

Blended Learning & Unicorns: What's Choice Got to Do With it?

Little did I know when I walked through the convention center doors at the 2023 Texas Computer Educators Association (TCEA) Convention & Exposition, one of my greatest take-aways would come from a simple poster session shared by a self-proclaimed “culture unicorn.”

Prior to this convention, I had dabbled in the world of blended learning. A learner-centered methodology, blended learning leverages the purposeful alignment of traditional face-to-face teaching practices and technology-enabled learning opportunities to create a personalized learning experience. (Keynes, 2017) I read and watched videos, but struggled to understand how to strategically implement this powerful teaching method for the benefit of my students and myself. Then I met Candice Adcock, an Instructional Technology Coach from Mesquite ISD, who asked me to take a step back from the technology aspect of blended learning and focus on the kind of choice blended learning could offer my students. Providing students with choice empowers them to take ownership of their learning and positively impacts classroom culture as it builds community, creates a safe environment, empowers student voice, cultivates risk taking, and fosters collaboration.

Blended learning emphasizes five elements of choice:

- Place
- Path
- Time
- Pace
- Evidence of learning (Product)

The key piece of information I was missing – the instructor doesn't have to provide choice in all these areas. Rather, they should select one element of choice to focus on, especially when building up the practice of blended learning. Determining what choice to offer is complex and is dependent upon multiple factors. Some questions we should ask ourselves include:

- Is there space for flexibility in choice within my course's curriculum and/or timeline?
- Do my students typically have electronic devices and internet available in class? At home?
- How much control over the learning process am I willing to concede to students?
- Do I have existing instructional material (recorded lectures, readings, videos, podcasts, etc.) that could be used to facilitate choice?
- How much effort am I willing to put into preparing or restructuring lessons and/or assignments to provide choice?
- Can I give myself permission to streamline my assessment and/or grading practices to keep students accountable while providing quick feedback?
- Am I willing to fail forward with my students as we figure out the practice of blended learning together?

With those questions in mind, the challenge now falls to me. What choice can I reasonably offer students in my courses? How can I use technology to support and/or leverage that choice? Can I, too, be a “unicorn teacher”?

Many thanks for the Engaging Classrooms Team for awarding me the Odyssey Grant which enabled me to attend TCEA gaining this insight and more into the power and practice of blended learning.

Keynes, J. M. (2017). Redesigning the Learning Experience. In E. C. Sheninger & T. C. Murray (Eds.), *Learning Transformed: 8 Keys to Designing Tomorrow's Schools, Today* (pp. 54–82). ASCD; Gale eBooks. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX7330800011/GVRL?sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=2bacd5d8>