would be highly personalized and adaptive, allowing some students to go deeper or faster and letting others go at the pace they need to ensure true mastery. This could also provide a more accurate daily picture of the content students had mastered and exactly where each student struggled. This blended learning approach can be seen in schools like Carpe Diem **(4)**, SF Flex Academy **(5)** -- and even in Envision's own summer school pilot, being documented right now on the Blend My Learning **(6)**blog.

What most of these early blended learning models are missing, however, is application of knowledge -- the deep and meaningful learning that students experience when they synthesize content and apply it in novel, exciting ways. This is where great PBL comes in. I'd love to see Khan paired with awesome physics projects, for example. Complete four badges showing you've mastered certain content and "unlock" a project challenge. The software helps ensure you have mastered the content; the challenge lets you apply the learning and produce a beautiful piece of work.

Or flip it around: Present the challenge that engages students first and then elicit their desire to tackle the online learning. This is where the expertise of the leaders in PBL is so valuable. I'd like to see High Tech High **(7)**, Envision Schools **(8)**, the Big Picture Learning **(9)**, and New Tech Network **(10)** digitize their best projects and resources and make them "student-facing." The New Tech Network's Echo **(11)** platform and the blossoming partnership between Envision Schools and Show Evidence **(12)** are two promising examples of bringing the best of PBL to a wider audience. And Khan Academy's two million users per month demonstrate the power of the Web to spread good ideas and scale implementation.

The blended learning movement is still in its infancy **(13)** and needs time to prototype, experiment, make mistakes, and figure out what works. It would benefit greatly from incorporating decades of learning from the PBL community around what engages students and leads them to producing the highest quality work. The PBL community, similarly, should embrace the power that blended learning offers.

The technology itself is not the game changer; it is the personalization that technology affords. Blended learning's greatest potential lies in the combination of immediate feedback to students, more personalized pacing, ability to make students responsible for their own learning, and ability to serve up the content when and how students are ready for it. If we can get this right, blended learning 2.0 could be a powerful way to run our schools -- where

the best of online learning meets the best of project-based learning. I have to believe the results for students will be powerful.

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Source: www.edutopia.org/blog/combining-blended-and-project-based-learning

Links

- 1 www.khanacademy.org/
- 2 www.youtube.com/watch?v=AkSGR_oj0rg&feature=youtu.be
- 3 www.envisionschools.org/site/student-success/success-stories/shanice-patterson/
- 4 www.youtube.com/watch?v=-s_O65rWV10
- 5 www.k12.com/sfflex/
- 6 blendmylearning.com/
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- 11 www.newtechnetwork.org/echo
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- 13 www.innosightinstitute.org/media-room/publications/education-publications/the-rise-of-k-12-blended-learning/
- 14 <mailto:blendmylearning@gmail.com>

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