



Should Active Blended Inclusive Learning (ABIL) Become the Sector-Wide Standard for Higher Education Teaching?

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Once upon a time, we knew that change was needed but we did nothing about it. This is the story that we have been collectively telling for some time now. For decades, research evidence has indicated very strongly that transmission-style education is less effective and especially disempowers those from underrepresented groups, and yet still we condone and celebrate this as the primary mode of instruction in most educational contexts around the world.

As I have stated, it's no secret that higher education needs to change, but what kind of transformation is needed and how can we enact this change? In this opinion piece, I will attempt to answer these questions by exploring the idea that an equity-focused evolution of active blended learning, which I'm calling Active Blended Inclusive Learning (ABIL), should be the sector-wide standard for higher education teaching. Why should we converge on this as the standard? Because it is the most effective approach for empowering learners and promoting equity of opportunity in education. In the paragraphs that follow, I will explain why.

What is Active Blended Inclusive Learning (ABIL)?

Active learning is all about empowering learners. In traditional pedagogies, the teacher is the protagonist of the story. Active learning is about making each learner the protagonist of their own story. According to my definition of active learning, 'rather than the teacher "transmitting" knowledge through lectures or reading, learners engage in a series of activities which require them to produce observable evidence of their learning' (Betts, 2024). This evidence of learning is critical because it allows us to ensure that teaching is empirical. Just as a researcher uses specific research methods to gather evidence to ascertain and fill gaps in collective knowledge, educators should use specific teaching methods to gather evidence to ascertain and fill gaps in the knowledge, skills and experiences of their individual students.

The traditional definition of active learning, as defined by Bonwell and Eison (1991), refers to instructional methods that engage students directly in the learning process. Unlike traditional passive learning - where students are merely recipients of information - active learning involves students actively participating in their education through a variety of techniques. These include collaborative exercises, problem-based learning scenarios, peer instruction, and experiential learning activities. Freeman et al (2014) further refined the concept, highlighting that active learning requires students to engage in higher-order thinking tasks, such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation - distinguishing it sharply from passive learning, which often limits students to memorisation and rote learning.

Active Blended Inclusive Learning (ABIL) can be defined as an approach to education that combines active learning techniques with digital technologies in a way that makes the learning environment more inclusive, reduces barriers to participation and amplifies the teacher's ability to gather observable evidence of learning at scale. One of the key challenges to implementing active and inclusive learning is that they are both difficult to translate to large class settings, but the use of digital technologies such as anonymous polls, collaborative online spaces, lecture recordings, captions, transcripts, alt-text, screen readers and generative AI tools can enable us to apply these principles even with hundreds or thousands of students.

Why is Active Blended Inclusive Learning (ABIL) important?

As stated in the introduction to the book [100 Ideas for Active Learning](#), 'current models of education need to make radical changes... starting with developing a curriculum that supports active approaches to learning' (Gowers, Oprandi and Betts, 2022). Too many educational institutions are still reliant on teacher-centred, transmission-style pedagogies of the type that Paulo Freire referred to as the banking model of education, where it is assumed that knowledge can be passively 'deposited' in the minds of students as a person would deposit money into a bank account (Freire, 1970). It is time for us to move beyond these outmoded assumptions and instead place evidence-based pedagogies, such as active learning and blended learning, at the forefront of our academic communities.

Higher education needs to be inclusive. Attainment gaps in education are a significant issue that affects various marginalised groups, including students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, neurodiverse students, and those from other underrepresented communities. As early as 1970, Freire argued that greater equity is needed, but over 50 years later there are still significant inequalities, widespread use of pedagogies that disempower vulnerable groups and huge gaps in performance between traditional students and those from non-traditional backgrounds.

When combined judiciously with active learning and inclusive pedagogic approaches, learning technologies and blended learning strategies can be some of the most effective tools for removing barriers to learning and reducing the inequalities and gaps in attainment for diverse groups of learners - especially those from marginalised groups and non-traditional backgrounds.

What is the evidence for Active Blended Inclusive Learning (ABIL)?

There is a strong body of evidence on the effectiveness of active learning (for example, Deslauriers et al, 2019; Freeman et al, 2014; Michael, 2006) and how digital technology can create effective learning environments (for example, Hofer et al, 2021; Noetel et al, 2021; Bond et al, 2020). Research findings also suggest that active learning is more inclusive, as it has the power to reduce attainment gaps for marginalised groups (see Ballen et al, 2017; Theobald et al, 2020). As far back as 2006, Joel Michael at Rush Medical College conducted an evaluation of whether there was sufficient evidence to support active learning and concluded that 'the very multiplicity of sources of evidence makes the argument compelling' that 'active learning, student-centred approaches...work better than more passive approaches' (Michael, 2006, p 165). By standardising our sector-wide teaching and learning cultures around active blended inclusive learning, we can ensure that learners are given equal opportunity to succeed and educators have a more robust learning design framework in which to situate their pedagogic practice.

Active blended inclusive learning is crucial because it significantly enhances student outcomes compared to traditional teaching methods. Theoretical frameworks such as constructivist learning theory, championed by Piaget (1976) and Vygotsky (1978), suggest

that learners construct knowledge through experience and social interaction, making active engagement key to deep learning. Empirical evidence supports this - for example, a meta-analysis by Freeman et al (2014) found that students in active learning environments were 1.5 times less likely to fail and showed a 6% improvement in exam scores compared to those in traditional lectures. Recent studies, such as those by Deslauriers et al (2022) and Kim et al (2023), further corroborate these findings, demonstrating higher student satisfaction, better conceptual understanding, and improved performance when active learning strategies are employed.

Active learning approaches are intrinsically inclusive, because they personalise learning and provide opportunities for all students to engage with the material in ways that suit them best (see Chi & Wylie, 2014). By shifting away from teacher-centred approaches, active learning allows for differentiated, adaptive instruction that can reduce achievement gaps. Theobald et al (2020) found that active learning particularly benefits underrepresented students in STEM disciplines, narrowing achievement gaps and fostering a more equitable learning environment. This adaptability makes active learning a powerful tool for promoting educational equity, ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, can succeed.

Examples of pedagogic strategies that can support Active Blended Inclusive Learning (ABIL)

- 1 **Flipped classroom:** In a flipped classroom model, students are provided with learning materials such as videos, readings, or podcasts to engage with before class. This allows class time to be used for active, collaborative activities such as group discussions, problem-solving tasks and hands-on projects. This strategy supports ABIL by giving students flexibility in how and when they engage with content, while also allowing for more interactive and inclusive in-class experiences (see Di Ciolla, Nerantzi & Chatzidamianos, 2002; Ogamba, 2022).
- 2 **Universal Design for Learning (UDL):** UDL is an educational framework that aims to accommodate the diverse needs of all learners. By providing multiple means of representation (for example, text, audio, video), engagement (for example, choice of topics, collaborative work), and expression (for example, written, oral, creative projects), UDL ensures that learning is accessible and inclusive for students with varying abilities and learning preferences (see Middleton, 2022).
- 3 **Peer-assisted learning:** Implementing peer-assisted learning strategies, such as peer tutoring or study groups, encourages students to support each other's learning. This method fosters a collaborative environment where students can share different perspectives and build a sense of community, which is central to the ethos of ABIL (see Kyrousi, 2022; Pedersen, 2002).
- 4 **Project-based learning (PBL):** PBL encourages students to work on complex, real-world projects over an extended period. This strategy promotes active engagement, critical thinking, and collaboration. By integrating interdisciplinary themes and allowing students to choose topics relevant to their interests and backgrounds, PBL supports inclusivity and engagement in blended learning environments (see Beggs, 2022).

Examples of how learning technologies can support Active Blended Inclusive Learning (ABIL)

- 1 **Interactive learning scenarios using simulations:** Educators can create interactive learning scenarios using simulation software, allowing students to engage in virtual experiments or real-world simulations. For instance, medical students could practise

diagnosing patients in a virtual clinic, or business students could simulate running a company. This strategy supports ABIL by providing hands-on experience in a safe, controlled environment, catering to diverse learning needs and allowing students to learn from mistakes without real-world consequences (see Betts, 2022b; Farrow, 2022).

- 2 **Use of polling tools for instant feedback:** During live sessions, educators can use polling tools like Poll Everywhere or Mentimeter to ask questions and gauge student understanding in real-time. These tools can also be used to facilitate discussion and encourage participation from all students, including those who might be hesitant to speak up in class. This supports ABIL by providing immediate feedback to both students and instructors, helping to identify and address learning gaps on the spot (see Osituyo, 2022; Richardson, 2022).
- 3 **Asynchronous online discussion boards:** By integrating discussion boards within an LMS like Canvas or Moodle, educators can encourage continuous, asynchronous engagement with course material. For example, students could discuss weekly readings, share insights, and respond to peers' posts. This strategy supports ABIL by allowing students to participate at their own pace, fostering a more inclusive environment where everyone's voice can be heard (see Vianya-Estopa, 2022).
- 4 **Digital storytelling for reflective learning:** Educators can use digital storytelling tools, such as Adobe Spark or WeVideo, to encourage students to create multimedia presentations that reflect their learning experiences. For instance, students could create a video journal summarising key takeaways from a course or project. This approach supports ABIL by enabling students to express their understanding creatively and in ways that align with their personal learning needs (see Beggs, 2022; Betts, 2022; Surendran & Surendran, 2022).

Examples of how Active Blended Inclusive Learning (ABIL) could be implemented at an institutional level

- 1 **Curriculum redesign initiatives:** Institutions could embark on a curriculum redesign initiative to integrate ABIL principles across all programmes. This might involve faculty development workshops on inclusive pedagogies, redesigning courses to include more blended learning opportunities, and incorporating diverse perspectives into course content. Institutions could also encourage departments to collaborate on interdisciplinary ABIL projects (see Betts, 2022a).
- 2 **Support, professional development and infrastructure for learning technologies:** Universities can establish holistic support systems for the integration of learning technologies. This includes creating Blended Learning Hubs - physical spaces equipped with advanced technology and flexible seating arrangements for hybrid learning - and providing ongoing professional development for educators. Training sessions could focus on using technology to support ABIL, ensuring that faculty are equipped to create inclusive, blended learning environments that leverage the latest tools effectively (see Di Ciolla, Nerantzi & Chatzidamianos, 2002; Groothuisen & van den Beemt, 2022; Ogamba, 2022).
- 3 **Equity and inclusion policies:** Institutions could develop and implement policies focused on equity and inclusion, including specific goals related to reducing attainment gaps and supporting underrepresented students. This might include establishing dedicated support centres, mentoring programmes, and scholarships aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion within the student body.

- 4 Building communities of practice and setting up a satellite group of the Active Learning Network:** Institutions can foster communities of practice between educators and students by connecting them with networks like the Active Learning Network. These communities can serve as platforms for sharing best practices, discussing challenges and developing innovative approaches to ABIL. By engaging with these networks, institutions can ensure that educators are continually learning and evolving their teaching strategies to better support diverse student populations (see Betts, 2024).

Conclusion and call to action

At the beginning of this opinion piece, I stated that higher education needs to change and asked two questions: what kind of transformation is needed and how can we enact this change? Through exploring this topic in more detail, I have tried to demonstrate that active blended inclusive learning is strongly supported by research evidence and also show how we can transform teaching and learning in line with this educational approach.

Going forward, the wider sector and the leadership at various institutions need to align on firmly moving in this direction. For this to happen, policies and strategies need to be put in place, so that there is a clear message from the top, but there also needs to be action from the ground up. Check your institutional strategies and policies. Do they explicitly state a commitment to the words - active, blended and inclusive? If not, then why not? Are these words reflected in your departmental policy and strategy? Are they deeply integrated into the curriculum development process, learning management system course templates and professional development offerings for staff (for example - PGCertHE, workshops)? How well are they communicated to students, integrated into the orientation process and embedded in support resources and study skills workshops? If the message does not permeate through the whole organisation, then it will be difficult to bring about change. If you do not see those words in processes, documentation and resources at all levels, then you may want to consider taking steps to get them added.

Institutions should build a community around active blended inclusive learning at each institution. Setting up a satellite group of the Active Learning Network is one way to do this, but there are many others. Find a way that works for your context. Community is a great catalyst for change.

Finally, look around you with a critical eye at the sector, your own institution and your own learning environment. What other aspects of your institution could be improved in relation to active blended inclusive learning and what can you do to help make those changes happen? Be proactive in identifying these opportunities for change towards more equitable practices.

All good stories come back to the beginning when they get to the end. So, should active blended inclusive learning become the sector-wide standard for higher education teaching? Absolutely. However, it starts with us. If higher education is going to change, it needs every one of us to work together to transform the culture and create an environment where, in spite of the challenges, we can use active blended inclusive pedagogies to rewrite the script, address societal inequalities and once again empower learners as the protagonist of their own story.

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Published by QAA, and produced by the sector and QAA Scotland, this report/resource has been commissioned by the Scottish Funding Council to support its duty to secure provision for assessing and enhancing the quality of fundable further and higher education provision.



Published - September 2024

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786
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