



etb

Bord Oideachais agus
Oiliúna Dhún na nGall
*Donegal Education and
Training Board*

Blended
Learning
Framework
for Donegal ETB

Facilitated by H2 Learning

September 2021



H2 Learning
Digital Exchange
Crane Street
The Digital Hub
Dublin 8
Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Blended Learning Versus Emergency Remote Teaching.....	3
Blended Learning.....	4
Blended Learning in Donegal ETB.....	9
What might BL look like in Donegal ETB?	9
Implementing Blended Learning within Donegal ETB	13
Key Considerations for Donegal ETB	15
Digital Infrastructure and Services	16
Digital Competences of Staff and Learners	16
Pedagogical Supports for Staff	17
Digital Content.....	17
Assessment Supports	18
Social and Emotional Wellbeing	18
Quality Assurance.....	19
Key Actions for Donegal ETB	19

Introduction

Donegal Education and Training Board (Donegal ETB) has been actively using digital technologies across the Further Education and Training (FET) provision through numerous Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) initiatives. In the establishment of a TEL Working Group, and the appointment of a TEL Coordinator in October 2019, the ETB's FET service has been implementing a yearly TEL plan. TEL is also part of the ETB's strategy and a key objective of the FET service's TEL working group Terms of Reference is *"to use technology to facilitate and support innovative teaching and learning practices"* so as to *"ensure that learners are more engaged, and ultimately achieve more from their learning"*.

Since March 2020 both staff and learners in the ETB's FET service have been engaged in 'Emergency Remote Teaching' (ERT) and this approach has been primarily underpinned by TEL practices. While this period has been challenging for staff and learners, it has also highlighted a range of initiatives that have enhanced teaching, learning and assessment practices. Looking to the future, it will be important to reflect on these approaches with a view to further support staff and learners, as appropriate, through the use of blended learning approaches.

In the QQI Quality Assurance Guidelines for Blended Learning programmes, it recommends that provider's take a *"a strategic approach to the use of blended learning [and that it] is explicit and is shared with staff, learners and other stakeholders. A strategic plan includes appropriate investment in infrastructure and contingency arrangements to support all options for blended learning in an online context"*¹. They also state that the organisation should ensure that *"approaches to online learning taken by individual units are in line with institutional plans ... and that implementation plans are clear about the provider's aspirations in relation to blended learning"*.

Donegal ETB embarked on developing such a strategic approach to the use of blended learning in late 2020 by engaging H2 Learning to facilitate a research and consultation process that focused on articulating a range of options for blended learning. A series of four focused conversations were held with key stakeholders between December 2020 and January 2021 and these insights have informed the development of this document and an emerging Blended Learning Framework.

The emerging framework will support and guide the ETB's strategic approach to blended learning. The framework anticipates that the majority of FET courses and programmes across the ETB will be supported by the use of blended learning approaches. Furthermore, the framework will also enable the ETB to plan, design and accredit flexible forms of blended learning that comply with QQI Guidelines. The purpose of this document is to clarify what we mean by blended learning, both in terms of blended learning approaches/practices and blended learning accredited programmes and to identify the necessary supports required to implement such approaches across the ETB.

¹ <https://www.qqi.ie/News/Pages/QQI-publishes-new-Quality-Assurance-Guidelines-for-Blended-Learning-Programmes.aspx>

Blended Learning Versus Emergency Remote Teaching

Blended Learning (BL) is a contested term and there are multiple definitions and descriptions to describe what it looks like in practice. At its simplest “*blended learning is the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences*” (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004; p.96). There is a growing recognition that BL can be much more than this and can also include the use of digital technology in face-to-face teaching². Figure 1 below shows the continuum between the traditional in-person learning model at one end and a fully online model at the other and there are any number of BL models in between, depending on the context.

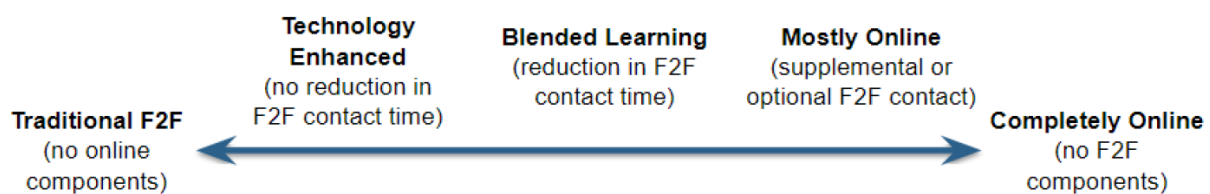


Figure 1: Continuum of Learning Models (Graham, et al. 2013 in Graham, 2017)

The term is typically used to denote a reduction in in-person contact time and an increase in self-directed learning, where some or part of a programme is taught remotely, either online or using a range of other technologies including learning packs, mobile phones and/or devices. BL has the potential to provide some learners with greater flexibility in relation to their learning, in terms of **how** they learn, **when** they learn and **where** they learn. It can provide them with opportunities to engage with learning materials and activities at their own pace and it allows them to engage in educational discussions and to complete learning tasks in their own time. Such choices provide learners with options and can remove the stress of having to acquire new skills or knowledge during live teaching events, either online or in face-to-face settings. It can allow them to engage with learning activities in their own time and to progress through them at their own pace by taking a path of their choosing. However, it should also be acknowledged that such practices may not be appropriate for all learners, particularly learners who require high levels of support throughout their learning journey.

The responses by educators to Covid-19 have accelerated the use of digital technology across all education and training sectors with many educators and learners having experienced an increased use of digital technologies, particularly to support remote learning. ERT was thrust upon staff and learners and they were forced to respond, without adequate time, resources and supports for effective implementation. Despite these challenges educators have engaged with ERT since March 2020 and they have made major strides during that time period in terms of how they have adapted their practice to support learners remotely. Furthermore, learners have reported that they have enjoyed elements of ERT and these particularly relate to the greater flexibility it has given them around their learning.³

² Sue Beckingham definition of BL, <https://twitter.com/suebecks/status/1430438279934058502/photo/1>

³ Donegal QQI Report

Blended Learning

QQI published programme guidelines for blended learning programmes⁴ in 2018 and they stated that in relation to programmes that would be accredited as blended learning programmes, then “blended learning will always involve face-to-face learning” and that programmes might include a combination of, for example

1. Online learning resources developed for online delivery
2. Access to learning technologies such as virtual learning environment
3. Tools to support virtual learning and off campus learning– virtual learning spaces and discussion and other forums to support students
4. Online activities to support formative and summative assessment
5. Face-to-face tuition
6. Assessment submitted, marked and returned to learners with feedback through electronic or other media

During Covid-19 many educators and learners experienced some or all of the practices listed above but they also found new ways to connect with their learners by using learning packs, phones and other approaches. The use of technology, new and old, certainly played a key role in enabling many learners to continue their course or programme during lockdown, by enabling learners to engage in remote learning. The original QQI guidelines, developed in 2018, stated that blended learning will always involve face-to-face learning and in this context it referred to in-person or on-site learning. However, the notion of face-to-face learning expanded during Covid-19 with the increased use of live conferencing technologies, such as Google Meet, Zoom and Teams, which enabled educators and learners to meet face-to-face live online without having to travel from their homes. This form of learning was new for many before Covid-19 and it has now opened up new possibilities for educators and learners that they will wish to explore in the future. In recent months QQI have acknowledged the progress made by the FET sector in relation to ERT and they are currently developing guidelines for fully online programmes⁵ and they are also updating their procedures for BL leading to QQI Awards⁶.

In addition to live online learning events, often referred to as synchronous learning, many learners also engaged in remote discussions, asynchronous learning, using online forums and social media platforms. This form of discussion often allowed learners to take their time in responding to a question or a topic, and rather than “shooting from the lip”, they could now formulate a considered response in their own time. Some quieter learners enjoyed participation in such discussions and would like to see such practices retained in the future.

The majority of Donegal ETB staff and learners have missed the opportunities to meet in physical learning spaces, either in a classroom, an outdoor setting or in a workplace. There is a strong desire to return to such settings where people can connect, socialise and learn with and from each other. There is now an opportunity to redesign teaching, learning and assessment practices in these spaces to

4

<https://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/Statutory%20QA%20Guidelines%20for%20Blended%20Learning%20Programmes.pdf>

⁵ [QQI Programme Validation and Re-engagement Provider Q&A Session - YouTube](#)

⁶ Application form for Approval of Provider’s QA Procedures for Blended Learning leading to QQI Awards, June 2021

include some of the practices that worked well during ERT and this will provide opportunities for extended use of blended learning approaches.

BL Approaches and BL Accredited Programmes

There are two different levels of BL integration which can be identified as different in the QQI QA regulation, BL approaches and BL accredited programmes, and which other awarding bodies, such as City and Guilds, do not use make. BL approaches involve the integration of digital technologies into existing in-person teaching, learning and assessment practices. Such practices are designed to enhance the teaching, learning and assessment practices so that the learner is more engaged in achieving their learning outcomes. Educators would have the freedom to design and implement such BL approaches in their own context without having to seek QA approval. BL approaches would constitute good teaching, learning and assessment and would allow educators to apply the knowledge they gained during ERT with their learners.

BL accredited programmes or BL leading to QQI Awards anticipates that learners will be required to take a portion of the programme online and this element will be scheduled in the programme calendar. Providers of such programmes will need to show they have the capacity to develop, deliver and quality assure blended learning programmes leading to QQI awards. QQI has recently revised its QA Procedures for Blended Learning leading to QQI Awards to reflect the lessons learnt during Covid-19. Organisations within or aligned to Donegal ETB will have to show they have the capacity to design and deliver such programmes or courses. In light of the experiences with ERT, there is an expectation that all ETBs will shortly embark on revalidating some existing or new programmes or courses as accredited BL courses in accordance with these revised QQI QA Procedures.

In light of these changes ETBs will be required to develop the following:

- Strategic Plan for Blended Learning
- Policy for Blended Learning
- Draft QA procedures to manage Blended Learning

While BL is a contested term QQI is requesting ETBs to develop a *“a definition for BL and a business and educational rationale for its deployment”*. Some see this as a positive in that it allows educators and learning organisations to *“develop their own meaning of the term within the context of their course or institution”* (Alammary, Sheard, Carbone, 2014; p. 443). It allows people to blend instructional methods (such as lectures, discussion groups, workshops, skills demonstrations etc.) with where learning takes place (such as in-centre, live online or self-directed learning at home or elsewhere) and the technologies that facilitate teaching, learning and assessment practices (such as digital technologies, books and other media). Ultimately these blends should *“support meaningful educational experiences”* (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004, p. 98) and undoubtedly these blends will differ across the varying FET contexts. It is impossible to have a one-size-fits all definition or description for BL, rather it is more appropriate to think of the potential range of blends, ranging from low-impact blends to high-impact blends (Alammary, Sheard, Carbone, 2014). Thinking of BL in this way will allow Donegal ETB to consider both BL approaches and BL accredited programmes.

The most recent definition from QQI states that *“a ‘blended programme’ means any programme which has some physical face-to-face interaction between programme staff and learners but which requires learners to access other part(s) of the programme online”*. The key word here is requires and therefore

if learners are required to access some part(s) of the programme online, then it needs to adhere to the QA Procedures.

Others, such as Graham (2017), have introduced this idea of a continuum of learning models (see figure 1 above) that ranges from traditional F2F to fully online and there are a range of learning models in between. Alammary et al (2014) identified **three different approaches** and these are follows:

- (1) **Low-impact blend**: adding extra activities to an existing course/programme
 - e.g., Where an instructor adds a Kahoot Quiz to their classes.
- (2) **Medium-impact blend**: replacing activities in an existing course/programme
 - Teacher records a presentation in advance of the face-to-face session and learners access it online. The face-to-face classroom session is shorter and focuses on discussion and deliberation. (The Flipped Classroom Model)
- (3) **High-impact blend**: which in the present case might be an accredited blended learning programme.
 - The ETB designs or redesigns an existing course/programme so that it has a blend of in-person and online timetabled learning activities. Learners are required to access some part(s) of the programme online. Such a programme is accredited as a BL course/programme and is validated by QQI. The course/programme is revalidated to be delivered in a blended way using a mix of technologies, pedagogical strategies and a range of modalities (i.e. a mix of online and F2F). Staff and learners are aware of this blend in advance.

Both the low and medium impact blends are linked to BL approaches and could potentially be found across all ETB courses and programmes. It should be noted that a low-impact blend has minimal impact on the educator, as it allows them to start small without fundamentally changing their course. The medium-impact blend is a replacement approach that has a limited impact on the educator and on the institution. There is a need to consult with ETB management to ensure that such a blend is permissible and in accordance with QQI guidelines, but such blends should be seen as an enhancement rather than a requirement. The high-impact blend will potentially have a major impact on Donegal ETB and on their educators and learners. The ETB will have to engage in a process to have the course or programme validated and the educators will fulfil a number of requirements that include; the necessary technologies and support structures in addition to the knowledge and skills to implement such a blended programme. The learners will also have to have the technologies and the necessary digital competences to engage with the revalidated course/programme. Many organisations typically start with low and medium impact blends and then, over time, move on to designing and implementing high-impact blends.

Alammary et al.'s (2014) research suggests that:

- An educator should **start by adding a simple online activity** that they and their students can easily manage. Later, if more online activities are needed, a medium-impact approach involving replacement could be considered.
- The addition of an activity must be driven by a **specific pedagogical need**, rather than, say, technology for technology's sake. Educators therefore need to find out what is problematic or lacking in their courses and understand how to apply the technologies and teaching approaches to address these issues

- The added activity should be **well integrated** into the course. It is essential to consider the connection between what occurs in class and what happens online.
- The course should not be **overloaded** with tasks and activities. It is worthwhile investigating students' opinions about the course components.

When designing low and medium blends, it is vital that educators consider their context and in particular their learners in designing such experiences⁷. There is a need to consider what the blend will look like and to plan for its implementation and thus there is an onus on the educator to decide how to blend a range of ingredients, which includes technology and online tools alongside other resources, such as learning packs, to enhance student learning. The educators have choices to make in this regard and their professional judgement comes into play in making such decisions.

There is a growing realisation that blended learning opens up opportunities to shift our pedagogical approaches⁸ and where learners may be struggling, we can redesign our learning experiences by applying different teaching strategies and using technologies to enhance student learning. This is at the core of blended learning and JISC⁹ and others have made similar observations.

It is tempting when discussing technology-enhanced learning to focus on the digital technology element, not least because of the cost and challenge of learning how to use it. However, we are very clear that the pedagogic considerations are vastly more important. All successful education and training requires close attention to learning design and content creation, and technology-enhanced learning is no exception. The imperative to start with the learning outcomes and work back to the teaching inputs has never been more important than in this period of digital transformation.



Figure 2, TeachNimble Blended Learning Framework

Figure 2 captures the TeachNimble Blended Learning Framework, which was adapted from the ABC Learning Framework created by Diana Laurillard and colleagues in University College London. It

⁷ <https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/blog/blended-learning-adult-education-summary-online-discussion>

⁸ [Blended learning: a long-term shift in pedagogy - HEPI](#)

⁹ <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/sites/default/files/ltr-report-change-and-challenge-for-students-staff-and-leaders-aug-2020.pdf>

captures the six learning types that learners typically engage in when learning and we have added into other dimensions, Social and Emotional Wellbeing and Assessment Opportunities. These are the types of activities educators typically design to enable learners to learn. Educators use a range of technologies to bring these learning types to life so learners can attain the prescribed learning outcomes.

There is a need to take a holistic approach to blended learning that is focused on achieving the prescribed learning outcomes. The following definition from the University of Leeds seems to fit well with the proposed approach in Donegal ETB, as it stresses the need for educators to make considered decisions in formulating a range of blends.

“The considered, complementary use of face-to-face teaching, technology, online tools and resources to enhance student education.”¹⁰

When it comes to validating or revalidating an existing programme as an accredited BL programme the course/programme should initially consider *why* they want to engage in such a significant change. The rationale for such decisions typically focuses on issues such as:

- Allowing greater **flexibility** to engage in self-directed or online learning and not have to travel to a centre all the time
- Attracting **new learners** currently unable to connect with Donegal ETB
- Accessing **specialised educators** who do not reside in Donegal

The opening section of the QQI Blended Learning Gap Analysis Tool and Action Plan leads with Why an organisation is altering the mode of delivery and asks, *why blended learning is being proposed as a means of delivering programme material?* If an organisation is unable to answer this question then they should not proceed any further in relation to developing an accredited blended learning programme. Where there is a clear and justifiable rationale for moving forward the organisation should then consider if they have the capacity to embark on such a journey. The creation of such high-impact blends will need to adhere with the QA Procedures for Blended Learning leading to QQI Awards. This will require a holistic approach on the part of Donegal ETB and we will outline what this might look like later in this document.

¹⁰ http://ses.leeds.ac.uk/download/88/blended_learning_strategy

Blended Learning in Donegal ETB

The Focused Conversations highlighted that staff and learners see BL as supporting more flexible learning experiences. While BL can provide many educators and learners with greater flexibility, it may also necessitate providing additional supports to learners with additional learning needs, who may actually require more one on one supports. The introduction and expansion of BL offerings within Donegal ETB has the potential of transform education and training offerings in a number of ways:

- to attract new learners from a wider range of educational backgrounds'
- to attract new learners from new locations
- to enhance and improve education and training programmes across the ETB.

The discussions found that learners wanted greater flexibility and control over:

- **Where** they can learn – the Place
- The **speed** at which they learn – the Pace
- The **pathway** they take when engaging with learning materials – the Path
- The **time** when they can engage in learning – Time

The discussions also highlighted that some courses/programmes needed higher levels of in-person learning¹¹ and that certain courses already contained significant elements of self-directed learning.

What might BL look like in Donegal ETB?

Donegal is a large county, and many see BL potentially reducing travel time for staff and learners, by reducing the in-centre elements of some existing courses/programmes. The in-person learning experiences, either in centre or in a work setting, were greatly missed during ERT and staff and learners are keen to restore this. In the future, there will be opportunities to combine successful aspects of ERT with in-person learning.

While some learners may not wish to engage in medium or high-impact blended learning initially, they should have opportunities to experience low-impact blends that help their learning. Therefore, a range of BL practices could be implemented across the ETB and these would be designed to fit with particular contexts, which would consider a range of factors into consideration. The blends would vary depending on the context and could include options such as:

- All courses across Donegal ETB could include a **simple online activity**, such as using a Kahoot quiz with learners. This could take place during an in person learning event where learners completed the activity on their phones, using the ETB Centre WIFI. The quiz could be used for formative assessment purposes. **[Low-impact blend]**.
- Here are some examples from across the ETB of a Low-impact Blend.
 - *Social IT* - tutors engaged with students by opening a new Kahoot Quiz each week meaning students could complete it in their own time. Students were also supported by posting out resources or handouts ahead of an online lesson so they could work through the content during the class, taking a flipped approach.
 - *Youthreach example: Online Training* - On returning to the centre in September 2020 discussions were held with students. Staff found that students needed further training and upskilling in getting online in order to complete their classes and courses

¹¹ In-person learning takes place when learners participate in learning activity in a classroom, a workshop, a studio or some other place-based space.

of study. Centre staff timetabled a week of in centre training and facilitation with the students to outline the practices and processes of completing work online. Thus students attended classes in the centre and completed work online.

- There is also the possibility for existing courses to reduce the amount of time in-centre and to replace it with more online self-directed learning (i.e. learners engage with online resources in their own time) and/or live online learning events (i.e. where learners interact with staff and/or fellow learners live online from home or another location). A number of courses across the ETB implemented such blends during Covid-19, with the in-centre teaching time slightly reduced and replaced with a mix of live online and self-directed learning activities. The creation and rollout of such models would not need to engage in revalidation with QQI. **[Medium-impact blend]**.
- Below is an example of a Medium-impact Blend from Youthreach and it shows how elements of an existing programme were moved online to reduce movement and interaction during Covid-19. In a post Covid world some of these activities could continue to take place online.
 - Students in the centre have all been provided with laptops/chrome books to work in their classes. In order to reduce movement and interaction students work and QQI assessments were primarily moved online. Tutors and students engaged in class based discussions on topics and each tutor had access to an interactive whiteboard for facilitation of teaching and learning. Staff used a range of online teaching and learning tools which included Google Classroom, visualizers, Wizer, Padlet, Mentimeter, Jamboards, Wordwall, Kinemaster as well as YouTube clips and videos.
 - The key here is that such a redesign would not overly reduce the amount of time learners currently spend in centre and the use of digital tools would enhance the existing face-to-face teaching activities. Learners would continue to predominantly engage in learning activities in person in the centre.
- In the future Donegal ETB will potentially redesign existing courses or create new courses so that they have a mix of f2f with required online learning activities. These programmes will be accredited BL programmes and they will be designed to meet the needs of particular learner cohorts. The ETB may wish to reach a broader geographical base of learners within and outside of Donegal and the revalidated programme might consist of online learning events, both synchronous and asynchronous, combined with face-to-face learning activities in Donegal over the life of the course. **[High-impact blend]**.

While ERT was to the fore during Covid-19 there were some examples of courses that moved modules or components fully online and used a blend of live synchronous and asynchronous learning activities to deliver a course or programme. Such courses would normally be described as 'online', rather than 'blended' online courses, as there was no in centre learning.

Here is an example from the Training Centre of a programme that delivered the ICDL Management Spreadsheets course online. This is an example of a high-impact blend.

- The Enterprise Engagement Unit were asked by a local company to provide advanced Excel training for some of their staff under the Skills to Advance programme. The client company specifically requested that the training be delivered remotely via Microsoft Teams as that was the collaboration software used internally, and most of the staff were still working from home under Level 5 of the Covid-19 regulations. The

instructor chose to use a flipped classroom approach, by providing the class with pre-recorded demo material, which was followed up with a walkthrough of the previous week's exercises during a synchronous session once a week. This was followed by the provision of further exercises based on the videos issued prior to the class.

Assessment took place under remote invigilation (as per the instructions provided by the awarding body - ICDL).

- Once Covid-19 restrictions are lifted in June 2022 such a high-impact blend would have to be revalidated to adhere with the QA Procedures for Blended Learning leading to QQI Awards.

Integration of Blended Learning across the ETB

Thus the integration of BL practices can occur in a multiple ways across the ETB, ranging from low-impact blends to high-impact blends. All educators should be confident and comfortable in using digital technologies so they can engage in BL approaches with their learners. Staff should be confident and competent in using digital technologies to design and implement such blends. Where it is appropriate some programmes or organisations within Donegal ETB may decide to design high-impact blends that **requires** learners to access part(s) of the programme online. The decision to design and implement such blends would need to be carefully considered and approved by the ETB's QA procedures.

Table 1 indicates how such blends might impact on the learner and on the educators and the ETB.

Table 1: IMPACT (on both teaching/teachers/institutions and on learners/learning/pedagogy)

	IMPACT (on teaching/teachers/institutions)		
	Low	Medium	High
IMPACT (on learners/ learning/ pedagogy)	Adding extra online activities to existing course	Redesign of existing course by replacing some of the face-to-face activities with online components	Building a new blended learning course from scratch
Low	Enhanced balance of learning types ¹² <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquisition • Collaboration • Discussion • Investigation • Practice • Production (e.g. online discussion, online collaborative annotation documents, online simulations)		
Medium	Some further enhanced balance of learning types	Further enhanced balance of learning types enabled by course redesign	
	Incorporation of some formative assessment (e.g. online quizzes, e-portfolios, peer assessment)	Formative assessment has a significant role in the course ¹³	
High			Creation of a good balance of learning types
		Greater flexibility and increased student autonomy ¹⁴	Flexibility and student autonomy
	Incorporation of significant elements of formative assessment	Incorporation of extensive elements of formative assessment	Incorporation of formative assessment fully into the course
	Some modification of summative assessment approaches	Significant modification of summative assessment approaches	Incorporation of innovative forms of summative assessment

¹² Learning types are the kinds of learning activities an educator might design for their learners, they are NOT associated with a type of learner (see Figure 2 for further detail).

¹³ important as there is less face-to-face interaction because a significant part of the course is online).

¹⁴ This is likely to have been a major driver for the course redesign

The idea of flipped learning¹⁵, which is referenced earlier as a medium-impact blend also came to the fore during the Focused Conversations, where learners engaged in some preparatory work in advance of a live session, the Before Event, and the Lesson Learning Event being a more active event focused on discussion and collaboration, with the After Event focusing on practice and consolidation.

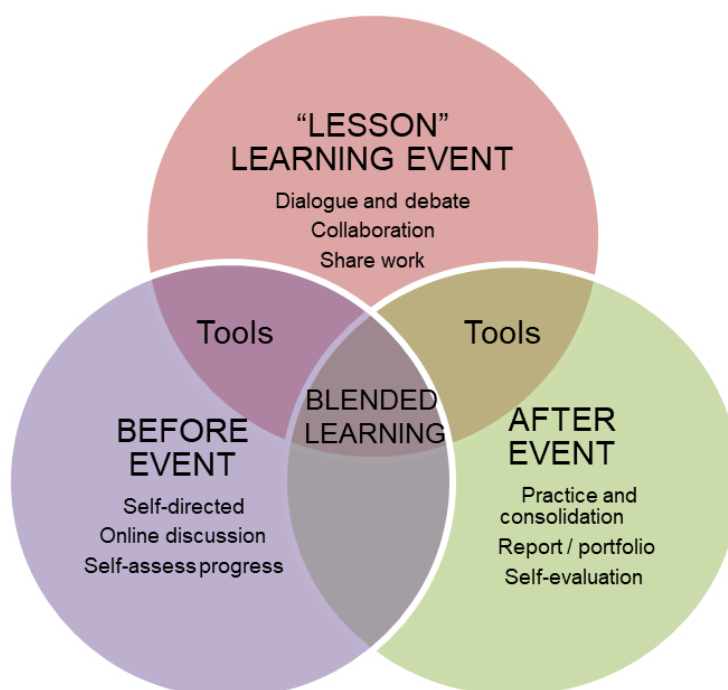


Figure 3, The Flipped Classroom Model

This model allows learners to engage in self-directed learning in advance of a Lesson Learning Event using a range of technologies, both old and new, and it frees up time during the Lesson Learning Event for more active forms of learning.

Therefore, to implement such blends Donegal ETB will need to ensure that the proper structures and resources are in place to design and implement a range of BL experiences. The provision of a range of blends will enable the ETB to expand its current education and training offerings and, in the process, reach new learners. The use of BL approaches allows the ETB to reimagine existing courses/programmes so that they provide learners with greater choice and control over their learning.

Implementing Blended Learning within Donegal ETB

The ERT Phase has identified a range of challenges for learners and teaching staff across Donegal ETB and many of these challenges will need to be considered in the design and rollout of BL. There is a growing realisation that BL approaches and, in particular, accredited BL courses and programmes need to be carefully designed and implemented. During Covid-19 staff had multiple opportunities to use a range of digital technologies with their learners and there is an expectation that many of these BL approaches will continue in the future. There is also an expectation that some courses and programmes will engage in a redesign process to move significant elements of existing or new programmes online

¹⁵ https://flippedlearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/FLIP_handout_FNL_Web.pdf

and these will need to be validated in time by QQI. Whether implementing BL approaches or new accredited courses/programmes there is a need to carefully consider the lessons learnt during ERT and apply these, where possible, to any future BL practices.

Table 2: Challenges for Learners and Teaching Staff with Emergency Remote Teaching

Learners	Teaching Staff
Access to suitable devices (computer)	Access to suitable devices (computer)
Access to reliable broadband	Access to reliable broadband
Appropriate Digital Competences	Appropriate Digital Competences to design and teach online
Difficulties with motivation/concentration/engagement with learning. Felt it was too easy to procrastinate online	Difficulties with designing learning experiences that motivate and engage learners to concentrate on their online course
Missing the social aspects of learning	Miss the social interaction with learners in face-to-face settings
Missing the structure of the in-centre learning day and having to get up and attend a course	Staff find it challenging to create structure for learners online
Exhaustion from sitting in front of a screen all day (screen time)	Exhaustion from sitting in front of a screen all day. Managing a work life balance
Home not a natural place for formal learning	Home now a space where staff are both working and raising their families
Frustration when learning is not working	Frustration not being able to connect and engage learners
Miss the element of peer learning and peer support , particularly when in the Centre with ETB staff and their fellow learners	Found it difficult to generate a rapport with learners online . Particularly challenging without visual cues
Online learning can lead to drop out from courses . One group felt that fully online does not work for some learners	Concerns over assessment integrity
	Covering curriculum content in a shorter timeframe is a major challenge

While some of these challenges are outside the control of the ETB; the majority of the identified challenges can be addressed over time. Donegal ETB is already working on addressing these challenges and established a range of supports for learners during the ERT Phase to enable them to participate in remote learning. In the future there will be a need to plan for BL and to provide the following supports for staff and learners by providing:

Digital Infrastructure and Blended Learning

- Access to suitable digital learning devices and learning platforms
 - Clear guidelines on what kinds of devices, including mobile devices such as phones and tablet devices, are required
 - Note that the use of mobile devices will have implications for learning design and access to learning platforms

- Increased IT Support for Online/Blended Learning
 - Troubleshooting Services
- Access to reliable broadband connections within Donegal ETB facilities

Teaching and Learning

- Developing the digital competences of all staff and learners
- Developing clear guidelines/protocols around BL
 - The role of the educator
 - The role of the learner
- Pedagogical supports to design and implement good BL experiences
 - Learning Design Support centrally to assist staff across the ETB design and implement BL and online learning materials and approaches
 - Teaching online approaches
- Support Assessment strategies
 - Formative and Summative
- Access to suitable digital content for online and BL
- Access to ongoing professional development for staff

Key Considerations for Donegal ETB

In order to implement BL across Donegal ETB, there is a need to take a holistic approach to the design and rollout of online and blended learning experiences. This applies both to the widescale adoption of BL approaches and to the rollout of accredited BL programmes.

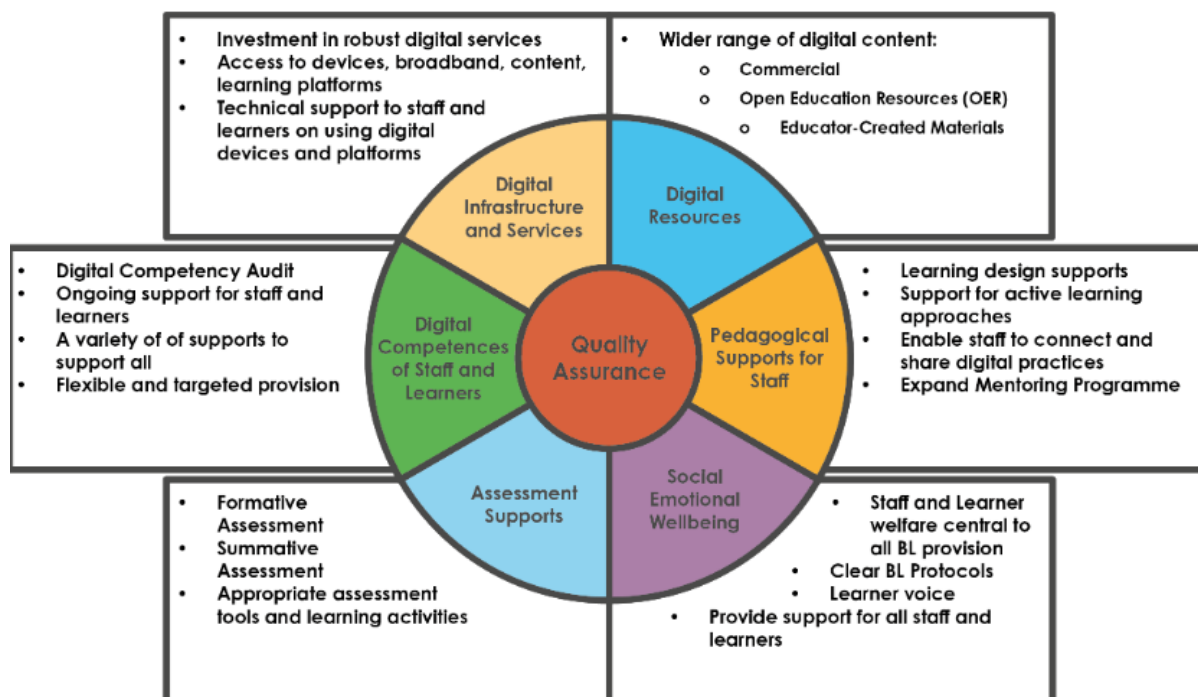


Figure 4, Blended Learning Framework¹⁶

¹⁶ The creation of this framework was informed by the RASE Blended Learning Framework, <https://sites.google.com/site/hkumoodle/pedagogical-model>

Digital Infrastructure and Services

While acknowledging that BL encapsulates more than digital technology, it is important to acknowledge that reliable IT infrastructure will be a key component of any future BL delivery within Donegal ETB. The ERT phase demonstrated how important it was to have access to reliable broadband, devices and platforms and there will be a need to continue investing in appropriate infrastructure to enable the ETB to offer meaningful BL experiences. Furthermore, the procurement of new equipment and platforms will also require ongoing investment in maintenance and upkeep of this expensive equipment. There has been significant growth in both the physical and virtual digital infrastructure since 2020 and this will be needed to be supported into the future.

The current IT Services Team have been commended for their work during Covid-19 and there is now a need to review their capacity to deliver a quality service in light of the extra equipment and the increased workload around the provision of BL. In addition to reviewing the capacity of the current team there is also a need to audit existing digital infrastructure to ensure that existing Donegal ETB facilities are equipped to support BL, ranging from low-impact to high-impact BL. Facilities will need broadband, so as to enable staff and learners to connect and utilise digital technologies, including phones and tablets, when required. Also, some high BL blends might require learners to have access to good WIFI connections and these could be provided in existing Donegal ETB facilities, including the new Digital Hubs. Therefore, the audit should consider if additional investment is required and where best to make this investment to further advance BL within the ETB.

In addition, to maintaining existing services there have also been calls to extend the service by providing workshops and clinics for staff and learners around using digital technologies effectively. This again raises issues around capacity and should be considered in any future audit. Ultimately there is a need to provide a structured service where staff and learners have access to a quality service, while also ensuring that the workload is appropriate for those providing the service. It is key to build BL on a solid foundation and the IT Services Team are key in this regard.

Digital Competences of Staff and Learners

While having access to reliable robust digital technologies is key, it is equally important to ensure that staff and learners are equipped with the digital competences to use these tools. The new European Digital Education Action Plan¹⁷ places a major emphasis on enhancing digital skills and competences and this should be part of all courses in Donegal ETB.

Significant strides have been made since March 2020 by staff and learners to develop their digital skills and competences and this should continue to underpin all future BL practices. It has been suggested that a digital skills audit should become part of all future inductions and that learners should have access to a range of courses to help them develop their digital skills over the lifetime of a course/programme. Such courses would focus on helping learners to utilise the key digital technologies they will encounter on their course.

Staff also will require ongoing supports to help them develop their digital skills and competences. They have identified the need for a range of interventions from short byte sized supports, to 'how to' videos to more comprehensive courses. There was also a call to expand the existing Digital Mentoring

¹⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan_en

Programme, so that more ETB staff are supported and scaffolded in developing their use of digital technologies over time.

There will be a need to develop a plan around enhancing staff and learner digital skills and competences, so that BL can be eventually integrated across all Donegal ETB courses and programmes.

Pedagogical Supports for Staff

The research on BL is very clear in highlighting the need for educators to plan and design BL experiences. This is particularly true in designing medium and high impact blends where consideration has to be given to the ingredients of the blend and to how it will be implemented. Many educators in Donegal ETB have already engaged with a range of professional learning supports around BL design and UDL. There will be a requirement to expand these supports, so staff are equipped with the knowledge and skills to design a range of BL and online learning experiences. In addition to redrafting their BL QA procedures, QQI are also developing procedures for fully online programmes. Their Blended Learning Gap Analysis Tool asks if an organisation has “expertise in instructional design and educational technology”. Therefore there will be a need to recruit specialists in learning design or to train up existing staff for this role, so that this criteria can be met. It would make sense to recruit centrally for such a position, so as to support all organisations within the ETB.

This resource could work on building capacity across the ETB in BL design. There is a need to provide staff, at various levels of the organisation, with access to courses on learning design principles. In addition to formal courses staff should also have regular opportunities to connect and collaborate with colleagues across the ETB to share practices and challenges. In this way the ETB can create a Community of Practice around BL approaches. Such CoPs such not be restricted to teaching staff but should also include other ETB staff involved in IT services, library and student support etc. Ultimately there will be a need to capture and share such practices more widely across the ETB and the FET system in general.

There may be a requirement to provide additional time for staff to avail of these supports and also to ensure they have time to trial new approaches with learners. Staff should be encouraged to innovate and try out new BL approaches and practices and where appropriate, share the lessons learnt. This can be done through existing communities of practice across the ETB for particular courses or programmes.

Digital Content

It was noted during the Focused Conversations that “handouts don’t move online easily” and that there is a need to source relevant digital content resources for use in blended learning and fully online courses/programmes. Some of these resources may need to be procured from external sources, while others may need to be developed internally by ETB staff. While many staff have dedicated significant time to developing such resources during Covid-19 there is still a need to develop additional digital resources. The creation of such resources is time consuming and has the potential to add to staff workload. There is a need to consider how additional digital resources can be developed and curated¹⁸, so staff have access to the following kinds of resources:

¹⁸ It should be noted that often a librarian provides such a service in higher education contexts and the ETB may need to recruit a person with this skillset.

- **Commercial:** Content that is produced by a commercial company and typically is purchased by an ETB or a FET provider. Such resources may also have free download versions on the Internet that individual FET practitioners may use.
- **Open Education Resources (OER):** Content freely available on the Internet and is designed for use and reuse in education and training settings. Such resources are typically developed by educational organisations such as universities, educational organisations or ETBs.
- **Educator-Created Materials:** Content developed by educators to use in their own learning settings and which is sometimes shared with other educators. The creation of such resources may also be supported by a teaching and learning support agency or by an ETB.

Some digital resources are housed on the QA Portal at present and it is recommended that the ETB takes a coordinated approach to sourcing relevant digital content for existing and future blended learning and online courses/programmes.

Assessment Supports

Blended Learning practices can support both formative and summative assessment strategies. During ERT many educators have expanded the tools they use to implement formative and summative assessment practices. This can range from a Kahoot Quiz to realigning an existing summative exam to an end of year of project that is submitted online via Google Classroom or Moodle. The use of digital technologies opens up alternative forms of assessment that educators may not have used previously, and these can be an integral part of blended or fully online courses/programmes. There are a wide range of tools that can be used to support these practices and the ETB should consider which tools they support centrally in terms of professional development and IT Services Support. There may also be some tools that will be procured centrally by the ETB or particular units or sections may procure certain tools for their learner cohorts.

Thus, there is a need to consider what technologies will be supported and to what level, particularly in relation to formative assessment strategies. New programmes or revalidated programmes may decide to realign their summative assessments and these need to adhere with QQI Guidelines and should align with existing QA protocols. There will be a requirement for staff to understand formative and summative approaches before embarking on integrating formative assessment technologies into their practice.

Social and Emotional Wellbeing

The ERT phase has highlighted the need that learners “*need to Maslow before they Bloom*”¹⁹ and the importance of ensuring learners feel safe and secure while engaging in learning activities. There is also a growing recognition that we also need to ensure that educators feel equally safe and secure to enable them to do their job, either online or in physical settings. The ERT phase highlighted some of the challenges that educators faced during that period in relation to having clear protocols around their role as online educators and how learners should interact and perform in online settings. Issues such as whether learners should have their cameras on or off during live online settings and when staff were

¹⁹ <https://www.edutopia.org/article/how-maslow-bloom-all-day-long>

available to respond to learner emails and requests for support, weren't always clear. There is a need to provide boundaries and protocols in the future for how and when educators and learners will engage, particularly when using online learning technologies.

Staff have reported that preparation for ERT required a greater time investment than their face-to-face teaching practices. This has been a particular issue for part-time staff, who are often contracted for the contact time they spend with learners. Staff time to prepare for online and blended learning courses/programmes should be explored to ensure staff have adequate time to prepare and repurpose their face-to-face courses for an online/blended environment. Staff will benefit themselves from participating in online courses as learners where they can actively experience online learning practices.

Some learners may not initially have the necessary digital competences or equipment to participate in online or blended courses/programmes, but they too should be supported to experience elements of blended learning. All learners should have opportunities to experience learning activities that are underpinned by blended learning approaches and this may require them to receive additional supports when in face-to-face learning settings. By providing such supports and experiences all learners will have access to a wider range of learning experiences within Donegal ETB.

Quality Assurance

Donegal ETB wants to design and offer high quality learning experiences for all their learners and this includes blended and online learning. Therefore, QA policies and procedures should be at the core of all BL provision across the ETB, and should inform good practice from low-impact blends to high-impact blends. Over time all educators should consider integrating BL approaches into courses/programmes so that learners are supported to achieve their learning outcomes. This will vary depending on the context in question.

QA will play a key role in revalidating existing programmes/courses as BL accredited Programmes. QQI has developed procedures to assist ETBs to engage in such processes and these should be adapted to meet the needs of Donegal ETB.

Key Actions for Donegal ETB

Finally, we have summarized the following key actions to be undertaken by to support the Donegal ETB strategic approach to Blended Learning into the future:

1. Develop a policy in relation to Blended Learning with relevant policies and procedures for all staff and learners within Donegal ETB.
2. Conduct an audit of existing digital infrastructure and of the capacity of the IT Services Team to enable them to continue providing a quality service with the inclusion of Blended Learning.
3. Develop a plan around enhancing staff and learner digital skills and competences to implement blended learning practices. Part of this plan should include an audit of staff and learner digital skills and suggestions on how to build 'basic' digital skills to participate in blended learning courses.

4. Continue to provide pedagogical supports for staff to design meaningful learning activities for their learners that utilise a range of digital technologies, both in-centre and online. The pedagogical supports should also include new forms of digital assessment, both formative and summative. This should consider the expansion of existing programmes, such as the digital mentoring programme.
5. Conduct an audit of digital resources for online and blended courses/programmes and develop a strategy to acquire and develop relevant resources. Such a strategy should outline who will do what.
6. Consider if existing or new blended learning courses/programmes will require alternative forms of assessment that go beyond final exams to include other forms of assessment that can be supported by digital technologies. There is a need to consider whether assessment supported by digital technologies provides opportunities to better assess some/all of the course objectives than is provided by existing assessment methods.
7. Develop QA procedures and guidelines for blended learning. Position these BL procedures and guidelines clearly in relation to existing QA procedures and guidelines so that they don't just become an add-on.
8. Ensure learner welfare is a core component of all future blended learning programmes and that supports are provided where required for learners who need additional supports.
9. Provide learning design supports to providers across the ETB, so they can engage in redesigning existing accredited programmes as accredited BL programmes for specific learner cohorts. Such supports should take a holistic approach and consider which course elements will be covered in face-to-face and online learning sessions.
10. Develop a phased costed plan to implement a range of blended learning experiences, ranging from low-impact to high-impact, over the next 3 years. This should commence with identifying courses/programmes that are already embarking on implementing blended learning.