

A photograph of three young adults (two men and one woman) smiling and looking towards the camera. They are outdoors, with green foliage and a blue building in the background. The woman in the foreground is wearing a light pink top. The man in the middle is wearing a blue plaid shirt. The man in the background is wearing a maroon shirt. A laptop is visible in the bottom left corner, being used by the man in the maroon shirt.

# Realizing the Potential of Blended Learning: Beyond Personalized to Active Learning

Produced by Apex Learning® in  
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# Introduction

The most effective teachers personalize learning to meet the unique needs of each student and they have always created active learning experiences to engage their students. But teachers struggle with doing this consistently at scale when using traditional instructional materials.

With the quantity of digital curriculum available to educators today, we are seeing a growing number of teachers implement blended learning models to personalize learning for their students. Each student can now benefit from a unique, personalized learning pathway. But in truth, digital curriculum can be just as tedious and uninspiring as plowing through flat content in a traditional textbook. This doesn't have to be the case.

Both research and our observations confirm that people learn best from experiences that engage them in trying and doing the task at hand. Active learning is not a new concept. The idea was popularized more than a hundred years ago by John Dewey and is echoed in philosophies that span decades from Montessori to Experiential and Project-Based Learning. In *Democracy and Education (1916)*, John Dewey writes about the nature of experience and learning: ➤

The nature of experience can be understood only by noting that it includes an active and a passive element peculiarly combined. On the active hand, experience is *trying*—a meaning which is made explicit in the connected term *experiment*. On the passive, it is *undergoing*...

To “learn from experience” is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. Under such conditions, doing becomes a trying; an experience with the world to find out what it is like; the undergoing becomes the instruction—discovery of the connection of things.

— John Dewey



**The design of these active, personalized, new learning environments starts with clear definitions.**

### **Active Learning**

Active Learning, according to the [University of Michigan Center for Research Learning and Teaching](#), is “a process whereby students engage in activities, such as reading, writing, discussion or problem solving that promote analysis, synthesis and evaluation of class content. Cooperative learning, problem-based learning, and the use of case methods and simulations are some approaches that promote active learning.”<sup>ii</sup>

### **Personalized Learning**

Personalized learning, according to a Gates Foundation–funded [Rand report](#), is an “approach in which teachers and schools create systems, tools and methodologies that tailor instruction to the individual needs, skills and interests of each student, in an effort to accelerate and deepen their learning.”<sup>iii</sup>

### **Blended Learning**

Blended learning, according to the [Clayton Christensen Institute](#), is a formal education program in which a student learns: (1) at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path and/or pace; (2) at least in part in a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home; (3) and the modalities along each student’s learning path within a course or subject are connected to provide an integrated learning experience.<sup>iv</sup>

Just as the most effective teachers create personalized and active learning experiences, the most effective digital curriculum takes advantage of technology.

This paper is designed to highlight how blended learning can provide personalized and active learning experiences that increase student engagement and achievement. The formula for successful blended learning implementations that drive both personalized and active learning comes from the synergy of combining elements: instructional design, instructional materials, and school design.



# A Brief History of the Future

As the world around us continues to change, it will be important that we apply the lessons of the past to the trends of the future in order to ensure that we are creating powerful learning experiences for all. We can think of these lessons in terms of arcs that have spanned the history of education and learning. In recent history, we have seen a variety of trends, all designed to push learning forward in effective and efficient ways; some have come and gone as “just another educational fad,” while others have stood the test of time.

## Student-Centered Learning

(1915 - Present)

With roots in Dewey and Piaget, student-centered learning (SCL) was revived by Ted Sizer in 1984 with the founding of the [Coalition of Essential Schools](#). The [Nellie Mae Education Foundation](#) shifted its focus on SCL in 2010; its definition includes student ownership, personalized, competency-based, anytime, anywhere access to instruction.

## Standards-Based Reform

(1983 - 2015)

Clarify what students should know and be able to do, measure achievement using standardized tests and hold schools accountable. It introduced measurement and promoted equity but had many unintended consequences.

## Managed Instruction

(1995 - Early 2005)

Boost the quality and consistency of teaching (particularly in big urban districts) by aligning content, instruction and professional development. It improved consistency and coherence but limited teacher creativity and didn't work as well for students who were way ahead or behind.

## Technology Integration

(About 1995 - 2010)

Incorporate technology into existing school models. It extended learning and replaced textbooks but was idiosyncratic by classroom.

## Competency-Based Learning

(2000 - Present)

Students show what they know and progress based on demonstrated mastery of content. Despite promising results in a handful of school districts, competency-based learning will take longer to catch on than previous trends, in large part due to admissions policies used in higher education.

## Social Emotional Learning

(2003 - Present)

Mindsets and habits are more important to life outcomes than test scores. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning ([CASEL](#)) was formed in 2003 to advocate for what Daniel Goleman discussed in his book *Emotional Intelligence*. Mindset research by Carol Dweck and Angela Duckworth was propelled by Paul Tough's bestseller *How Children Succeed*, leading hundreds of districts to embrace broader aims.

## Active Learning

(2004 - Present)

A decade ago, higher education research promoted active, collaborative, cooperative and problem-based learning.<sup>v</sup> In 2014, after a decade of test prep, El Paso schools shifted toward a focus on active learning—personalized and engaging experiences for every student, with a focus on habits of success as well as academic outcomes.

## Blended Learning

(2005 - Present)

Early adopters developed school-wide approaches that [blended the best of face-to-face teaching with online instruction](#). Students have the opportunity to partially learn online, and they have more control over time, place, path and pace.

## Deeper Learning

(2010 - Present)

The outcome framework introduced by the [Hewlett Foundation](#) combined Common Core, [Partnership for 21st Century Learning](#) and mindsets.

## Personalized Learning

(2014 - Present)

Largely an update to blended learning, the Gates Foundation began using this term to focus on desired outcomes and to better incorporate historical practices to differentiate learning.

## ➤ Flat and Sequential Origins

The first generation of digital content tended to be flat and sequential—essentially textbooks and multiple choice assessments that had been relocated to the online sphere. Adding video to the learning experience boosted the appeal, but the videos often appeared in the form of online lectures that mirrored the traditional classroom experience and offered little engagement for students. In many early examples of digital learning, the role of the teacher was de-emphasized, and the student experience remained passive. While digitizing traditional paper-and-pen materials and moving lectures online does expand access and options, it accomplishes very little toward the goals of personalizing instruction and actively engaging students in learning.

The power of digital learning lies not simply in replacing decades-old tools with technology, but also in utilizing it to drive a new way of providing instruction that builds on pedagogical best practices we already know to be effective. When we bring together the best instructional strategies with high-quality content and deliver it in a way that takes advantage of the capabilities of technology, we can create personalized learning environments that encourage all students to actively engage in learning rather than simply consuming content.



Realizing the true potential of technology takes more than videotaping a lecture, creating PDF versions of textbooks or giving students access to productivity applications to create documents and presentations. It means producing digital content that actively engages students in learning and supports teachers in building meaningful connections among the digital coursework, the physical classroom and the outside world.

## ➤ A Call for Active Learning

A growing body of research supports the notion that good teaching matters more to student achievement than any other single aspect of schooling.<sup>vi</sup> The recent RAND report [Teachers Matter: Understanding Teachers' Impact on Student Achievement](#) also shows that schools with the greatest achievement gains reported strong implementation of personalized learning strategies.<sup>vii</sup> Yet, while much progress has been made in the last five years, it is clear among field experts that we are still “in the early innings of a worldwide learning revolution.”<sup>viii</sup>

A common misconception exists that active learning is only “hands-on offline,” and personalized learning stays “online.” But both online and offline elements of a blended learning environment can be active and personalized. By identifying and meeting individual needs, students can be equipped to participate in challenging projects and to produce high-quality products. Quality learning experiences combine the right teaching with the right content in the right environment. Digital curriculum empowers teachers to personalize learning and create active learning experiences at scale—for all students. Active and personalized learning leverages great teaching and realizes the full potential of technology to boost student outcomes.

Today’s youth constantly use technology in their personal lives. With the new generation of active learning, students utilize technological tools and resources as they read, write, discuss, problem solve and engage with information to construct ideas and create meaning.



### **iNACOL's Attributes of Next Generation Learning From a Student's Point of View:**

- Personalized to my needs and learning goals
- Flexible so that I can try different ways to learn
- Interactive and engaging to draw me in
- Relevant to the life I like to lead
- Paced by my own progress and measured against goals I understand
- Constantly informed by different ways of demonstrating and measuring progress
- Collaborative with faculty, peers and others; not limited by proximity
- Responsive and supportive when I need extra help
- Challenging but achievable with opportunities to become an expert in an area of interest
- Available to me as much as to every other student

Source: *Image* from [iNACOL Twitter Account @NACOL](#)<sup>ix</sup>



## The Path to Active Learning

Active learning involves the combination of instructional best practices supported by a new set of tools that create efficiencies and allow for impact at scale. This extends opportunities for powerful learning rather than simply replacing the tools of the past with digital copies.

When combined with the historical lessons of human development, new tools make it easier to consistently execute at scale. As we move toward a modular future, one in which you can no longer imagine only an individual course of study, it will get easier to construct highly engaging, constructive pathways for all students.

The formula for driving active learning comes from the synergy of blending three key elements: instructional design, instructional materials, and school design.



## ➤ Instructional Design

At the classroom level, this requires teachers to develop specific deployment strategies that make digital curriculum a successful component to the active learning environment, while also making regular and meaningful connections to digital content. One way to accomplish this is by creating opportunities for students to talk about the work they do online. For example, teachers may choose to use specific components of online lessons to initiate whole class discussions or as the basis for discussion in individual or small-group instruction. Lessons and projects can also be designed to make the connections between digital and physical environments—either thematically or academically. Courses that are designed to intentionally blend the digital and physical elements, like Clark County School District’s Freshman Academy (featured below), can help prepare students for success in school and beyond.

The Clayton Christensen Institute updated its widely accepted definition of blended learning to include a third component that emphasizes the importance of connections.

### Question to Ponder:

Do my lessons and classroom practices support active learning?

“Students develop an understanding of a discipline by engaging in challenging activities that allow them to see how, where and when the important ideas and facts are relevant (Bransford et al., 2000). Students can acquire more factual knowledge when it is connected to meaningful problem-solving activities. Conversely, problem solving cannot be taught without a base of factual knowledge.”

— From *Research Put into Practice: Apex Learning Curriculum and Pedagogy\**

High engagement alone will not lead to higher achievement; rigor plays a large part as well. The goal for educators is authentic engagement, quality work products and challenging work that teaches young people to use their minds well and often, in order to prepare them for the world they will inherit.

### How do we set students up to be successful in both the digital and physical classroom? What if students could take one class and get two credits?

Clark County School District (CCSD) in Nevada has developed an orientation style course called “Freshman Academy” that does just this. Freshman Academy is designed for incoming high school students

in the district, but also works well with 6th graders. Students attend a Freshman studies class for one period in the day, similar to an advisory. They focus on the skills that CCSD has identified students need to be successful in the blended environment, such as time management and effective use of digital curriculum. Students are also

assigned an online elective course. “Freshman Academy” combines digital content with direct instruction and produces two credits for students: one online elective credit and one credit for their freshman studies course. The teacher is in the classroom teaching students how to be successful in both the digital and physical environments.

## ➤ Instructional Materials

A key component to [any blended learning implementation plan](#) involves identifying the platform and content that will best support program goals and best align with strategy.<sup>xi</sup>

Active, blended environments engage students in more meaningful, authentic tasks.

This necessitates online content that does not assume students are passive listeners and content consumers, but rather active participants and content creators.

Powerful learning opportunities are driven by content that helps students build anticipation for knowledge, develops critical thinking, as well as requires students to observe, inquire, create, connect and confirm.

### Action Learning Verbs to Look for in Product Design

When teachers evaluate online and blended tools, they can look for these key verbs that signal active engagement. Specifically, does the digital content ask students to:

**Observe:** Look at this. What do you see? What's different? What's the same? Are there patterns? Find objects, information and words. Observing can happen with images, charts, graphs, maps and text excerpts. Observing is very similar to exploring. It can be freeform or focused. It can allow students to see and discover different things, or it can encourage them to seek out something in particular. Observing happens naturally when curiosity is present. In academic settings, curiosity may have to be generated in the teaching for observation to feel real and legitimate.

**Inquire:** What do you wonder? What questions do you have? What information are you looking for? What information should you look for? Reflect.

**Confirm:** Get answers to your questions. Show me how that works. Help me check my work. Make sure you've got it. Say it in your own words. Summarize what you know. Check your facts. Check your understanding. Check to see if your prediction was accurate.

**Connect:** What are the relationships between these things? Are there categories and subcategories? Is this related to my life or to something else I've studied? Is this claim supported by the information? What parts make up this whole? What's it like? What's it not like? Can I analyze it?

**Create:** Try it. How would you solve this problem? Make or say something that hasn't been made or said before. Write, compose and draw. Synthesize. Express. Imagine: What if?

### Question to Ponder:

Are the tools and curriculum I use designed to support active learning?

## ➤ School Design

There are several influential factors of school design that either advance or block the implementation of active learning opportunities. These include:

**Goals:** A shared picture of active learning experiences, in addition to desired academic outcomes, lead to targeted objectives.

**Culture:** Shared norms, rituals, incentives and policies drive behavior. Does your school value compliance or creativity, quiet or a buzz of activity? Do young people have a voice and choices within the life of the school?

**Data:** Active learning requires rich, formative feedback as well as engagement measures and qualitative feedback from teachers and students. Measurement should be regular and intentional.<sup>xii</sup>

**Support systems:** Students should engage in demanding academic work that requires strong and personalized supports and links to youth and family services.

**Relationships:** Sustained relationships in a secondary school can be supported through an advisory structure that helps students figure out who they are, where they're headed and how they're going to get there. Advisors support course selection, academic monitoring and post-secondary planning, and they provide links to support services.<sup>xiii</sup>

**Community connections:** Active learning creates the need for community partners that support project-based learning, work experiences and service learning.

**Professional learning:** Active learning is not just for students. Teachers deserve blended and personalized learning, including just-in-time resources, collaborative team learning experiences and support from school leadership.

### Question to Ponder:

How do the school systems, structure and schedule support active learning?

Although individual classrooms impact how students learn and process information, overall school culture and climate also prove important. Teachers who feel supported at a building level will be able to take greater risks and make more significant changes to their practice. School design that supports learning empowers both the teacher and the students: resources are readily available to all school community stakeholders, as are professional development opportunities; a high degree of choice and collaboration exists; students, teachers and parents are aware of—and dedicated to—what students should know and be able to do; and there is an emphasis on creating meaningful relationships and engaging learner experiences.



## Conclusion

The power of blended learning lies not in simply digitizing traditional models of teaching and learning. The true potential of blended learning is to enable both personalized and active learning at scale—for all students.

The ideal learner experience is driven by empowered teachers, strong relationships, high engagement, consistent rigor, positive culture, authentic learning, frequent feedback and student agency. Teachers need tools and resources that encourage all of these components in a blended environment, and digital curriculum developers have a responsibility to ensure that this is the case.

Digital curriculum is key to creating the high engagement, high rigor and high support environments that we know we need consistently and at scale. Technology proves a powerful tool that makes it possible not only to personalize learning but also to engage students in active learning experiences. We must ensure that we are making thoughtful decisions about the curriculum, the way in which students engage in the curriculum, and how online experiences connect back to learning opportunities offline.

## ➤ Endnotes

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