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RECLAIMING THE CLASSROOM IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH: EXPLORING STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON IN-VENUE LEARNING IN A BLENDED CONTACT MODEL

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INTRODUCTION

Post-pandemic, higher education institutions in the Global South face increasing difficulty in drawing students back to campus. The rapid shift to online learning has reshaped student expectations, with many now preferring the flexibility and autonomy offered by synchronous and asynchronous online settings (Graham, 2013; Hollinshead & Pope, 2023). However, not all learning types are equally supported online, particularly in contexts where digital access is uneven. Learning that relies on interaction, collaboration, and real-time feedback remains best suited to in-venue settings (Laurillard, 2012; Laurillard et al., 2018). To address this, a Blended Contact Learning and Teaching Model (BCLTM), which integrates in-venue, synchronous online, and asynchronous online learning settings, was implemented at a large higher education institution in South Africa. Grounded in Laurillard's Six Learning Types framework, the model promotes intentional alignment between learning activity, type, and setting, which forms the basis of academic staff development at the institution. This study explores student perspectives on the in-venue component, specifically, asking: What makes these sessions worth attending (or not), and what expectations do students have for these sessions that take place on campus?

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Even five years after the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced classrooms online in response to lockdowns and social distancing protocols, higher education institutions in the Global South continue to face persistent challenges in re-establishing the role of in-venue learning. The rapid transition to online teaching reshaped student expectations, with many now valuing the flexibility, accessibility, and autonomy afforded by synchronous and asynchronous modes. While these modalities effectively support certain learning types such as acquisition, they are less suited to pedagogical practices that depend on interaction, collaboration, and real-time feedback. In contexts such as South Africa, where digital access remains uneven and educational inequality is deeply entrenched, the pedagogical and social value of in-venue learning is particularly significant.

Despite the increasing adoption of blended contact teaching models, limited empirical research explores student perspectives on the in-venue component of such approaches in the Global South. Much of the

current literature focuses on the design and implementation of blended learning frameworks, yet little attention is given to understanding what makes face-to-face sessions meaningful, engaging, and worthwhile from students' point of view. Without this insight, institutions risk misaligning in-venue learning activities with student expectations, potentially resulting in disengagement and the underutilisation of valuable classroom opportunities.

This gap underscores the importance of foregrounding student voices in examining how in-venue sessions can best support their learning needs and expectations. There is empirical evidence (Herbert et al., 2022) that student perceptions provide a valid source for assessing teaching quality across diverse education systems and that such perceptions can serve as reliable and consistent indicators of teaching effectiveness. By investigating the ways in which students experience and interpret in-venue learning, particularly in relation to Laurillard's Six Learning Types, this study aims to provide evidence that can inform more intentional and contextually relevant pedagogical design. Addressing this gap is critical to ensuring that in-venue learning within blended contact models contributes meaningfully to student engagement, academic belonging, and equitable learning outcomes in the Global South. The following literature review situates this study within the broader discourse on blended learning, learning types, and the pedagogical role of in-venue settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review covers blended learning that forms the context for this research, the six learning types (Laurillard, 2012) that guides the blended contact learning model at the institution, and in-venue learning that forms the specific focus of the research.

Blended Learning

Blended learning has emerged as a defining pedagogical model in higher education, specifically in the Global South, where it provides a flexible response to infrastructure challenges and widening participation goals (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). It is understood as the purposeful integration of online and face-to-face modalities to optimise the strengths of both, producing outcomes that are often more effective than traditional face-to-face classrooms or e-learning alone (Graham, 2013; Chigbu et al., 2023). Research highlights that blended learning promotes student responsibility for their own learning, equips them for a technology-driven labour market, lowers the costs associated with fully online provision, enhances collaborative and engaging experiences, and supports students' holistic participation, both physically and socio-emotionally, in the learning process (Chigbu et al., 2023). Within this model, online components are particularly well suited for knowledge acquisition and flexible access, while in-venue sessions are critical for fostering interaction, collaboration, and immediate feedback (Laurillard, 2012; QAA, 2024). This complementary design reflects Biggs' (1996) principle of constructive alignment, in which learning activities across modalities must be intentionally structured to achieve coherent and meaningful outcomes.

Learning Types

Laurillard's (2012) Six Learning Types namely acquisition, investigation, discussion, collaboration, practice, and production, provide a widely used pedagogical framework for aligning learning activities with the most appropriate learning settings. The framework emphasises that learning is not a uniform process but rather involves distinct modes of engagement, each of which requires different forms of design and facilitation. While acquisition, which involves the absorption of new knowledge through reading, listening, or watching, is well supported in online environments where students can engage flexibly with content at their own pace, other learning types are more dependent on synchronous, interactive contexts. For example, discussion and collaboration are most effectively fostered through in-person engagement, where immediacy of feedback, body language, and peer dynamics enrich the learning experience (Laurillard et al., 2018; Hollinshead & Pope, 2023). In-venue learning provides students with opportunities for real-time dialogue, debate, and group work, which are central to the co-construction of knowledge and the development of higher-order thinking skills.

Laurillard (2012) further emphasises that no single learning type is sufficient on its own; instead, effective teaching requires a deliberate combination of learning types that reinforce and extend one another. For example, while acquisition provides the foundation of disciplinary knowledge, it must be followed by opportunities for discussion and collaboration to test understanding and develop new perspectives. Similarly, investigation and practice allow students to apply and experiment with ideas, while production requires them to articulate and demonstrate what they have learned. Laurillard's Conversational Framework illustrates how these modes interact in iterative cycles, ensuring that students engage not only with content but also with peers, tasks, and feedback.

Learning In-Venue

Research suggests that in-venue learning fosters academic belonging, motivation, and informal peer learning, which are particularly important in contexts marked by digital inequality (Looi et al., 2010; Kahu, 2013). In a recent study by Tlais et al. (2025), Lebanese students highlighted the value of in-venue classes for the immediacy of communication, hands-on laboratory practice, deeper understanding of complex material, and stronger social interaction. These findings confirm that physical classrooms remain essential in blended models, particularly for fostering engagement, collaboration, and practical learning experiences that online formats cannot fully replicate.

A study by Winfield and Whitelaw (2024) on blended contact using a flipped classroom approach in the Global South highlights the value of in-venue sessions from the students' perspective. In this study it was reported that classroom sessions supported deep understanding, enhanced critical thinking, clarified difficult concepts, improved time management when answering questions, and provided opportunities to engage directly with the lecturer. Another aspect valued by blended contact students in the classroom setting is that of communication, where lecturers explain concepts clearly, engage students in discussion, value their perspectives, and respond to feedback, creating a reciprocal learning environment (Armellini et

al., 2021). High quality lecturer-student communication in the classroom plays a central role in the development of partnerships, which in turn is seen by students as promoting engagement in the learning process. Armellini et al. (2021) furthermore concluded that students value lecturers who treat them as individuals, for example by remembering their names.

Studies focusing specifically on student perceptions of in-venue learning settings within blended models in the Global South remain limited. Much of the literature post-Covid19 has examined the design and implementation of blended learning frameworks, focusing on the online aspects, but has not fully addressed what makes face-to-face sessions meaningful, engaging, and worthwhile from the perspective of students. The current study responds to the gap by foregrounding student voices from the South African context and exploring how in-venue sessions contribute to student learning within a blended contact model.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Against this background, the following research questions were formulated to guide the investigation:

RQ1: What are students' perceptions of the value and role of in-venue learning within a blended model?

- What aspects of in-venue sessions do students find most valuable or meaningful for their learning?
- What factors make in-venue sessions less effective or engaging?

RQ2: How can student perceptions of in-venue learning inform the intentional and contextually relevant design of in-venue sessions?

- How do students' experiences of in-venue sessions align with Laurillard's Six Learning Types (acquisition, investigation, discussion, collaboration, practice, and production)?
- How can insights from student experiences optimise blended learning design in the Global South?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm, recognising that knowledge is socially constructed through lived experiences (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). A qualitative, exploratory design was employed to generate in-depth insights into students' perceptions of in-venue sessions within a blended contact model.

To ensure methodological coherence, each research question was mapped to the corresponding survey items and analytical approaches. Table 1 below provides a simplified overview of this alignment, showing how the study operationalised abstract questions into concrete measures. This alignment makes explicit how student perceptions were captured through both structured Likert-scale items and open-ended reflections, and how these data were analysed to address the research questions. Table 1: Alignment of Research Questions, Survey Items, and Analysis Methods

Research Question	Survey Item(s)	Analysis Method
RQ1: What are students' perceptions of the value and role of in-venue learning within a blended model?	Items on participation, peer interaction, application with feedback, creation/presentation; openended reflections on valuable and less valuable sessions	Descriptive statistics (Likertscale) + thematic analysis (open-ended).
RQ2: How can student perceptions of in-venue learning inform the intentional and contextually relevant design of blended contact learning experiences?	Items linked to Laurillard's Six Learning Types (acquisition, investigation, discussion, collaboration, practice, production); all structured and open-ended items	Framework-based coding against Six Learning Types + thematic synthesis for design implications.

Data Collection

Student feedback was sought through an online institutional survey administered in 2025. The survey, which focused on in-venue sessions, was distributed to students enrolled in blended learning programmes across several academic schools at the institution. The survey combined structured, Likert-scale items with open-ended questions, allowing for both measurable patterns and rich descriptive insights. The structured questions focused on opportunities for active participation, collaboration, practice, feedback, lecturer preparedness, and perceptions of the value of attending in-venue sessions compared to online or independent learning. The two open-ended questions invited students to reflect on classroom sessions they found valuable or less valuable, and to explain why.

The sample was purposively drawn from students studying in the blended contact mode, where in-venue learning is a core component, namely from four geographically dispersed campuses across South Africa, spanning a wide variety of disciplines at NQF Levels 5–7. In total, 1,475 responses were received across 121 unique courses, representing a response rate of approximately 32%. After checking for completeness, 39 incomplete responses were removed, leaving 1,436 valid responses for analysis. Ethical clearance was obtained through the institution's established processes, and participation was anonymous.

Data Analysis

Responses were exported from the survey tool into Excel. Both quantitative survey ratings and qualitative responses were analysed. Basic descriptive statistics were used to summarise patterns in Likert-scale responses, highlighting trends in student perceptions of in-venue sessions. Open-ended responses were thematically analysed, with emergent themes linked to student expectations, perceived value, and alignment with Laurillard's Six Learning Types. To strengthen trustworthiness, responses were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with coding conducted iteratively by the researchers. Coder

consistency was maintained through independent coding followed by comparison and discussion to resolve discrepancies, ensuring credibility in theme development.

Research Integrity and Use of AI

AI tools were used responsibly to support, not replace, human judgment in this study. They were applied to check the consistency of the thematic analysis and to refine the clarity, structure, and flow of the manuscript. All interpretations, coding decisions, and conclusions remain the responsibility of the authors.

DISCUSSION ON FINDINGS

The findings discussed below cover three sections, namely the basic descriptive statistics of quantitative questions, followed by the student perspectives on valuable learning sessions, and, finally, the student perspectives on less valuable learning sessions.

Basic descriptive statistics of quantitative questions

The survey results reveal a generally positive picture of teaching and learning experiences, with notable variation across items. The strongest endorsement came for Q10: “The lecturer is generally well-prepared and confident in delivering the subject content”, with 81% of students agreeing or strongly agreeing. In contrast, the lowest positive response (62%) was for “I was well prepared for my first assessment”, suggesting that while students recognise lecturer preparedness, they feel less assured in their own readiness. In this context, it is interesting to note that the item attracting the highest proportion of “strongly agree” responses was “I am confident that I will pass this module”, with almost 80% agreeing overall. At the same time, only 69% of students indicated that they clearly understood what was required of them in the module, marking another area of relative weakness.

Perceptions of the value of attending classroom sessions were more mixed. On Q11: “Attending classroom sessions is a worthwhile use of my time and effort compared to participating online or working independently”, 72% agreed, while 15% were undecided and 12.6% disagreed (evenly split between “disagree” and “strongly disagree”). This indicates that although the majority value in-venue teaching, a sizeable minority remain unconvinced of its benefit.

Responses were more positive to questions linked to Laurillard’s (2012) learning types of production, practice, and collaboration. Three-quarters (75%) of respondents indicated that classroom sessions provided opportunities to create or present something. A further 70% agreed that they regularly had opportunities to apply what they had learned and receive feedback from lecturers or peers, and 78% affirmed that sessions encouraged interaction through group activities. Together, these results suggest that while students see considerable value in interactive and participatory teaching practices, challenges remain in promoting preparedness and clarity around assessment expectations.

Student Perspectives on Valuable Learning Sessions

In question 12 students were asked to reflect on a classroom session that they found valuable, and to describe what made it meaningful or helpful for their learning. Five key themes emerged:

Theme 1: Interactive and Participatory learning

Many students highlighted that classroom sessions were most valuable when they were actively engaged through activities such as group work, discussions, debates, quizzes, or collaborative projects. Interactive formats made learning more engaging, supported better retention of content, and opened opportunities to learn from peers. Rather than being passive listeners, students preferred sessions where they could participate directly. Group discussions, presentations, and collaborative problem-solving created a sense of ownership in learning while exposing them to different perspectives, as explained by a student: "When the lecturer allows us to give opinions and we get to understand different perspectives from different students", and another said: "When we are given a topic and each group or student shares their opinion about the topic, it becomes a debate but we learn alot (sic) as we get to hear different points of view". Such interaction not only enhanced understanding and memory but also strengthened confidence and communication skills, as suggested by another student: "Presenting in front of the class. Makes you get used and comfortable to talk in front of strangers".

Theme 2: Practical, Hands-On, and Real-World Application

Students reported that learning was most effective when abstract concepts were made tangible through exercises, case studies, industry guest speakers, or experiments. Guest lecturers were particularly welcomed: "The guest lecturers were very knowledgeable and engaging, it showed their expertise and enthusiasm which was a nice change of pace in the classroom". Activities such as coding tasks, business simulations, or art projects helped them connect theory to real-world contexts, understand complex topics, and develop problem-solving skills, as explained by a student: "Yes, we were given a simple website to design and had ample time in class to create it."

Theme 3: Supportive and Engaged Lecturers

Another key theme was the impact of lecturer presence, support, and clarity. Students valued lecturers who explained assignments clearly, answered questions, provided examples, and demonstrated enthusiasm, as explained by students: "Our lecturer goes through every slide in detail, and she is (sic) explaining so perfectly", and "Yes, the explanation I got from the lecturer is meaningful and helpful". Approachable and interactive lecturers made sessions meaningful, while dismissive or disengaged behaviour led students to perceive sessions as less valuable.

These findings extend the literature by highlighting that what students value most is not only clarity of explanation or structured interaction, as noted by Armellini et al. (2021) and Winfield and Whitelaw (2024), but the lecturer's personal presence and supportive attitude. This emphasis suggests that in-venue learning is experienced as relational as much as instructional. While Laurillard's (2012) framework foregrounds

dialogue and interaction, these results reveal that students see the lecturer's role as a person, approachable, enthusiastic, and engaged, as central to making learning meaningful.

Theme 4: Assignment Guidance and Assessment Preparation

Assessment is a powerful driver of learning and students' learning strategies are often determined by assessment (Hattingh & Dison, 2021). Students' focus on assessment also emerged from this investigation. Many students highlighted that sessions focused on assessments, such as assignment briefings, test preparation, or feedback, were particularly valuable. These sessions provided clarity, reduced anxiety, and helped them perform better. Guidance on assignments and assessments gave students confidence, reassurance, and a clear sense of how learning aligned with academic expectations, making these sessions among the most helpful. This is demonstrated by the following student response: "The lecturer took time to explain the assignment with the class and helped us locate good resources for our research."

Theme 5: Exposure to Broader Contexts and Critical Issues

The emergence of this theme, even though it was not a majority view, is most encouraging in the South African context. Some students highlighted sessions on cultural identity, history, sustainability, or social justice as particularly meaningful. These sessions broadened perspectives, encouraged reflection, and **connected** learning to real-world societal issues, as stated by a student: "Sessions I found value in typically contained more current or real-world information and applications". Beyond skills and content, students valued the opportunity to engage critically with societal challenges, developing a sense of purpose and relevance in their learning. As one student explained: "The topic about slavery and the identity of Africa definitely because understanding where we come from in law is important."

Student Perspectives on Less Valuable Learning Sessions

In question 13 students were asked to reflect on a classroom session that they found less valuable, and to describe what made it less effective or engaging. Once again five key themes emerged:

Theme 1: Lack of Engagement and Interaction

This theme closely relates to the first theme on valuable sessions, where students highlighted active participation and engagement as top priorities. Many students found purely lecture-based sessions, where lecturers read from slides or focused only on theory, less valuable, as noted by a student: "Reading through slides felt less valuable because I can do that myself, I'd like more explaining and teaching." Without interactive elements, discussions, or practical application, students reported losing focus and struggling to connect the content to real-life contexts. As one student explained: "A classroom session that felt less valuable was when the lesson was only lecture-based with no opportunities for participation. It became difficult to stay focused."

Theme 2: Unprepared or Inefficient Teaching

A number of responses pointed to lecturers being unprepared, rushing through content, teaching for very little time, or simply reading from slides, rather than explaining, demonstrating or facilitating learning. This

is explained by one student as follows: "When we get a lecture where work is explained to us, but we don't learn how to apply it or put it to paper", while another says "I don't understand the module nor the assignment and I fear I will not pass this module as I can't understand anything in it and feel I'm not being explained properly". This created frustration and a sense that students could self-study more effectively, which explains the almost 28% of students who indicated that they do not find in-venue sessions more worthwhile than self-study. Another example of inefficient teaching is where students complained about the frequency (too little or too much) and the way in which these were facilitated: "We have had quite a few lectures so far where we have not started with the content of the module, we are still discussing what the aims of the Social Science subject is and have gone into debates about different controversial topics. I feel we should get through the content before having these debates." Overall, students wanted discussion that was purposeful, inclusive and clearly tied to the learning outcomes.

Theme 3: Issues with Group Work and Collaboration

An interesting finding is that group activities were found to be a polarising issue. Some students valued them, but others felt they wasted time because not all members participated equally or because discussions were unfocused. Students seemed to struggle to get group members to participate, resulting in superficial engagement: "Any other session where we had group work considering nobody takes the work seriously and work is unevenly divided." A few students felt that too many group activities displaced time for covering foundational knowledge. One student explained: "I feel like the multiple group discussions take time from me (sic) learning. I would really appreciate if we learn directly from the textbook because initially that's what we are learning from especially since I noticed that Supply Chain is a theory heavy module."

Theme 4: Administrative, Logistical, and Time Challenges

It is clear from students' responses that not only the quality of teaching affects the value of in-venue sessions. Students noted that wasted class time, disorganised scheduling, late starts, or redundant sessions reduced the value of learning, as reported by a student who says: "Had a class scheduled as regular programming, got to campus only to find out it had been randomly given to a different lecturer, the issue could not be resolved and thus 3hrs of time had been wasted and invaluable." On the other hand, large workloads compressed into limited time were also reported to make some sessions feel ineffective.

Theme 5: Content Relevance and Level of Challenge

Some students found sessions less valuable because the material felt repetitive, disconnected from their qualification, or too surface-level. Others felt overwhelmed when content was too advanced or not adequately explained, for example: "The other sessions don't feel as needed because they're focused on giving feedback. I'd much prefer using class time to learn new things. Whether that's learning a new tool or a new setting in an Adobe app." Students said production tasks, such as presentations or class participation, often felt unclear or unhelpful when criteria were vague or when the task consumed time without supporting real learning. Presentations that spanned multiple sessions were seen as inefficient, and some resented participation activities that were too complicated for the marks awarded.

Discussion of student perspectives

These findings reveal a clear picture of what students consider valuable in in-venue sessions and what hinders their learning. Students consistently valued interactive and participatory approaches, practical and applied activities, supportive lecturers, assessment guidance, and opportunities to engage with broader societal issues. These results align closely with Laurillard's (2012) framework, which emphasises that discussion, collaboration, practice, and production are best supported in synchronous, face-to-face contexts. They also confirm Armellini et al.'s (2021) argument that reciprocal lecturer–student communication fosters engagement, and support Hattingh and Dison's (2021) view that assessment is a powerful driver of student learning strategies. In the Global South, where access to technology is uneven, such in-venue learning experiences appear to carry heightened significance for building confidence, academic belonging, and critical citizenship.

At the same time, the less valuable sessions illustrate the risks when in-venue learning fails to meet these expectations. Students described passive lectures, lack of preparation, unfocused group work, logistical inefficiencies, and irrelevant or unclear content as particularly frustrating. These findings stand in tension with Laurillard's (2012) model, which assumes that in-person contexts naturally enable richer dialogue and collaboration. Instead, students reported that disengaged lecturers, poorly facilitated activities, or vague assessment tasks diminished the very benefits that the literature attributes to classroom learning. Similarly, while Armellini et al. (2021) highlight communication as a strength of in-venue learning, the data here show that it can just as easily become a liability when interaction is absent or superficial.

Overall, these contrasting perspectives highlight that the value of in-venue learning in blended models is not guaranteed by the format itself but depends on intentional, well-designed pedagogy and lecturer presence. In the Global South context, where educational inequality shapes students' opportunities, inperson sessions must provide distinctive benefits, through interaction, application, support, and purpose, to justify their central place within blended contact models.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING IN-VENUE TEACHING IN BLENDED CONTACT

Based on the student feedback received, several actionable strategies can enhance the value of in-venue learning. First, addressing logistical and administrative issues, including timetabling, represents an “easy win” that can immediately improve the student experience. Furthermore, students can benefit from practical guidance in group work, including strategies for dividing tasks and encouraging equal participation. Lecturers should consistently explain how individual tasks and sessions fit within the broader curriculum and avoid repeating content unless there is a clear learning purpose. Linking classroom activities to realworld contexts and societal issues is valued by students, ensuring that content is meaningful and relatable. Peer observation and support for lecturers can help address ineffective practices such as over-reliance on reading from slides. Finally, and most importantly, even sessions focused on knowledge acquisition should be designed to be interactive and engaging, promoting active participation rather than passive listening.

CONCLUSION

In-venue learning settings play a critical role in blended learning models, particularly in Global South contexts like South Africa where access and engagement are uneven. This study highlights the pedagogical value of purposefully designed in-venue learning, especially for activities requiring social interaction and experiential engagement. By prioritising student perspectives, institutions in the Global South can more intentionally design in-venue learning that responds to shifting expectations, supports equity, and enhances the pedagogical value of blended models.

Good design should therefore aim for in-venue sessions that are interactive and participatory, grounded in practical, real-world application, supported by engaged lecturers who provide clear assignment and assessment guidance, and enriched through exposure to broader contexts and critical issues. At the same time, it must avoid practices that render sessions invaluable, such as limited engagement and interaction, irrelevant or unchallenging content, unprepared or inefficient teaching, poor group dynamics, and avoidable administrative or logistical challenges.

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