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Student Perspective on the Efficacy of Blended Learning in an AP English Classroom while Transitioning through a Pandemic

Laura Hass
*Dominican University of California*

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Laura Hass
Candidate

Jennifer Lucko, PhD
Program Chair

Matthew E. Davis, PhD
First Reader

Rebecca Birch, EdD
Second Reader

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Student Perspective on the Efficacy of Blended Learning in an AP English Classroom while Transitioning through a Pandemic

By

Laura Hass

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

Dominican University of California
San Rafael, CA
May 2022
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Abstract

Returning from an online and hybridized learning experience, in the wake of a global pandemic offers opportunities to integrate new strategies for student engagement and meeting academic standards. This research uses a theoretical framework that includes critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000), Universal Design Learning (Novak & Tucker 2021) and a constructivist approach (Bada & Olusegun, 2015) to blended learning. Tucker (2020) has shown that blended learning shifts classroom workflow, encourages grading practices that are sustainable, fosters partnerships between the teacher and student, and encourages students to take an active role in tracking, assessing, and reflecting on their own learning. This qualitative research focused on AP classroom practices, and included 61 high school advanced placement (AP) English students. It used a constructivist worldview with a phenomenological approach to specifically elicit student perspectives on blended learning. Instruments used for data collections included lessons, interviews, documents, and audiovisual and digital materials. Research findings revealed that art helps students connect literary concepts such as themes, symbolism, imagery, and plot to English course content. Second, students found others’ viewpoints interesting when given the opportunity to collaborate. Finally, it was found that memoir piques student interest and creates personal connection. This research has important implications for how teachers can provide the space for students to create change in their school environments, and more equitable access to learning, as well as the kinds of professional development and training that could be made available for teachers to incorporate blending learning strategies in a post-pandemic learning environment.
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This work is dedicated to all of the burnt out teachers, the uninspired students, the overwhelmed administrators, and everyone who has an interest in improving education for all learners.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

After almost five years and four schools, the researcher noticed the same themes across her experience with students: passive learning, unmet learning needs, and overall apathy (felt by both learners and educators). This led the researcher to seek ways to make learning more accessible and engaging for all learners. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the numerous leaks, cracks, and barriers in the education system. Many questions emerged for the researcher during remote learning like “What’s the point of this assignment I assigned the students to do?”, “How can I make this learning activity accessible not only to online learners, but also learners with special needs, English language learners, and all learners in between?” The lack of a shared physical space for our classroom during remote learning coupled with all of the challenges remote learning presented, pushed the researcher to think about how to provide an equitable learning environment more so than ever before. Remote learning presented the researcher with a unique opportunity to expand her knowledge and skills in leveraging technology to provide equitable learning for all learners through the implementation of blended learning strategies.

After reading Balance with Blended Learning by Catlin Tucker, the researcher was inspired to try out blended learning strategies in her remote and hybrid learning environments during the 2020-2021 school year. She observed that she was more engaged with the work that she was doing and so were her students! Through the implementation of blended learning strategies, she noted that she could provide support to her students in a way that was efficient and effective. She decided that she wanted to contribute to this topic in the higher education setting and this research study is the product of that journey.
Statement of Purpose

The three main frameworks the researcher included in the literature review offer a foundation of important principles that drives the focus of the research study - blended learning. Freire’s pedagogy, constructivism, and universal design for learning (UDL) help to demonstrate the underlying values and principles that blended learning seeks to put to action in the learning environment. Freire strived for empowerment as a goal for education and he was critical of traditional learning where he viewed learners as empty agents (Riasati & Mollaei, 2012). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a framework that supports the implementation of blended learning strategies. Constructivism is based on the notion that knowledge is acquired through social interaction versus being received or discovered (Senior, 2010).

Novak and Tucker (2021) elaborate on Staker and Horn (2012) as to how “Blended learning is the combination of active, engaged learning online combined with active, engaged learning offline to provide students with more control over the time, place, pace, and path of their learning.” Blended learning models, recommended blended learning practices, benefits of blended learning, inequities, and counter-perspectives on online education are reviewed in the literature. Hratinski (2019) suggests that more research and practice in the different blended learning definitions, models, and conceptualizations are needed. Kennette and Wilson (2019) have found little research focused on students’ perception of UDL in action in the classroom. This research study has the potential to fill these gaps in the literature while helping to advance educational equity and social justice for all learners through the structuring of blended learning strategies. The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine if blended learning strategies increase student engagement in the reading of a class novel for advanced placement high school
English students who have recently experienced many challenging environmental impacts on their educational experience.

**Overview of the Research Design**

This qualitative research represents a constructivist worldview with a phenomenological approach. The study supports a constructivist view because I am seeking an understanding of students’ perspective and because it relies on participants’ views and includes the use of open-ended questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I decided to conduct qualitative research through the gathering of multiple forms of data such as interviews, observations, documents, and audiovisual information.

The two research questions that my research aimed to answer were: How can blended learning strategies be structured to increase high school advanced placement student engagement in American literature while transitioning through a pandemic? And how do those strategies support student engagement with reading? The research took place at a private high school that I will refer to as Stone River High School. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for the school and students. At the time of research, Stone River High School enrolled 512 students served by 42 teaching faculty, and four counselors. 385 of the students are White, 76 students are two or more races, 24 students are Asian, 19 students are African American, 7 students are Native American, and 1 student is Pacific/Hawaiian Islander.

The population being studied in this research comprises 61 advanced placement English students from Stone River High School. The sampling design for this population was single stage. Students were introduced to the research study and informed about the invitation to participate verbally in class. I have personally benefitted from using blended learning strategies as a student and as a teacher. I am also a fan of Catlin Tucker who is an author, trainer, and
speaker on blended learning practices in the classroom. My experiences of learning and the cultural milieu in which I have lived impact my views favorably toward the use of technology in the classroom.

**Significance of the Study**

The findings demonstrate that blended learning strategies engage students with the reading in the advanced placement English course content. One of the findings that emerged from this research study was that the incorporation of art in blended learning helped students to understand English concepts. One day, students were participating in a station rotation activity. One of the stations that quickly became a hit amongst the students was the “Sketchnotes” station. I observed students enthusiastically focused on creating vivid images that represented themes such as “Family”, “Addiction”, and “Poverty” among others. I overheard students discussing the content of the story and helping each other discern the main events that transpired.

A second finding that emerged from the research was that students found their peers’ viewpoints interesting when given the opportunity to collaborate. For instance, one student, Ari, shared that, “I found it interesting how even different people from the same group after talking together answered the questions differently.” The final finding that emerged from this study was that the reading of a memoir gave students something to relate to, thus creating a bridge for authentic inquiry and conversation.

The revelation found in this study is that the incorporation of art helps students understand English content such as imagery, symbolism, plot, and theme through the use of colors and drawings, and that students found their peers’ perspectives interesting through collaboration, and that videos can help students engage and more deeply comprehend literature by providing important background knowledge. The findings of my study fill the gap in the
literature because the findings contribute to the need to understand students’ digital learning experiences (Garcia and Lee, 2020) and the need for research concerning different pedagogical scenarios and their impact on student outcomes (Detienne et al., 2020).

**Research Implications**

The implications of my findings for practice and policy are many. The findings demonstrate that blended learning strategies should be further implemented to support student engagement. The incorporation of art, student collaboration, and relatedness leads to increased student engagement and scaffolds learning for many learners to access the learning content and skills. I will continue to implement blended learning strategies in my classroom moving forward. Teachers can incorporate blended learning strategies to increase student engagement in reading.

My research demonstrates that schools need to provide teachers time and space for them to plan lessons that implement these strategies. This will entail providing teachers with self-paced and choice-driven professional development in blended learning. Districts need to provide funding and access to professional development opportunities for teachers to learn more about blended learning strategies and how to implement them in their own classrooms. The state should implement a policy that mandates a required blended learning course in every teacher credential program. There should be a state policy that student teachers effectively incorporate blended learning strategies into their student teaching experience and that it’s observed by their university supervisor. My findings foster social justice because the findings of my research demonstrated that providing different learning opportunities increased engagement in reading for all learners. The various blended learning strategies in the study provided diverse ways for students with different learning styles to engage with the course content and skills. This fosters
social justice because blended learning strategies help to offer all learners the opportunity to succeed in the classroom.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In March 2020, teachers had to transition almost overnight into online learning with little time for professional development training and practicing skills and new routines with students (Birch & Lewis, 2020). Many resources placed a greater focus on the digital tools, rather than on instructional strategies (Rao et. al., 2021). Even as students have returned to in-person schools across the nation and worldwide, many schools are still grappling with the effects of Covid-19 such as student and teacher quarantine, mask mandates, modified or canceled school events, and school shutdowns due to widespread Covid-19 cases. The many and wide ranging effects of Covid-19 has resulted in the need for the learning landscape to evolve with the changing circumstances. More broadly, Tucker and Novak (2021) have found that there is a lack of student voice and choice in education that has resulted in low student engagement. Coates (2005) defines student engagement as the students’ interaction with learning activities and resources intended to produce authentic learning. Blended learning provides a pedagogical and practical approach to address many problems in education for both students and teachers including teacher burnout, low student engagement, and lack of student voice and choice (Novak & Tucker, 2021).

This literature review approaches this subject from four points of view. Firstly, Friere’s critical pedagogy will be examined because blended learning principles are essentially rooted in the values and frameworks found in Freire’s critical pedagogy. Secondly, Universal Design Learning (UDL) will be explored because UDL serves as the framework for creating a blended learning curriculum that provides all students with equitable access to learning. Thirdly, a constructivist approach to learning will be examined because the roles of the teacher and student in a blended learning environment has its foundations in the tenets of constructivism. Finally, blended learning strategies will be explored.
Paulo Freire’s Critical Pedagogy

The foundation of what is commonly referred to as “Critical Pedagogy” in the education community, comes from Paulo Freire’s 1968 book titled, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire was from a middle class family in Brazil and became an educator (Russell, 2020). Due to the stock market crash in 1929 that resulted in the Great Depression, Freire’s family also found themselves in poverty. At the time, the quality and reach of education in Brazil was poor, the illiteracy rate was high, and the level of education was low (Shih, 2018). Within this particular context, Freire hoped to free the oppressed. However, the majority of people in Brazil could not view the world through a critical lens and lived in a “silent culture” (Shih, 2018). Freire’s ultimate hope was to awaken the critical consciousness of the oppressed thus shaping his idea of critical pedagogy (Shih, 2018).

Freire strived for empowerment as a goal for education and he was critical of traditional learning where he viewed learners as empty agents (Riasati & Mollaei, 2012). Friere held a vision in education that was forward-thinking and away from conventional “banking methods” (Mayo, 2014). The “banking method” is described by Friere (1993) as a teaching practice whereby educators “deposit” information into the minds of students. Friere states that the more students go along with the banking concept, the less they develop critical thinking skills and the more they accept a passive role in their education. Thus, creating a new generation of uneducated people for oppressors. Students are most likely to unthinkingly adopt the ideology of those who have taught them if they are not taught how to reflect about the ways in which they think, and why they think as they do (Russell, 2020).

Friere (1993) described how, “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are
simultaneously teachers and students” (p. 72). Freire highlights the importance of both teacher and student having both roles of educator and learner in order for authentic learning to occur. Of educators Freire writes, “...His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them” (Freire 1993, p. 75).

Freire also stresses the importance of dialogue. Freire states that dialogue has the power to transform and humanize the world, but that dialogue cannot simply be regarded only as one person (Freire, 1993). In order to create real change, Freire states that the people must be assigned a significant role in the change process in order for real change and transformation to occur (Freire, 1993). Freire states that if there is no trust or faith in the people then change is not carried out for the people but “‘by’ the people for the leaders: a complete self-negation” (1993, p.129). Freire’s vision of a mutually beneficial teacher-student learning partnership has its relevance in blended learning strategies because blended learning is grounded in the teacher being an equal partner in learning with the student so that both student and teacher voices are equally powerful and respected.

**Universal Design for Learning Framework**

Freire’s pedagogical principles provided an important theoretical framework for UDL, and by extension blended learning. UDL requires that teachers trust the students to make the best learning choices for themselves, and blended learning requires that teachers and students have a trusting and reciprocal partnership where both parties have equal voice.

**UDL Design to Overcome Barriers to Learning**

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is rooted in efforts to help students who were underserved in schools, particularly those with disabilities (Tucker & Novak, 2021). It was
discovered that removing barriers for those students as a consequence removed previously hidden barriers for learners who were not identified for special education (Tucker & Novak, 2021). Learning barriers for students with disabilities usually arise in the following areas: academic areas, executive function, and learning behaviors (Rao et. al., 2021). Additional challenges arise in an online learning environment due to lack of real-time guidance from teachers, lack of just-in-time support and feedback, and the need for students to manage instructional activities more independently (Rao et. al., 2021). These learning barriers do not just exist exclusively for students with disabilities just as UDL doesn’t benefit students with disabilities exclusively.

**Academic Barriers.** Rao et. al. 2021 have reported that when reading texts, students may struggle with decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension and that when it comes to writing, students struggle to come up with ideas, organizing ideas, drafting writing, and mechanics of writing. UDL paired with instructional strategies such as blended learning help to enhance support for all learners. More academic challenges may arise in an online learning environment. For example, “teacher talk” and instructions are more text-based (Rao et. al., 2021). Students may have less opportunity to ask clarifying questions, and they may not engage with reading due to challenges (Rao et. al., 2021). The academic barriers that all learners face in-person and online are important in understanding how blended learning, in conjunction with UDL, helps to lower these barriers.

**Executive Functioning Barriers.** In terms of understanding expectations, students may struggle to remember instructions, follow step-by-step directions, and know how and when to ask for help (Rao et. al., 2021). When it comes to planning and organization, students struggle to break tasks down and set realistic goals, manage their time, self-monitor their time, and manage
resources (Rao et. al., 2021). In an online learning environment, students may be unsure how to begin and be unable to get just-in-time feedback (Rao et. al., 2021). Blended learning strategies such as one-on-one conferencing and the station rotation model are meant to combat these barriers to learning. Online students may not have clarity on assignments and directions and teachers may not be there to monitor progress and offer scaffolding and assistance (Rao et. al., 2021).

**Learning Behavior Barriers.** When it comes to motivation, students struggle to engage and persist with tasks. Rao et. al. 2021 documented how students find staying focused to be challenging. In terms of self-regulation, students sometimes develop a learned helplessness, lack coping skills, and struggle to use feedback (Rao et al., 2021). And in an online learning environment, boundaries between home and class are blurred, and students may avoid tasks that they prefer not to do or find challenging (Rao et. al., 2021). Furthermore, a lack of peer interaction can be isolating and potentially de-motivating for students (Rao et. al., 2021). Finally, without feedback students may be unsure if they are meeting expectations (Rao et al., 2021).

**UDL History and Development**

Novak and Tucker (2021) note that the term “Universal Design” was coined by architect Ronald Mace in 1988. Mace defined it as the “design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.” (p. 16). UDL adapts Mace’s definition to learning. UDL is less about what you do and more about what you believe about teaching and learning (Novak & Tucker 2021). For example, a teacher that teaches with UDL in mind will first consider the potential barriers to learning that could arise in a lesson before planning it. A teacher will then consider which digital tools, in combination with instructional strategies, will reduce barriers and enhance support for students.
The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) later developed the UDL framework to include three main principles: multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression, and multiple means of engagement (CAST, 2011a). These three main principles are divided into nine more specific guidelines, each of which further divide into multiple checkpoints. The following UDL principles pave the way for learning barriers to be reduced between students with disabilities and those without while eliminating the need for students to disclose their disability to others (Al-Azawei et. al., 2016). A recent study showed almost exclusively positive student outcomes, including increasing student satisfaction and engagement (Al-Azawei et. al., 2016).

**Multiple Means of Representation in UDL.** According to UDL, each learner has a preferred way of receiving information, either through visual, auditory, or kinesthetic means. Each learner will engage more deeply with the material when provided the information in many different ways (Rose & Strangman, 2007; Courey et. al., 2012). One can address this UDL principle by providing step-by-step instructions for multi-step tasks and for new digital tools that students are expected to use. Step-by-step instructions can include items like screenshots and hyperlinks to increase clarity and provide direct guidance (Rao et., al., 2021). One can also create a screencast video or audio instructions that provide narration for written directions or text-based assignments, using tools such as Screencast-O-matic, and Loom (Rao et. al., 2021). Screencasts can provide a sense of teacher presence for asynchronous learning activities.

**Multiple Means of Action and Expression in UDL.** Students also vary in their preferences in how to demonstrate mastery of course content. In one study, interviews revealed that giving students access to multiple means of action and expression on a discussion board (where students could respond in prose, via recording, or illustrations) allowed students to
contribute their ideas in more efficient ways (Goldowsky & Coyne, 2016). Some resources that help achieve this are interactive whiteboards (e.g., Educreations), infographics (e.g., Canva, Piktochart), and interactive presentations (e.g., Voice Thread, Puppet Pals) (Rao et. al., 2021). For example, students can narrate concepts on presentation slides and share it with peers. Students can also demonstrate what they know using a combination of text, images, audio, and video using digital tools such as Book Creator, UDL Book Builder, and Tar Heel Reader (Rao et. al., 2021).

**Multiple Means of Engagement in UDL.** Providing students with choice is one way that a teacher can maintain students’ interest and motivation throughout the learning process. The ability for control and autonomy are important for workplace engagement (Pink, 2011). Frequent and personal communications such as providing strategies for improvement as part of teacher feedback on assessments also engages students. Additionally, student engagement increases when they feel safe in the learning environment and there are few distractions (Kennette & Wilson). Providing choice to students increases intrinsic motivation and the amount of effort the person puts into the task (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008). When compared to a control group, Davies et. al. (2013) actually showed that improvements in engagement occurred over time during the semester. Black et al. (2015) showed that both students with and without a disability perceived a positive impact on their learning when instructors followed UDL principles in their classroom.

**Constructivism**

Constructivism is based on the notion that knowledge is acquired through social interaction versus being received or discovered (Senior, 2010). Earlier work with constructivist conceptions of learning are historically rooted in the work of Dewey (1929), Bruner (1961),
Vygotsky (1962), and Piaget (1980). The theory suggests that people construct meaning (and by extension learning) from their own experiences and reflecting on those experiences (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). As it relates to education, and instead of the goal being to cover all of the curriculum, the aim is to focus on the learners’ needs, experiences, aspirations, and interests (Senior, 2010). It is important to note that this view of learning sharply contrasts with one in which learning is the passive transmission of information from one individual to another (Bada & Olusegun, 2015).

One of the tenets of constructivist learning is that there needs to be an active process involved for learning to occur (Tam, 2000). In other words, the students are urged to be actively involved in their own learning while the teacher functions more as a facilitator who coaches, prompts, mediates, and helps students develop and assess their understanding, and thereby their learning (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). This process contrasts sharply with the traditional classroom where students are more like passive empty vessels waiting for the teacher to pour knowledge into them. Bada & Olusegun (2015) state that learning is individualized to the learner and that learning occurs when the individual makes their own meaning from the information. According to Caine and Caine (1991), the search for meaning is innate and that effective teaching recognizes that meaning is unique and personal. Furthermore, students’ understandings are based on their own unique experiences (Caine & Caine, 1991). The search for meaning occurs through what Caine and Cain (1991) call “patterning”. Emotions are critical to patterning because learning is influenced by emotions, feelings, and attitudes.
Brooks and Brooks (1993) conceive a constructivist teacher as someone who will:

1. Encourage and accept student autonomy and initiative;
2. Use a wide variety of materials, including raw data, primary sources, and interactive materials and encourage students to use them;
3. Inquire about students’ understandings of concepts before sharing his/her own understanding of those concepts;
4. Encourage students to engage in dialogue with the teacher and with one another;
5. Encourage student inquiry by asking open-ended and thoughtful questions and encourage students to ask each other questions and seek elaborations of students’ initial responses;
6. Engage students in experiences that show contradictions to initial understandings and then encourage discussion;
7. Provide time for students to construct relationships and create metaphors;
8. Assess students’ understanding through application and performance of open-structured tasks.

Honebein (1996) summarizes what he describes as the seven pedagogical goals of constructivist learning environments:

1. To provide experience with the knowledge construction process (students determine how they will learn)
2. To provide experience in and appreciation for multiple perspectives (evaluation of alternative solutions)
3. To embed learning in realistic contexts (authentic tasks)
4. To encourage ownership and a voice in the learning process (student centered learning)
5. To embed learning in social experience (collaboration)
6. To encourage the use of multiple modes of representation (audio, video, text, etc.)
7. And to encourage awareness of the knowledge construction process (reflection, metacognition).

Hoebin (1996) also documents the benefits of constructivism which include children learning more and enjoying learning more, increasing thinking and understanding, transferable learning, an increase in student ownership and creativity, stimulating and engaging students in an authentic, real-world context, and promoting social and communication skills. Blended learning is rooted in constructivist learning theory. For example, an open dialogue between the student and teacher and student and peers is key to a successful blended learning environment. Another example of constructivism in blended learning is the emphasis on student-centered learning. Student autonomy is valued in blended learning as well.

**Blended Learning Defined**

Findings have shown that blended learning has positive benefits for learners and that it allows traditionally underserved students access to learning (Garcia & Lee, 2020). It also provides non-traditional students such as people with families, full-time jobs, etc. the opportunity to learn and advance in their academic endeavors (Detienne et al., 2020). Studies have also shown that students experience more flexibility and independence in blended learning (Garcia & Lee, 2020, Rasmitadila et. al., 2020). Like with Freire’s repositioning of power in learning toward the student and UDL’s democratization of learning, the heart of blended learning is a shift in control from teacher to learner.
**Blended Learning's Origins**

The term “blended learning” was coined in the late 1990s with the increased availability of digital learning platforms (EPIC Learning, 2013). With the increasing use of technology in individual classrooms Garrison and Kanuka (2004) later define blended learning as “the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” (p. 96). Graham (2006) similarly defined blended learning as face-to-face learning with technology-infused learning.

Tucker (2020) says that one of the goals of blended learning is to shift the workflow in the classroom and embrace grading practices that are sustainable, foster a partnership between the teacher and student, and encourage students to take an active role in tracking, assessing, and reflecting on their learning. Novak and Tucker (2021) elaborate on Staker and Horn (2012) as to how “Blended learning is the combination of active, engaged learning online combined with active, engaged learning offline to provide students with more control over the time, place, pace, and path of their learning” (p.19). The definition reflects a constructivist perspective in that it places value on the student’s role as an active participant in the learning process (Novak & Tucker, 2021).

Driscoll (2002) argued that blended learning has taken on several meanings, such as combining technology, pedagogy, and job tasks. However, Driscoll (2002) pointed out that the different meanings of blended learning to different people “illustrate the untapped potential of blended learning” (p. 1). Blended learning has been viewed by some in Higher Education as a threat to the status quo (Bouilheres et al., 2020). Increasing numbers of institutions of higher education are adopting blended learning (Garrison & Vaughan, 2007). “Blended” or “hybrid” course offerings are estimated to be utilized in 79% of public institutions of higher education in
the United States. Public institutions offer more blended courses than private institutions do (McGee & Reis 2012). Higher educational institute policies that encourage blended learning can strengthen a university’s commitment to improve student learning as well as increase side benefits such as access, flexibility, and cost effectiveness (Graham et. al., 2013). For example, Brigham Young University at Idaho began its “Pathway” program in 2009 in a blended learning (BL) format. The program offered college preparation courses in the United States and other countries. It has also provided its entry level and evening courses in a BL format (Porter et. al., 2015).

Aurangzeb (2018) found in one study that blended learning is successful in the traditional classroom with a distribution of 60-70% face-to-face interactions and remaining 30-40% in the form of online activities, and that this provides a more personalized and student-centered learning environment while still allowing learners access to the teacher whenever needed. The analysis of the survey results provides empirical evidence to the claim that students’ perceptions of their learning experiences at the university was beneficially impacted as a result of the blended learning environment in each of their classes (Aurangzeb, 2018). Akkoyunlu and Soylu (2006) explored students’ perceptions of blended learning and concluded that students felt motivated when participating in a blended learning environment in comparison to face-to-face interactions. They also found online interactions to be more enjoyable compared to face-to-face discussions. Empirical evidence on effectiveness of blended approaches versus traditional approaches is a bit mixed. Angelone et al. (2020) found that by focusing on improving technological design it better facilitates experiences for learners.
Blended Learning Models

Tucker (2020) lays out a framework for several blended learning models such as the playlist model, the flipped classroom model, the station rotation model, and the whole group rotation model.

**Playlist Model.** In the playlist model, students self-pace through a playlist of learning activities that mixes media, learning modalities, and online with offline tasks.

**Flipped Classroom.** In the flipped classroom model, the transfer of information (mini-lessons, lectures, and explanations) is captured using media, usually video, so that students can self-pace through that content pausing, rewinding, and rewatching as needed. The “flipped” instruction can be viewed at home or during asynchronous work time. Then synchronous class time can be utilized for practice and application. In regards to clear communication, a clear vision and expectations must be communicated as well as resolutions for when a tech connection isn’t working (Detienne et al., 2020). In regards to activating learners and curriculum alignment, polls and quizzes could be conducted in an entertaining way (Detienne et al., 2020). The teacher should also pose oral discussion questions throughout the class session (Detienne et al., 2020). It is recommended that hybrid synchronous sessions should build upon asynchronous activities from a flipped classroom approach (Detienne et al., 2020).

**Station Rotation.** The station rotation model is made up of a series of learning activities that students rotate through. Unlike the whole group rotation model, this model does not require all students to be online simultaneously. A station rotation lesson commonly includes a teacher-led station, an online station, and an offline station. The benefits of the station rotation model include: ability to create smaller learning communities within a large class; work directly with small groups of learners; provide more control over the pace of learning at the online and offline
stations; and create more opportunities to differentiate learning experiences, group students strategically, and promote communication and collaboration (Novak & Tucker, 2021).

**Whole Group.** The whole group rotation model consists of students moving as a unit between offline and online activities thus freeing the teacher to work one-on-one with learners during the online portions of the lesson. The benefits of the whole group rotation model are having increased access to personalized instruction and practice during the online learning tasks, more control over the pace of their own progress through the online portion of the lesson, and opportunities to work with the teacher and their peers to improve the quality of the learning.

**Recommended Blended Learning Practices**

McGee and Reis (2012) found that varied interactions and prompt feedback are key to student engagement in blended learning courses. Angelone et al. (2020) found that by focusing on improving technological design it better facilitates experiences for learners. The second design recommendation is to enhance co-presence through physical or visual connections and inclusive language (Angelone et al, 2020).

**Interactivity.** Interactivity may involve instructor to student, student to student, or student to others, materials or resources. Some examples of this may be students completing online tutorials, sharing their experiences in an online discussion, and presenting their ideas about what they learned in class. Students in the researcher’s study will be given opportunities to interact with the teacher and their peers in multiple ways such as one-on-one conferences with the teacher, small group work, partner work, collective digital annotations, and peer editing on a Google doc.

Informal approaches include small group work and modeling. It is important for students to use metacognitive strategies to monitor their learning in a blended learning course. For active
learning to happen, students must be aware of what they do know as well as what they do not know (McGee & Reis, 2012). For example, a teacher in a blended learning classroom may spend ten minutes modeling through a document camera how to write a thesis statement for a literary analysis essay. Then students work together in small groups to write their own thesis statement. Interactivity holds relevance because the researcher will embed interactivity throughout the research project to engage students in a student-centered learning process.

**Instructional Categories.** McGee and Reis (2012) also outline three instructional categories: Process-driven, product-oriented, and project-oriented. Examples of process-driven instruction are audio recordings, brainstorming, document analysis, concept mapping, listen, read, write, reflect, and synchronous discussions. Product-oriented instruction includes art projects, essays, case briefs, and podcasting. Examples of project-oriented instruction are debates, group reports, case studies, interactive web activities, and online group collaboration. Students in the researcher’s study will engage in all of these instructional categories to support student choice, voice, and engagement.

**Simplicity and Applicability.** Technology should be simple enough for the students to be engaged and at the same time students should be provided with choices on how to use the technology or which technology to use in order to engage all students. McGee and Reis (2012) found that student motivation decreases when technology is being used just for the sake of using technology. They recommend that assessment also be completed online. Communication of the blended design, expectations, and process is key to student success. Prompt and specific feedback, clarifying and reinforcing the role of online discussions, and monitoring online discussion while referencing them in face-to-face. (McGee & Reis 2012) There is a consensus that students need to have independence in their work, time management, communication, and
study skills in order to be successful in a blended course. Providing student evaluations of the course for students to complete periodically throughout the course can help with making changes during and after the course (McGee & Reis 2012). These recommendations are relevant to the researcher’s study because the researcher plans to implement blended learning strategies that incorporate these recommendations in order to effectively engage students and give them voice and choice in their learning.

Senior (2010) found that teachers who routinely teach and manage their classes using group dynamics principles encourage their classes to evolve into learning communities that ultimately have the power to modify the behavior of individuals. In line with Freire, Senior (2010) also notes that teachers must not only be effective teachers but they must also be members of their class groups, and that teachers need to alternate between the formal role of traditional pedagogue to the informal role of the class group member. If teachers narrowly define their roles they will find themselves increasingly marginalized in the ever shifting landscape of education.

**Benefits of Blended Learning**

Two reports from the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) show that there is evidence that technology has supported an increase in reading (McGee & Reis, 2012). The purpose of the researcher’s project is to determine if blended learning strategies increase student engagement in the reading of a class novel. This is promising news for the researcher as the researcher aims to engage students in reading through the implementation of blended learning strategies. Kusuma et al. (2020) showed that students positively benefited in their English writing skills when taught using blended learning methods. The students reported feeling that blended learning helped them in choosing vocabulary words and using correct grammar in their
writing. The interview results of this study showed that 100% of respondents stated that the blended learning method had a positive impact on their writing skills, especially in practicing their writing skills (Kusuma et. al., 2020). Rahman (2018) found that blended learning has a positive effect on students’ writing skills. According to Al-Zumor et al. (2013) blended learning effectively enhances students’ vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and pronunciation. Ghari (2013) found that blended learning can create a beneficial condition to increase ELL students’ writing performance. This is promising information for the researcher’s project with AP English students because it demonstrates the potential that blended strategies have for supporting and enhancing students’ learning experience.

Blended learning increases access to education for underserved populations. In a study by Garcia and Lee (2020), respondents positively linked the shift to digital education to flexible and individualized learning. Many respondents associated digital education with lifelong learning possibilities and increased access to education for underserved populations (Garcia & Lee, 2020). Blended learning has organizational benefits as well. It accommodates students who have job and family commitments thus taking a multifaceted student population into account (Detienne et al., 2020). Educational access and efficiency in teaching; and pedagogical benefits related to quality of learning were highlighted as benefits to synchronous hybrid learning (Detienne et al., 2020). Students find blended learning can add to the learning experience, knowledge, variations in learning models, and more flexible and independent learning (Rasmitadila et. al., 2020).

**Inequity**

The Covid-19 pandemic reignited what has been termed the “digital divide” (Vogels et. al., 2020). According to Chmiel (2021), the digital divide is the “divide” between middle-
upper-class children and those from less advantaged urban and rural communities. Scholars emphasize that it’s not the lack of physical availability of computers that should be of concern. Rather, it’s people’s ability to make use of technologies to engage in meaningful social practices that defines where an individual falls within that divide. Cyberbullying, harassment, social media, and privacy issues continue to be challenges at schools and universities. This is important to understand and consider when implementing blended learning strategies in the classroom. The term digital divide illustrates the social inequity between individuals who have access to basic infrastructure necessary to digital learning, such as computer devices and the Internet, and individuals who do not (Garcia & Lee, 2020). A new digital divide has emerged which is digital literacy or digital competency that help learners achieve positive learning outcomes in digital settings but also differ based on level of education, culture, and English skills (Ritzhaupt et al., 2020). This information connects to the researcher’s study because the researcher may need to consider that her students have differing levels of digital literacy.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the digital divide (the gap between those who do or do not have access to technology) has hindered certain students’ ability to complete everyday tasks and schoolwork (Vogels et al., 2020). Vogels et. al. 2020 reports that 43% of lower-income parents with children whose schools shut down say it is very or somewhat likely their children will have to do schoolwork on their cellphones; 40% report the same likelihood of their child having to use public Wi-Fi to finish schoolwork because there is not a reliable internet connection at home, and 36% say it is at least somewhat likely their children will not be able to complete schoolwork because they do not have access to a computer at home. At the same time, rural and urban parents whose children’s schools have closed are more likely than their suburban counterparts to think that it is at least somewhat likely their children will struggle with their
schoolwork because of lack of digital resources at home. The survey also covered another key aspect of the digital divide: whether Americans are worried about their ability to pay their internet or cell phone bills over the coming months. Hispanic or black broadband or smartphone users and those with lower incomes are especially likely to say they worry about these types of bills. About half say that coronavirus poses a major threat to their personal finances and as of early April 2020, and 43% of Americans say that someone in their household has lost their job or experienced a pay cut (Vogels et. al., 2020). When asked about school’s responsibility to provide laptop or tablet computers to students in order to help them complete their schoolwork at home during the coronavirus outbreak, 37% of Americans say K-12 schools have this responsibility to all students, and 43% say they are only responsible for providing these resources to students whose families cannot afford them (Vogels et. al., 2020). By comparison, 19% believe schools do not have this responsibility to any students.

In addition to the issue of a digital divide, there are other various challenges such as poor planning by school districts, lack of connectedness, instructional planning, decreased attention span, and hindered student reading and writing ability that resulted from the pandemic (Vogels et. al., 2020). Chmiel (2021) argues that schools and districts have invested too quickly in computers and technology without investing professional development needed to make these tools useful. According to Seward and Nguyen (2019), many classrooms “have computers, projectors, document cameras, and smart boards, but meaningful use of these tools depends on the instructor’s familiarity and comfort with technology” (p. 80). Teachers need to be digitally literate in information, media, and technology skills in order to effectively navigate this technology environment (Truesdell & Birch, 2013).
Some challenges to this learning landscape include the need for teachers to adapt and change their teaching methods and learning activities while simultaneously maintaining the same learning standard. Prior to the pandemic, Birch and Lewis (2020) observed that many pre-service and in-service teachers did not feel comfortable and confident with technology. When it comes to instructional planning, blended learning environments are faced with three major challenges: creating organized and well-designed content that keeps students intrinsically motivated and strengthens their time management and computer skills, maintaining students’ satisfaction with the blended learning environment, and time-consuming administration of the course by teachers and student frustration due to lack of technological expertise and communications problems (Aurangzeb, 2018). And the level of student satisfaction with blended learning remains debatable (Aurangzeb, 2018). The researcher aims to clarify student perceptions of blended learning strategies through her project.

**Counter-Perspectives on Digital Education**

Students learning online often miss the personal connections made in the classroom. Blended synchronous learning is a potential solution to this problem, but questions remain as to how to best leverage technology in order to design a seamless experience where online and face-to-face students can connect (Angelone et al., 2020). Remote students also feel distant from the institution which highlights the importance of creating a sense of connectedness (Detienne et al., 2020). Along with issues of disconnectedness, there are also challenges with decreased student attention span and hindered student reading and writing ability. A 2012 Pew Research survey found that nearly 90 percent of teachers believe that digital technologies were responsible for creating a generation of easily distracted students with a short attention span (Chmiel, 2021).
Another 60 percent felt that students’ abilities to read, write, and communicate face-to-face were hindered (Chmiel, 2021).

**Conclusion and Gaps in the Research**

While there has been many recent studies done on blended learning, there is still much to investigate in this relatively new learning landscape. Garcia and Lee (2020) recommend that future research address macro (e.g., national policies addressing inequalities) and micro (e.g., students’ digital learning experiences) dimensions to understand how these levels interact. Detienne et al. (2020) calls for more research to be done concerning different pedagogical scenarios and their impact on student outcomes and that future research should include larger and more diverse samples, include more empirical and longitudinal data, include empirical real-time data of the learning experience, and include the effect on student learning outcomes across settings and include the effectiveness of certain pedagogical scenarios for making the most of the learning experience and social presence of remote participants. Salikhova et al. (2020) found that studies conducted from the standpoint of self-determination theory on the specifics of digital education in different cultures have been extremely rare. Hratinski (2019) suggests that more research and practice in the different blended learning definitions, models, and conceptualizations are needed. Kennette and Wilson (2019) have found little research focused on students’ perception of UDL in action in the classroom. Blended learning is the means of providing learning with UDL in mind. The researcher will be conducting AP English lessons that incorporate the UDL guidelines, while blended learning is the strategy used to put those guidelines to action. The researcher will be filling in the gap in the literature by conducting blended learning strategies driven by UDL guidelines in a high school English classroom and
exploring the digital divide, equity, student engagement, and student voice and choice while transitioning through a pandemic.

There is a gap in knowledge when it comes to blended learning studies at the high school level. There is little to no research done with American AP English high school students in a blended learning classroom. The purpose of my research is to determine if blended learning strategies increase student engagement in the reading of a class novel in an AP English course. The research will take place at a small private high school. The population of students have been through a lot in the past four years with the Tubbs, Glass, and LNU fires, power outages, and the pandemic. Most of the high school burned down during the Tubbs fire in 2017. The school just recently started building back the buildings that burned down. The school has endured many challenges in recent years such as administration and staff turnover and declining student enrollment, but the school community continues to endure and strive for excellence.
Chapter 3: Methods

The purpose of this study was to determine if blended learning strategies increase student engagement in the reading of a class novel for advanced placement high school English students who have recently experienced many challenging environmental impacts on their educational experience. Additionally, this study sought to understand how these blended learning strategies support student engagement with reading. Coates (2005) defines student engagement as the students’ interaction with learning activities and resources intended to produce authentic learning. Students at the research site have recently experienced several major fires in the local area as well as the COVID-19 pandemic that have collectively caused both medium and long term school shutdowns. There is a gap in the research when it comes to qualitative studies on blended learning with high school students. Since synchronous blended learning is relatively new, more studies are needed that investigate its use and effectiveness (Raes et al., 2020).

Research Questions

In addition, it is now also important to understand the ways in which students who are returning from fully online and hybrid school environments understand how they newly understand the possibilities and most effective ways for them to engage with learning with a specific focus on student reading. The primary research questions ask: How can blended learning strategies be structured to increase high school advanced placement student engagement in American literature while transitioning through a pandemic? And how do those strategies support student engagement with reading?

Description and Rationale of Research Approach

This qualitative research represents a constructivist worldview with a phenomenological approach. The study supports a constructivist view because I am seeking an understanding of
students’ perspective and because it relies on participants’ views and includes the use of open-ended, teacher-generated questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It is rooted in the assumption that human beings construct meanings as they engage with the world they are interpreting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I sought to gain an understanding of my place of work through the lived experience and meaning making of my participants. Constructivism assumes that meaning is always social, arising in and out of interaction with a human community. Very little research is done in the United States that is based on studies involving the perspective of students (Seidman, 2013).

I decided to conduct qualitative research through gathering multiple forms of data such as interviews, observations, and student work. I conducted quantitative research through gathering data from two surveys that included scalable answers. I made these data collection decisions because I have a strong interest in their lived experience and the meaning they make of that experience. These are all open-ended forms of data in which the participants can share their ideas freely (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Interviewing provides a necessary avenue of inquiry in order to gain an understanding of someone’s lived experience and the meaning they make out of it (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Schutz (1967) calls this type of understanding their “subjective understanding.” Interviewing affirms people’s experiences, thoughts, feelings and ideas. This interview process is considered to be phenomenological because the interviews focus on the experiences of participants and the meaning they make of that experience. The goal of my research is to come as close as possible to understanding the true “is” of my students’ experience from their subjective point of view. Dey (1993) states that interviewing allows us to put behavior in context and provides access to understanding their action. A phenomenological approach to interviewing guides the researcher.
in interviewing and allows researchers to create a rational logic for how they carry out their research (Siedman, 2013). Interviewing the participants gave me an opportunity to understand their subjective experiences of blended learning in the classroom. Audiovisual data was collected in the form of interview transcriptions. The interview transcriptions helped me to visually see the data which helped me understand the participants’ experiences better and aided in conducting open coding.

Observations were conducted throughout the research study. Observations helped me understand blended learning within the context of the learning environment and the participants’ experience in the study. The documents that were gathered were called “learning logs” that provided students an opportunity to reflect on the blended learning strategies implemented in class. Students responded to the reflection questions in the learning log on a weekly basis throughout the duration of the study. The learning log activity allowed me to understand the ways in which blended learning strategies helped support student engagement.

**Research Design**

**Research Site and Entry into the Field**

The research took place at a private high school that I will refer to as Stone River High School. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for the school and students. Stone River High School enrolls 512 students, served by 42 teaching faculty, and four counselors. The average class size is 22 students with a 13:1 student to faculty ratio. 97% of students from the 2020 senior class went on to attend college in fall of 2020. The research site has 26 sports teams and 75% of the students at the site participate in athletics. 50% of the faculty/staff coach in the athletic department at the school site. 385 of the students are White, 76 students are two or more races, 24 students are Asian, 19 students are African American, 7 students are Native American,
and 1 student is Pacific/Hawaiian Islander. The high school is part of an archdiocese that comprises five high schools with a total of 1,860 students, 10 elementary schools with a total of 2,230 students, and two private schools with a total of 191 students. The archdiocese territory comprises 11,711 square miles. I gained entry into the research site because I am employed there as a full-time teacher.

**Participants and Sampling Procedures**

The population being studied in this research comprises 73 advanced placement English students from Stone River High School. The sampling design for this population was single stage. Students were introduced to the research study and informed about the invitation to participate verbally in class. For students who expressed interest in participating, the researcher provided a consent letter to the students and parents/guardians that outlined the purpose of the study and provided details on how the survey data will be collected, used, and protected.

Students participated in a five week unit on a novel that employed blended learning strategies and tools. All students in the researcher’s AP English classes participated in pre and post surveys, writing prompts, and the creation of artifacts, but only students who provided signed consent forms were included in data collected and analyzed for this research project. 73 students consented to their survey, learning logs, and artifact data being collected. Three students consented to being interviewed. Individual interviews were determined by the number of students who elected to participate in this more in-depth inquiry. These individual interviews took place during lunch in the researcher’s classroom. Interviews were audio recorded on the researcher’s password protected phone.
Methods

Instruments used for data collections included interviews, observations and student work. The questions contained in the interviews and learning logs helped to answer the research question because they asked students to reflect on their blended learning experiences in the classroom.

During week one, students participated in the blended learning model called “The Playlist”. Students were provided a list of learning activities and were given flexibility in the order they completed each learning activity and the time spent on each learning activity. One of the learning activities in “The Playlist” blended learning model was focused on Martin Luther King Junior’s “I Have A Dream Speech”. Using Pear Deck, a Google Slides extension, students viewed a video of the speech and then annotated the speech on the Google Slides. Students were asked to select their favorite phrase or line from the speech and then illustrate it.

Students participated in a class discussion that consisted of a T-Chart and assigned chapter discussion questions based on the class novel. Students were split into small groups and had the choice of working independently or with their small group members. Towards the end of the class period, each student in the class shared their response to a discussion question along with cited textual evidence.

Week three of the research project consisted of a blended learning activity called “Choose Your Own Adventure” and “The Station Rotation” blended learning model. Students learned about the opioid epidemic in the United States in “Choose Your Own Adventure”. This was a prevalent theme in the class novel titled, *Hillbilly Elegy* by JD Vance. This learning activity first provided students with choice in how they learned about the opioid epidemic. Students could read a linked article, watch a linked video, or listen to a linked podcast. Then,
students had a choice in how they processed the information they discovered: draw it, write about it, or discuss it. Finally, students had a choice in how they shared their learning with twelve different choices. Some of those choices were visual art, sketchnotes, audio explanation, a video, flowchart, etc.

The station rotation activity consisted of five different stations that students physically rotated through around the classroom. Tables were organized that included directions and materials that students needed for each station. Students peer-edited a synthesis essay in station one, they explored an academic database in preparation for later research in station two, they created sketchnotes for either Chapter 8 or Chapter 9 in *Hillbilly Elegy* in station three, notes were taken on flipped content in station four, and one-on-one conferences with the teacher (me) with a focus on the synthesis essay took place in station five.

Week four of the research project included the summative assessment of the unit of study. Students conducted a choice project that focused on the central themes in *Hillbilly Elegy*. Students had the choice of writing a synthesis essay, creating a book trailer, writing a literary analysis of each chapter of the novel, or creating a podcast. This project concluded the research project.

During the four week duration of the study, students kept a writing log. Students were asked to reflect on the week’s learning and identify what or which assignments were helpful (if any) and how or why they were helpful. Learning logs were completed on a Google doc that was maintained with a private, password protected account. Sample learning log questions included: “What did you find interesting or unexpected as you worked on this assignment?” and,
“What feature(s) about the assignment made it helpful in your learning?” These types of questions were asked of the participants on a weekly basis during the duration of the research project.

Concurrently, the interviews were audio recorded on the researcher’s password protected phone. Sample interview questions included: “Describe your experience participating in the Station Rotation blended learning model” and, “Which learning tools, if any, helped you learn during this unit?”. These types of interview questions encouraged the participants to reflect on their experiences using specific blended learning tools and participating in specific learning activities. Their responses to these types of questions compelled the participants to think about these experiences and to talk about them thus attaching meaning and a subjective perspective to it.

At the end of the research of study, students took a post-survey assessment that contained questions pertaining to their learning experience during the unit of study. Sample survey questions included: “The Playlist blended learning model helped me engage with the course”, and “I enjoyed reading during this unit”. The pre-survey provided a baseline and the post-survey provided a comparison to the pre-survey to more deeply understand if and/or how specific blended learning strategies helped support student engagement.

**Data Analysis**

I read through the Google Form responses that the pre-survey collected. I searched for strong responses to the questions. This helped me to create a baseline to serve as a comparison at the end of the research project. Throughout the entire duration of the study, I collected digital documents called learning logs. I printed out all of the learning logs and put them into a binder. Using a highlighter and pen, I conducted open coding on the learning logs and initially started
off with four main categories: “Skills, Concepts Learned”, “Blended Learning and UDL Features”, “Learning Benefit”, and “Engagement”. As I continued to code the learning log data, my process turned into focused coding where I started to narrow down categories and merge some of them together. For example, I merged “Learning Benefit” into “Engagement”. I started to notice a relationship between learning activities that incorporated art and engagement while conducting focused coding on the learning logs. “Video” and “Collaboration” later became categories as these were strongly associated with student engagement as well.

Interviews were audio recorded. Throughout the interview I also took notes on key phrases that characterized the experiences with various blended learning strategies. As participants spoke, I made note of their thoughts and the tone of their voice. I wrote analytic memos for each individual interview immediately after the interview concluded. By creating memos, I was able to compare and contrast the differences and similarities in multiple interviews based on both positive and negative experiences. The code words included: collaborates, drawing, engaged, reading, and learning. If a participant said one of the code words or something similar, then I would follow up with more questions with the intention of getting a more in-depth response. However, I concentrated on the participant’s language and put my list of code words to the side during every interview. I wrote down any word or phrase that I felt was significant to write down. I took the participant’s words and compared them to my code word list and categorized them accordingly once the interview was completed. The process repeated when I listened to the recording and transcribed the interviews.

Open coding was used first before, during, and after each interview. I used focused coding by looking for similar or the same words by the interviewees. These words were either the most frequently used words, or stood out as the most significant words or phrases used by the
interviewees to describe their experience in a blended learning environment. By finding these patterns, I was able to determine the language students use when describing certain relationships or associations with specific blended learning strategies, or in other words, I was able to better understand what was most important to my interviewees who shared the significance of those experiences.

After open coding, I used focused coding when analyzing the surveys, learning logs, and interviews. I added frequently used words to the same data analysis matrix that I used for the interviews and categorized the data into three main categories: “Collaboration”, “Art” and “Videos”. Concept mapping involved grouping the coded words from the surveys, learning logs, audio, and transcribed interviews into three main sections: video, collaboration, and drawing. I found that these three categories strongly supported student engagement in reading.

After concept mapping, I used connecting strategies to piece together similarities and differences in my interviewee’s stories. Because each experience in a blended learning classroom is entirely subjective, I used a data analysis matrix that combined similar experiences (drawing with engagement, collaboration with viewpoints, and videos with in-depth understanding). That made finding similar keywords and phrases easier to keep track of throughout the process. This whole process led me to form themes: “Art is Helpful!”, “Students Find Others’ Viewpoints Interesting When Given the Opportunity to Collaborate”, and “Being Able to Relate” Creates Bridges for Authentic Inquiry and Conversation.

Validity

I am the classroom teacher of the student participants. This may have influenced the data collection because I had a personal investment in wanting the blended learning unit to positively affect my students’ learning experience. My role as the teacher also influenced the learning
environment that the data was collected in. Another bias was that I believe blended learning is an engaging and effective way to learn. In addition to being the teacher of the student participants in this study, I also acknowledge that my positionality may also affect the validity of my study. Specifically, my age, my interests, and my life experiences all encompass my positionality.

Personally, I have benefitted from using blended learning strategies as a student and as a teacher. I am a fan of Catlin Tucker who is an author, trainer, and speaker on blended learning practices in the classroom. My age probably affects my views on technology use and more modern ways of learning. I am aware of my bias and wanted to keep my objectives clear to ensure a valid study. Therefore, I implemented several strategies to address these validity threats.

For one, I identified and analyzed discrepant evidence and negative cases in my data collection (Maxwell, 2013). I rigorously examined both the supporting and the discrepant data to ensure the validity of the study’s conclusions. Second, I used triangulation to reduce the risk of chance associations and of systematic biases due to a specific method (Maxwell, 2013). Third, I used numbers through the use of a Likert scale in the pre and post surveys to assess the amount of evidence in my data that bears on a particular conclusion or threat (Maxwell, 2013).

There was intensive long-term involvement in this research study. I have been observing the participants in this research study since August 2021. I was able to develop and test alternative hypotheses and confirm my observations and inferences. Through long-term involvement and transcribed and coded interviews, I was able to gather rich data. I conducted respondent validation through the gathering of weekly learning logs that elicited feedback from the participants regarding the blended learning lessons they were experiencing in class.
Chapter 4: Findings

The findings discussed below demonstrate that blended learning strategies engage students in AP Language and Composition course content at Stone River High School. In particular, findings show that art helped the students understand various English concepts on a deeper level. The second theme highlights the ways by which students found their peers’ perspectives interesting through partner, small group, and whole class discussions. Finally, the findings show that students engaged with the reading content on a deeper level when blended learning strategies, in concert with UDL, were implemented in the lesson.

Art Helps

One of the major findings in this research study was that students gained a deeper understanding of English concepts such as plot, theme, symbolism, imagery, and rhetoric. Students participated in creating drawings, using Google Slides extension Pear Deck, to reflect on Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech. Learners created vivid and colorful illustrations with the Pear Deck Draw tool, and in this process, they learned the function and importance of imagery and symbolism in writing and speaking. This learning experience also helped students to better understand what rhetoric is and how to analyze rhetorical situations, which is a major component of the AP Language and Composition course. Additionally, students created sketchnotes to deepen their understanding of the book’s themes and plot by chapter.

Sketchnotes

One day, students were participating in a station rotation activity as one of the blended learning models. The Station Rotation model includes a mix of offline and online activities that moves students between individual and shared tasks, and incorporates video. This blended
learning model allows the teacher to be able to spend time working directly with students in small groups or one-on-one. One of the stations that quickly became a hit amongst the students was the “Sketchnotes” station. Students were provided instructions on a Google Doc along with a link to an instructional video on Youtube that defined sketchnotes and walked students through how to create their own sketchnotes. With provided construction paper and colored pencils and markers, students were tasked with creating sketchnotes that expressed the plot and main themes of either Chapter 8 or Chapter 9 of *Hillbilly Elegy* (students chose which chapter they would sketch). This activity gave students an opportunity to express their understanding of the chapter through artistic means and they had a small group of their peers to exchange ideas. I was pretty surprised as I circled the room, stopping at each station to check student progress and to offer additional support. I observed students focused on creating vivid images that represented themes such as “Family,” “Addiction,” and “Poverty” among others. I overheard students discussing the content of the story and helping each other discern the main events that transpired while sketching. And I witnessed the students reading the book which, strangely enough, had been difficult to get them to do since returning to class from remote learning. I sensed a feeling of calm and thoughtfulness as I observed students engaged in their sketches and coloring. I had not expected students to be so into this activity and I definitely did not expect the assignment to have such a calming effect on the small group of students at the station table. I made a mental note to continue offering opportunities to do sketchnotes in the future. One of my students, Brianna, was seen using six different colored markers and intently creating small doodle sketches using symbols to represent major plot points in one of the chapters. I observed Ellen conversing with her small group about the major events of Chapter 8 of *Hillbilly Elegy.*
When asked what was helpful to learning in the station rotation activity, Brianna said, “I liked being able to draw a picture because the illustration helped me paint a picture in my mind of what was happening.” Brianna found that the sketchnotes activity was helpful in understanding the plot of the chapter of focus.

When asked what was interesting or unexpected about the station rotation activity, a participant, Ellen, said, “It was just fun to color and express the book’s mood in a different way… It only solidified my understanding of how Vance’s life affected him long term. It was interesting to color when all we have done prior was typing and writing.” Ellen selected the sketchnotes activity to focus on and she found that it was enjoyable to color and express her understanding in a different way. She also found it unexpected because students hadn’t had the opportunity to draw and use color in class prior to this activity.
Mary further elaborated on what she enjoyed about the sketchnotes activity, saying, “I mean, I like colors. So I like coloring. So that’s probably the thing that makes it the most fun. It is nice to get your ideas out onto a page, which is, you know, helpful…” Mary has dyslexia so reading and writing can be challenging for her. This activity helped her to demonstrate her understanding because a barrier was lowered for her: writing. I observed that Mary was very selective about the colors she used for her sketchnotes.

Martin noted that the sketchnotes activity was one his favorite activities in the unit we did, saying, “I learned in very different ways and drawing out my thoughts. I do that a lot at home, and just drawing out my thoughts made me like connect make different connections in the book to real life.” He draws a lot at home and drawing out his thoughts helped him to make
different connections in the book to real life. Martin further elaborated on the connections he made to real life such as the concept of upward mobility. He shared that the social issues brought to light in the book have ignited discussions about solutions to these problems amongst his friends. I observed Martin talking to his friend Anthony, “Vance’s mother’s addiction and traumatic childhood made it hard for Vance to achieve upward mobility. Maybe my CBSL project will focus on finding solutions to these problems.” Anthony was inspired to possibly dedicate his Christian-based service learning project on finding a solution to issues like addiction and childhood trauma. The CBSL project is a project all senior students participate in at Stone River High School. The goal of the CBSL project is to make a positive impact in the local community by helping to solve a problem.

**Pear Deck Drawings**

In celebration of Black History Month and as part of the AP Language and Composition curriculum, students engaged in an activity about Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech using Google Slides and a Google Slide add-on called Pear Deck. Pear Deck makes Google Slides more interactive for learners by giving students various ways to show their learning. Using Pear Deck’s draw tool option, students annotated Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech and drew a picture on a Google Slide that illustrated their favorite line or phrase from the speech.

I was thrilled to see the effort and detail students put into creating their Pear Deck drawings. It was clear that the speech and the activity made an impression on them. One student quoted a line from the speech on their drawing writing, “Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.” Then the student drew a gold goblet with blue water in it with the words “Bitterness” and “Hatred” seemingly floating in the drink.
Another student selected the line from the speech that reads, “Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California,” then drew the shape of the state of California and multiple colorful lines consisting of red, yellow, blue, green, and orange flowing down the curves of the
Golden State shape. Another student selected the phrase, “But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt.”. The student drew a simple house made up of a square and triangle and labeled it “Bank of Justice” and then drew green dollar bills labeled as “Equality” and “Justice”.

Figure 5 Pear Deck Drawing based on Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream Speech”

Figure 6 Pear Deck Drawing based on Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream Speech”
Another student selected the line that reads, “...We allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city...black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands...”. The student drew a globe, using green to depict land and blue for the water, and then drew many stick figures positioned standing around the globe all holding hands and all drawn using different skin tone colors. There were many detailed and beautiful illustrations. Ruth who selected the line that says, “Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.” Ruth drew a picture of a flexed arm muscle, then a plus sign, and then a red heart outlined in green and blue with rays emanating around the heart. This activity helped students notice and appreciate imagery and symbolism and the power these literary devices have in communicating one’s message. This was evidenced by their reflections on the activity.

Part of the AP Language and Composition curriculum includes rhetorical analysis. Students learn to analyze writing and analyze its effectiveness through the use of rhetorical strategies. Students offered thoughtful reflections on this activity and I look forward to facilitating this activity again in the near future. Upon reflection, one focus student, Heather, said, “I was able to analyze King’s speech more and understand it on a deeper level. I had never read it all the way through and it was interesting to do so. It was unexpected the complexity and amounts of imagery he implemented in his speech.”

Another student, Alex, said, “Having to actually think about what the quote would look like in a drawing helped me understand the imagery that Martin Luther King Jr. was trying to achieve. I learned about ways to think about quotes and evidence. The drawing part was pretty interesting.” Alex found that illustration of one of the concepts or ideas from the speech helped her to understand the imagery MLK invoked. As I walked around the classroom, there was a
sense of calm and focus as students worked at their own pace to watch MLK’s “I Have a Dream” speech via Youtube, read the speech, annotate the speech, and then draw in reflection using the Pear Deck Draw tool. Michael shared that, “Having to actually think about what the quote would look like in a drawing helped me understand the imagery that Martin Luther King Jr. was trying to achieve.”

Drawing helped some students recognize imagery also in the rhetorical strategies employed by MLK. For example, Matthew conveyed how through:

The recognition of imagery and repetition through Martin Luther King Jr’s style of speech…I was able to see an overview of the speech made by Martin Luther King Jr., learning of how the man spoke to crowds. The use of imagery provokes a sense of confidence and power. I never heard the full speech of Martin Luther King Jr, so I never imagined he implemented so much imagery within his speech.

Similarly, Hannah offered that:

From this assignment I learned that MLK used lots of symbolic comparisons in his writing to better convey his message, and to illustrate his point in a vivid way. I learned that the use of symbolism helps to liven a piece of writing. I found it interesting the amount of symbolism that he included in his speech.

Another student, Kara, said, “This assignment unintentionally allowed me to analyze and apply rhetorical devices we learned in semester 1. The assignment itself taught me important knowledge and asked me to visualize King’s message.” Contrary to what Kara thought, this assignment was intentionally created for students to practice rhetorical analysis. I was happy to see that she made this important connection because analyzing strategies such as imagery is at the heart of analyzing rhetoric. Rhetorical analysis has been challenging for most of my students
this year and for good reason. Strong reading comprehension and critical thinking skills are just a couple of the skills needed to analyze rhetoric successfully. By giving Kara the opportunity to visualize MLK’s language, she was able to better understand how imagery works to contribute to effective writing and speaking. I observed students sharing their Pear Deck drawings and their favorite lines from the speech. Students really enjoyed all of the color options that the Pear Deck Draw tool offered.

Students were found to understand English concepts such as plot, theme, symbolism, imagery, and rhetoric when art was incorporated into learning experiences. The findings advance previous blended learning studies because my research study’s findings demonstrate a couple of ways to embed blended learning strategies in the classroom to increase student engagement. Students were able to deepen their understanding of English concepts through sketchnotes and Pear Deck drawings. Incorporating art into the English classroom can help increase student engagement and allow students to reflect on central English components.

**Collaboration Leads Students to Find Others’ Viewpoints Interesting**

Another collaborative activity that students participated in involved a t-chart and chapter discussion questions based on *Hillbilly Elegy*. Students were assigned a chapter from the book and given the option to work independently or in a small group with the other students assigned to the same chapter. Each student shared their response to one of the discussion questions and shared the textual evidence they found to support their answer during the last part of the class period. It is important to note that the students have had a difficult experience engaging in class discussions so this activity was structured to scaffold the discussion experience.

Ari, a learner who enjoys socializing with her peers during class, shared that she “found it interesting how even different people from the same group after talking together answered the
questions differently.” The exposure to different perspectives from Ari’s peers led Ari to reflect more on the issues raised in the book and she became aware that sometimes there isn’t one simple, cookie cutter answer to a literary discussion question. This helps advance Ari’s critical thinking skills as well as others in the class. Eric, a learner who tends to not participate in class discussions, had an unexpected positive experience with this learning activity. Eric was similarly enthusiastic about the process and how it helped him remember and integrate the readings by getting to listen to other students. He said:

I learned more in-depth about the chapters that we read…I found some of the stories that Vance told to be very interesting because I had sort of forgotten about them until people in the class presented them…I thought this assignment was great.

The discussions that were had in small groups along with the whole-class discussion helped Eric recall significant events from the reading. Due to this learning activity, he developed an interest in the stories Vance shares in his memoir. Nick, who sometimes struggles to complete classwork on time, said, “I thought working in small groups but going at our own pace at the same time was helpful.” The student-paced feature of this learning activity helped Nick and other learners who struggle to follow along in a teacher-led classroom. The significance of this finding is important in understanding how to structure blended learning strategies for student engagement. Many students enjoyed hearing other students’ perspectives on the story and were able to gain a more in-depth understanding of the plot and central themes. For instance, when asked to reflect on what was helpful to her learning, Mariah said:

...being able to discuss it with the rest of the class and hear what they said gave me a better understanding of what is going on in the book…Having a group to work in helped
me more easily access the academic content. I learned how to collaborate with others and
discuss what we have just read.

**Collaborative Annotations**

Students participated in a Playlist activity which consists of a list of learning activities
that students can work through in any order they wish, at their own pace, and had opportunities
to work independently as well as in small groups or pairs. The Playlist model is one of several
blended learning models that were implemented in this study. This model entails each student
working through an individual playlist of activities. Playlists work well for projects, essays, and
entire units of study. The purpose of The Playlist model is to provide learners more agency and a
more personalized learning experience. Playlists can include activities such as peer evaluation,
offline tactile activities, video instruction and modeling, conferencing, and more!

One of the learning activities in the playlist was called “Collaborative Annotations”.
Students read a series of passages from Mahatma Ghandi’s letter to Viceroy Lord Irwin, the
representative of the British crown in India, protesting Britain’s monopoly on and taxation of
salt. As students read, they annotated the text with two or three other students on a shared
Google Doc. This assignment helped prepare them for the rhetorical analysis essay on the AP
exam where they will need to read and annotate a historical speech or letter and then analyze the
rhetorical strategies used in a formal essay.

Eliza, who typically participates in whole-class close reading activities, said, “It was
helpful to annotate to understand the reading…I also liked working with a partner because she
annotated things I wouldn’t have annotated otherwise so I got a more in-depth understanding of
the reading.” Through collaboration with a fellow learner, Eliza was able to make note of
rhetorical strategies being used that she wouldn’t have otherwise noticed. Collaboration is a key
component of blended learning and it is important to acknowledge this finding because it provides insight into how to embed opportunities for collaboration in order to effectively engage learners.

Jeff, a student athlete who has struggled to understand rhetorical analysis, shared that:

The fact that this assignment was to be completed with a partner was helpful because we could collaborate on which things were truly important. I found it interesting how the text was written in a way that the purpose was very clear yet invoked a lot of thought. Gandhi put a lot of emotion in his work and it was good to reflect on that.

Jeff appreciated collaborating with a partner because it helped him understand parts of the speech that were most important. Jeff also appreciated the passion that Gandhi put into his speech. The opportunity to collaborate with a peer helped Jeff to focus on the significant aspects of the reading thus helping him to annotate for rhetorical analysis. Jeff also gained an appreciation for the emotion Gandhi invoked in the letter. Analysis of pathos, a persuasive appeal to emotion, is one of the major rhetorical strategies employed by effective speakers and writers. Collaboration helped Jeff to reflect on how the use of pathos helped to make his letter so effective. This again demonstrates how collaboration can be structured in a classroom to foster student engagement.

Kelsey, a seemingly shy person, said, “Group work allowed for me to share my ideas about the passage.” The opportunity to collaborate on close reading annotations with a small group engaged her in the activity because she was able to share her ideas with her peers. This is a significant finding because it provides information that contributes to the ways blended learning strategies can be structured in a classroom.
Peer Editing & One-on-One Conference with Teacher

Two of the stations in the station rotation activity involved peer editing of a recent synthesis essay and a one-on-one conference with the teacher regarding the student’s synthesis essay. One of the many benefits of blended learning is that it opens up the opportunity for the teacher to provide more individualized instruction to students through one-on-one conferencing. One-on-one conferencing is another blended learning strategy. These activities provided students with two opportunities to receive feedback from their peers and the teacher before starting to revise their rough draft. Peer editing also helps the student who is editing the essay because it gives students the opportunity to read other students’ ideas and gives them ideas for their own writing. The one-on-one conference served as an opportunity for students to share their thoughts and questions as well as receive feedback from the teacher. I provided feedback based on the AP synthesis essay rubric. I shared what they did well and pointed out areas of growth for the revision of the essay.

I really enjoyed facilitating the one-on-one conferences because I felt like I was able to make an immediate impact in student understanding, skills, and knowledge. I also felt like it showed students that I truly care about their learning and genuinely want to help them grow as writers. I think the one-on-one conferences helped students to see me as their teammate in learning and success. It also gave students the opportunity to think aloud and reflect on their writing with me as their soundboard. When asked what was helpful about the one-on-one conferences, Christina identified, “Corrections and advice from the teacher.” The students seemed genuinely appreciative of my help in their revision. One student named Jacob said to me, “Thank you, I appreciate it.” This might not sound like much, but it meant a lot to me because Jacob spent most class periods scrolling on his phone. It was the first moment I had with him all
year where he was engaged in what was happening in class. It was also a positive and productive interaction with him whereas in the past our interactions would mostly involve me telling him to get off of his cell phone.

Students had the opportunity to receive feedback on their synthesis essay writing from their peers. As I walked around the classroom, students were in conversation with each other practicing “The Sandwich” method when giving feedback. Students shared strengths in their peer’s writing then offered constructive criticism and then closed with a strength or positive message to the student. One student, Luke, told his peer Josh, “Your thesis statement was awesome because it took a position and then you provided your reasoning which provides the structure of the rest of the essay.” Another student named Alicia told her peer, “You want to make sure to explain how the evidence supports your argument.” When asked what, if anything, was helpful in the peer editing station, Alicia said,

Classroom opinion and different advice/viewpoints …It helped me look at writing in more detail and see ways my writing can improve. It was cool to have someone you aren’t familiar with look at your writing because you got a new perspective.

It was made clear in this research study that embedding opportunities to collaborate was helpful to student learning, and therefore student engagement. Collaborative annotations, small group discussion, peer edits, and one-on-one conferencing were some ways that were found to be helpful in student engagement when structured with collaboration in mind.

**Station Rotation**

I implemented the Station Rotation model with my AP English students, which is one of the blended learning models that helps to provide students with differentiated and one-on-one
learning with the teacher. The station rotation activity has collaboration embedded within it, and is meant to get students physically moving.

When asked what features of the station rotation, if any, were helpful Kylie highlighted that, “The features that made it helpful in my learning were working with others and having instructions.” Tabitha similarly said, “I thought working in small groups but going at our own pace at the same time was helpful.” Peter, who has been observed to be focused on just completing a class assignment versus genuinely engaging with the course content, said, “I would like to revisit collaborating with our group members in each station because it helped us share ideas.” Students enjoy working with their peers because they find it to be helpful and enjoy sharing their ideas with each other.

“Being Able to Relate” Creates Bridges for Authentic Inquiry and Conversation

Students watched a TedTalk by JD Vance, in which Vance talks about how he overcame obstacles in his life such as family addiction and poverty. He discussed the importance of social capital and credited his own network of people for helping him achieve success amidst obstacles. This TedTalk previewed the book for students and served to hopefully engage students in the storyline.

Johnny has shown disinterest in the class novels this year, but Vance’s story catches his attention. Vance’s background and life story contrasts with his own life which he found to be interesting. Johnny expressed, “Something I found interesting or unexpected as I worked was the Ted talk because I thought it was really interesting to learn about someone and their life that is different from my own.” Johnny found the TedTalk interesting because it exposed him to a perspective different from his own. Harry’s house burned down in the Tubbs fire in 2017. He and his family lost all of their material possessions and just recently had their home rebuilt. Harry
found the “underdog” aspect of Vance’s story interesting. Harry shared, “I found it interesting that he came from a not-so-good situation, and now he is fairly successful.” Harry found Vance’s story interesting because Vance came from a struggling family and became successful. Jane said,

I learned a lot about the background of Hillbilly Elegy and the author’s childhood. It was definitely an eye opener as to how fortunate I am to be in the upper-middle class and to have all these opportunities handed to me. It made me realize how grateful I am to have supportive parents and to live in an enriched environment.

Jane became reflective of her own life and how grateful she is for her own circumstances after learning about Vance’s life obstacles in the TedTalk video. This finding is important to this research study because it reveals that personal connection to a text can help increase student engagement. Creating moments for students to reflect on their own background, where they come from, and their own life experiences helps aid in student engagement with the literature in this course. Creating this opportunity through an Edpuzzle assignment on Youtube is just one way to embed moments of personal connection and reflection in a classroom. Valerie, who did not show much enthusiasm for this book initially, commented,

I thought that it was very beneficial to get more knowledge about J.D. Vance and his background…I found it interesting that J.D. Vance had a rough childhood and that he basically came from nothing. I would possibly like to know more about the author because this book is a pure reflection of his life and I think that it would be very beneficial.

Valerie found Vance’s background interesting and she wanted to learn more about him after watching the TedTalk video. Lucca has struggled to engage with the class novels this year. He has earned low grades on reading assessments and does not participate in class discussions.
Lucca said, “I learned that no matter where you come from it’s always the choices that you make that determine if you’re successful or not. I found his whole life story interesting.” What is significant to note here for the purpose of this research study, is that Lucca was able to connect to one of the story’s messages: Success is a series of choices one makes. This message resonated with Lucca and further contributes to how one can structure personal connection in a classroom to increase student engagement. Ashley has not enjoyed the books we have read as a class this school year. However, she seemed to find Vance’s memoir interesting. Ashley remarked:

I learned the upbring to J.D.’s life and the success he ended up with. You have no control of where you start but you have control of where you end up…I found it interesting how he was able to push himself to where he is today even though he grew up in a not so good environment. I would find it beneficial to dig deeper into this topic and find more about his life but also look at finding solutions to the problem.

Ashley found Vance’s story interesting partly because it is a story of an underdog who beat the odds, but also because it exposed her to parts of the United States with which she is unfamiliar. It was observed that the story’s message and the obstacles that Vance overcame resonated with Ashley. This interest led her to want to learn more about Vance’s life and even became interested in finding solutions to the range of social problems Vance highlights in the TedTalk video. Sean found Vance’s TedTalk interesting for personal reasons. Sean said:

I learned from what point of view the book is being written from; understanding this makes me excited to read it. Being able to listen and sympathize/empathize with the author was also something that struck me. I found I was able to relate with him a little bit… from a young age I watched my uncles struggle with drugs and being poor, and it’s
left a large imprint on me… I’d like to have group discussions on the book covering the central themes that were discussed in the Edpuzzle.

Sean looked forward to reading the book after watching Vance’s TedTalk. He found it interesting that he was able to sympathize and empathize with Vance because he found something in common with Vance. Sean went on to share that he saw how his relatives’ drug addiction impacted his cousins growing up. Sean is excited to read this story because he can relate to it.

Other students were moved by the various social issues that Vance discussed in the TedTalk. Charles enjoys discussing current events and American history in our class. The course lends itself to conversations on these topics because the students read and write about them as part of the course curriculum. Charles noted, “I learned a lot more about the struggles that are hidden in America, specifically in the working class. I found the amount of abuse and how common domestic abuse is very surprising and sad.” This finding is significant because the exposure to an unknown region and culture led Charles to become interested in the story. The importance of this finding is that exposure to a different perspective or way of life can provide students new ways of thinking and looking at things. The structuring of a video, like the TedTalk mentioned, can lead to student engagement. Henry said, “I found it interesting to know that there are many kids in the world who could be living like this, like Vance.” Katherine enjoys learning about history. Like many of the students mentioned in this study, she struggled to engage in previous class novels. Katherine noted, “I found it interesting that federal acts such as housing policy can negatively affect people in so many ways and in turn this affects the area they are living in.” This finding is significant because Katherine engaged in the story due to the historical and social issues the story presents. I think this demonstrates that structuring opportunities to
learn about other perspectives through the use of an instructional video can aid in student engagement in the course literature.

Students participated in a learning experience titled, “Choose Your Own Adventure”. This activity focused on opioid addiction which is one of the main themes in *Hillbilly Elegy*. JD Vance’s mother struggled with an addiction to opioids that impacted JD’s childhood and early adulthood. Family addiction wreaked havoc on everyone in Vance’s family. Vance also raised awareness of the opioid epidemic in his memoir and calls for solutions to the problem. This learning experience gave students the opportunity to choose how they would learn about the opioid epidemic. They could either watch a video, read an article, or listen to a podcast. Then they had various choices to reflect, review, and demonstrate their understanding of the opioid epidemic. It was found that students were surprised by the severity of the opioid epidemic, further engaging them in the story of Vance’s life. For example, Eric, a learner who dedicates himself to playing baseball, stated, “I learned about the opioid epidemic and how it started. I didn’t know how the opioid epidemic started and it surprised me.” This finding is important because it reveals one way to structure blended learning strategies (choice and the implementation of technology) to help increase student engagement. The information about the opioid epidemic surprised him which helped to further engage him with the content. James has confessed to not reading most of the class novels this year and shared that most of them were not interesting to him. He enjoys stories that surprise him unexpectedly. James commented, “I learned a lot more about the opioid epidemic. I didn’t know it had killed quite so many people.” The significance of this comment holds importance because James learned something unexpected thus engaging him in one of the book’s central themes: opioid addiction. Mariah enjoys running and learning about issues related to social justice. Mariah shared, “I was shocked
to learn about the opioid addiction that has affected those living in the Rust Belt.” Her shock concerning the opioid crisis in the Rust Belt region engaged her in learning. The way the learning experience was created with blended learning and UDL elements such as choice and multiple means of engagement and expression helped Mariah expand her understanding of the world and the different lived experiences of others. Ashley is a bubbly and driven person who brightens the classroom every day with her smile and positivity. Ashley recalled, “I learned all about the world of opioids and how bad it can be for the human body.” Ashley came to understand the different life experiences of those living in the same region that Vance talks about in his book. This helps her to comprehend the book on a deeper level while also engaging her in one of the central themes in the book before reading it. Manny noted, “I found it interesting that drug addiction is also very prevalent for young people too.” Dillon commented, “I found it interesting that doctors prescribed opioids without testing if it was addictive.” This learning experience provided students further context and background knowledge on one of the major themes in the book to help students understand how the opioid epidemic affected Vance’s mother and the rest of his family and create connections to their experience of the world as well as broaden their understanding of the diversities of life experience.

Conclusion

Art, collaboration, and creating opportunities for relatable learning content are helpful in engaging students in reading a class novel. The research study aimed to address the following two questions: How can blended learning strategies be structured to increase high school advanced placement student engagement in American literature while transitioning through a pandemic? And how do those strategies support student engagement with reading?
Art helps students visualize the story, thereby helping them to understand central themes and major plot points. Imagery and symbolism are further understood and appreciated through art in English class. Art provides opportunities for students to demonstrate and express their understanding of imagery, symbolism, plot, and central themes in a creative and reflective way. Collaboration allows for students to share and listen to different viewpoints of class content, further engaging them in the curriculum. Students found their peers’ perspectives on the class novel to be interesting. Autobiographical context helps picque student interest and creates personal connection. Students were surprised by the social issues within the Appalachian region and felt compelled to find solutions to the various social issues that were brought to light in *Hillbilly Elegy*. The significance of these findings are numerous. First, the findings offer insight into the ways one can structure blended learning strategies in the classroom to increase student engagement. Second, the findings reveal American high school advanced placement student perspectives on blended learning strategies. There is little to none of this group found in the literature when it comes to blended learning research.

The revelation found in this study is that art helps students understand English content, students find their peers’ perspectives interesting through collaboration, and the use of memoir can help students create personal connections and pique their interest. These findings lend further insight into how to structure blended learning strategies and perceptions of blended learning experiences from American high school advanced placement students, which is largely still a growing and unexplored field in education.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Three major themes emerged as my findings from my research study. One finding focused on the incorporation of art as being helpful to students in their understanding of English concepts such as symbolism, plot, theme, and imagery. Another finding that emerged from this study was that students found others’ viewpoints interesting when given the opportunity to collaborate with each other. Finally, the third finding was that videos piqued student interest in the class novel.

My findings reinforced that blended learning provides a pedagogical and practical approach to low student engagement (Novak & Tucker, 2021). Student engagement increased in the area of reading as a result of implemented blended learning strategies in the research study. These blended learning strategies included The Playlist Model, The Station Rotation Model, offering choice in how to access course content as well as how to demonstrate understanding, the use of videos such as Youtube and Edpuzzle, etc. Overall, student engagement increased in reading due to these blended learning strategies.

My findings mirrored what Rose and Strangman (2007) and Courey et al, (2012) found about learner engagement, namely that, each learner will engage more deeply with the material when provided the information in many different ways. Student engagement increased when they were given choice in how to access the content and how to show their understanding. For example, students experienced choices in how to access content such as watching it, listening to it, or reading it. My findings connect to what Patall et. al., 2008 said regarding choice: Providing choice to students increases intrinsic motivation and the amount of effort the person puts into the task (Patall et. al., 2008). It was clear that students enjoyed having choice in how to learn throughout the research study.
**Implications for the Literature**

I was surprised to find that art was helpful in aiding their understanding of course concepts such as imagery, symbolism, theme, and plot. I had not expected the students to be so engaged with the learning activities that incorporated art. I found little to no research that provided insight into art and blended learning strategies. I think this unexpected finding occurred because I was willing to try something new in my classroom in an effort to make learning more accessible for all learners. I think this unexpected finding is significant because it supports learners’ understanding of English concepts through a new medium that’s not typically used in English classes. Providing students an opportunity to learn through the incorporation of art increases equity in my classroom because it provides students with another path to learning and success. Student-centered and art-based literacy instruction helps students who are transitioning through a pandemic achieve success in English. I was also surprised to find that student understanding of the class novel was enhanced through the reading of a memoir. The memoir helped students to be able to relate to the content and this created a bridge to authentic inquiry and conversation. This aided in their comprehension of the story and set the stage for reading in a way that I did not expect. The videos sparked student engagement in the book before even reading it. These findings provide additional perspectives on how to provide equity in a student-centered learning environment. My findings are significant and contribute to the academic literature because I found additional benefits to video use in the classroom that include the importance of relatedness as a bridge to authentic inquiry and conversation.

The findings also contribute to the need to understand students’ digital learning experiences (Garcia and Lee, 2020) and the need for research concerning different pedagogical scenarios and their impact on student outcomes (Detienne et al., 2020). The incorporation of art,
exposure to different viewpoints through collaboration, and the importance of being able to relate, with the help of blended learning strategies, help to increase student engagement in reading.

**Implications for Practice and Policy**

The findings demonstrate that blended learning strategies should be further implemented to support student engagement in a community facing several environmentally challenging events. Blended learning strategies have the potential to address many problems in education. My research findings have implications for my teaching practice and for others’ teaching practices. There are implications for policy at the school, district, and state levels.

**Classrooms**

I will continue to implement blended learning strategies in my classroom moving forward. In particular, I will continue implementing “The Playlist” model, “The Station Rotation” model, and “The Flipped Classroom” model. I will continue providing students with choice in how they learn and in how they demonstrate their understanding. Other teachers can structure blended learning strategies through the incorporation of art, collaboration, and relatable content through the use of videos. Educators can provide students with opportunities to draw their thoughts and ideas to demonstrate their understanding of English concepts. Opportunities to work in partner pairs or small groups can provide learners with the opportunity to collaborate and engage in different perspectives. Teachers can curate their lessons by incorporating videos that students can personally relate to, therefore helping students to make connections between their life and the course curriculum. Teachers can incorporate blended learning strategies to increase student engagement in reading.
Policy

After this research study, I think that policies involving the implementation of blended learning strategies should be introduced at the school, district, and state levels. Schools should provide teachers time and space for them to plan lessons that implement these strategies, and districts should provide funding and access to professional development opportunities for teachers to learn more about blended learning strategies and how to implement them in their own classrooms. I think the state should implement a policy that mandates a required blended learning course in every teacher credential program. There should be a state policy that student teachers effectively incorporate blended learning strategies into their student teaching experience and that it’s observed by their university supervisor. My findings foster social justice because the findings of my research demonstrated that providing different learning opportunities increased engagement in reading for all learners. The various blended learning strategies in the study provided diverse ways for students with different learning styles to engage with the course content and skills. This fosters social justice because blended learning strategies help to offer all learners the opportunity to succeed in the classroom.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

There were many limitations to this study such as the relatively small time frame, small sample size, and the exclusion of certain social groups. Future research in this area is expansive and more research is needed for specific areas of blended learning in particular.

Limitations of the Study

I would continue to implement blended learning strategies in my classroom and record my observations and reflect on the experience if I had another full semester to collect data. My participants provide a limited perspective because all of them are native English speakers. I am
missing perspectives from English language learners. I am also missing the perspective of parents. I am the classroom teacher of the student participants. This may have influenced the data collection because I had a personal investment in wanting the blended learning unit to positively affect my students’ learning experience. My role as the teacher also influenced the learning environment that the data was collected in. Another bias was that I believe blended learning is an engaging and effective way to learn. In addition to being the teacher of the student participants in this study, I also acknowledge that my positionality may also affect the validity of my study. Specifically, my age, my interests, and my life experiences all encompass my positionality. Personally, I have benefitted from using blended learning strategies as a student and as a teacher.

**Future Research**

My research demonstrated that there are gaps in the literature when it comes to art-based blended learning strategies, collaboration, and video use in advanced placement high school English courses. There is also a gap in the literature concerning the relationship between Freire’s “Critical Pedagogy”, UDL and blended learning strategies. A future researcher may consider implementing blended learning strategies that incorporate different mediums of art such as paint, sculptures, chalk, etc. A future researcher may also try implementing blended learning strategies utilizing different technology than that used in this research study such as Seesaw, Flipgrid, Nearpod, etc. Quantitative methods could be used to expand upon the findings of my research. For example, student assessment data from reading quizzes could be collected. Future research may entail more diverse school settings, larger geographical reach, greater variety of schools (public, charter, urban, etc), and longitudinal data. Parents, other teachers, and administrators could be included in future research as well.
Conclusion

I decided to go on this journey in researching blended learning because I kept noticing the same problems in the schools that I worked at so I wanted to find solutions to make teaching and learning better. I started reading *Balance with Blended Learning* by Catlin Tucker during the summer of 2020 and found the strategies and rationale mentioned in the book to be promising answers to the problems I, and other teachers and students, were facing. I began to incorporate blended learning strategies in my classroom during the 2020-2021 school year, which was mostly a fully remote school year. I found some success, but I wanted to learn more about blended learning. Ultimately, I wanted to help teachers make their work more equitable and help them create more equitable classrooms. This is what led me to conduct this research project. One of the most important things I learned about blended learning from this journey is that it has the potential to rekindle teachers’ love for teaching and students’ love for learning. I hope that my research findings may put the sparkle back in a weary teacher’s eyes. I hope that it can help a student to fall back in love with learning again. I hope that my findings can revitalize the education system so that it can be rebuilt to support the needs of all educators and learners. After all, we are always growing and learning.
References


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Appendix A: Student Interview Questions
1. How would you describe your relationship with books?
2. What would make you more likely to engage in reading?
3. What types of challenges have you experienced with reading?
4. Is it difficult to engage in reading? Why or why not?
5. What type of classroom activities in the past have engaged you in the class novel?
6. Describe your experience collaborating with your peers during the current unit of study.
7. Did the learning choices in this unit engage you in the reading of the class novel? Why or why not?
8. What have you learned about yourself as a reader so far?
9. Describe your experience participating in the Station Rotation blended learning model.
10. Describe your experience with the one-on-one conferences.
11. Has there been any specific activity that has engaged you in the reading of the class novel so far?
12. As you reflect on your experience reading during this unit, were you more engaged in the reading of this class novel compared to the past class novels we have read this year? Why or why not?
13. What activity or aspect of this unit stood out to you? Why?
14. Which project did you choose for the summative assessment and why did you choose it?
   Describe your experience reading this novel.
15. Did you learn anything about yourself as a reader from this unit? If so, what did you learn?
16. Which learning tools, if any, helped you learn during this unit?
17. Which learning activities or experiences would you like to continue to have in this class moving forward? Why?
18. How would you design a class novel unit? (PAR)
19. If we created the next class novel unit together how would we go about doing that? (PAR)
Appendix B: Learning Log Questions
1. Which assignment from this week are you working on?
2. What standards or skills did you use to complete this assignment?
3. What feature(s) about the assignment made it helpful to your learning?
4. Was there any part of the assignment that was difficult for you? Was there a feature or resource that helped you to more easily access the academic content?
5. What did you learn from this assignment? What kind of new knowledge or new skills did you gain?
6. What did you find interesting or unexpected as you worked on this assignment?
7. Is there any part of this assignment that you would like to revisit with the class or with the teacher?