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Renewing Introductory Management Courses in Higher Vocational Colleges through Blended Teaching: The Roles of Digital Literacy and Learning Engagement

Baoyin Liu, Rozaini Binti Rosli*

School of Business & Management, Lincoln University College, Petaling Jaya 47301, Selangor, Malaysia

Corresponding author: Rozaini Binti Rosli, rozaini@lincoln.edu.my

Abstract: This paper examines how blended teaching can renew introductory management courses in higher vocational colleges through two closely related pathways: the development of digital literacy and the strengthening of learning engagement. Rather than treating blended teaching as a simple combination of online and face-to-face instruction, the paper understands it as a pedagogical redesign that reorganises preparation, classroom activity, feedback, and assessment. Drawing on scholarship from blended learning, vocational pedagogy, digital literacy, student engagement, and management education, the analysis identifies four persistent constraints in current practice: weak links between theory and workplace situations, uneven student digital readiness, superficial participation, and assessment systems that over-reward short-term recall. The paper argues that digital literacy matters because students in blended environments must search, evaluate, communicate, and complete tasks through digital tools with growing independence. Learning engagement matters because flexible access and platform use produce little educational value unless students participate behaviourally, invest cognitively, and remain emotionally connected to the course. On this basis, the paper proposes six practical pathways for course renewal: reorganising content around managerial tasks, designing a three-stage learning loop, embedding meaningful digital tasks, strengthening engagement through interaction and assessment, developing teachers' digital-pedagogical capability, and improving institutional support. The study offers a practice-oriented framework for colleges seeking to move foundational management teaching towards more applied, participatory, and digitally informed learning.

Keywords: Blended Teaching; Introductory Management Courses; Higher Vocational Colleges; Digital Literacy; Learning Engagement; Teaching Reform

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Importance

Blended learning is no longer understood merely as a temporary mixture of online and classroom sessions; it is increasingly discussed as a deliberate redesign of time, interaction, feedback, and assessment [1-3]. In management education, this matters because course goals extend beyond conceptual recall. Students are expected to interpret organisational situations, coordinate with others, communicate professionally, and make judgements under practical constraints [4-7]. For higher vocational colleges, the challenge is even sharper. Introductory management courses sit at the foundation of many business-related programmes,

yet they are often delivered through lecture-heavy routines that privilege definitions, principles, and end-of-term tests. Such arrangements may transmit terminology, but they do not easily build applied understanding or workplace readiness.

At the same time, the digitalisation of work has altered what counts as basic managerial competence. Students need not only disciplinary knowledge but also the capacity to search for information, evaluate digital sources, communicate through platforms, and complete technology-mediated tasks. Business and management education therefore cannot treat digital literacy as an external add-on [5,8-11]. Nor can flexible online access alone guarantee better learning. Research on student engagement consistently shows that meaningful learning depends on participation, persistence, cognitive investment, and a sense of relevance [12-15]. Against this background, blended teaching becomes significant not because it uses more technology, but because it can connect course design, digital capability building, and sustained engagement in a more coherent manner.

1.2 Research Objectives

This article aims to clarify how blended teaching can renew introductory management courses in higher vocational colleges through two connected mechanisms: the development of digital literacy and the strengthening of learning engagement. Rather than reporting new survey data, the paper offers a conceptual and practice-oriented analysis grounded in scholarship on blended learning, management education, digital literacy, student engagement, and vocational pedagogy [4,5,8,13,16]. It seeks to answer three questions. First, why are introductory management courses especially suitable for blended redesign in higher vocational settings? Second, through what mechanisms do digital literacy and learning engagement influence the effectiveness of course implementation? Third, what practical pathways can institutions and instructors adopt to turn blended teaching from a technical arrangement into a meaningful pedagogical reform?

1.3 Analytical Basis and Scope

The discussion focuses on introductory management courses typically offered in business, marketing, logistics, tourism, and service-related programmes. These courses usually introduce planning, organising, leading, coordination, communication, supervision, and basic decision-making. The paper does not treat all forms of blended teaching as equivalent. Following existing research, blended teaching here refers to the purposeful integration of online resources, in-class activity, digital communication, and formative assessment into a single learning design [2,3,17,18]. The analysis also adopts a vocational perspective, meaning that course value is judged not only by exam scores but by the extent to which students can connect concepts to work situations, participate in collaborative tasks, and develop durable learning habits [6,7,25].

2. Why Introductory Management Courses Need Blended Redesign

2.1 The Competency Profile of Vocational Management Education

Basic management courses in higher vocational colleges are often treated as theoretical foundations, yet their educational function is wider than conceptual introduction. Students must learn to interpret routine organisational problems, allocate simple resources, coordinate roles, communicate across tasks, and respond to uncertainty in service or operational settings. These are not competencies that emerge from memorising principles alone. They require repeated exposure to scenarios, opportunities for reflection, and structured interaction with peers and instructors [4,6,7]. For this reason, vocational management education benefits from learning designs that combine explanation with application, individual study with collaborative work, and knowledge input with timely feedback.

Blended teaching is particularly suited to this competency profile. Pre-class digital materials can introduce core concepts in manageable units, while classroom time can be reserved for case analysis, role play, discussion, and problem solving. After class, students can revisit resources, submit short reflections, and receive formative feedback through learning platforms. This sequencing helps move introductory courses away from one-directional lecturing and towards constructive alignment between learning outcomes, learning activities, and assessment [2,7,17]. Evidence from higher education also suggests that blended environments are most effective when course design, student support, and assessment structures are aligned rather than assembled piecemeal [19-21].

2.2 The Limits of Lecture-Dominated Delivery

Lecture-centred teaching remains common because it is efficient for covering content, especially in large classes. Yet in introductory management courses it often produces several recurring problems. First, abstract concepts are detached from

work situations. Students can repeat terms such as span of control, motivation, leadership style, or organisational structure, but they struggle to see how these ideas operate in everyday supervisory or service contexts. Second, teacher talk dominates while student reasoning remains thin. Third, assessment often rewards short-term recall more than interpretation or application [4,7,21].

Management education scholars have long argued that digital and blended delivery should not simply reproduce transmission teaching in a new medium [2,4,16]. When online components are used only to upload slides or record lectures, the most pressing pedagogical problem remains untouched. By contrast, studies in management education show that digital tools can broaden participation, support reflection, and extend learning beyond the classroom when they are tied to clear task design and communication structures [5,22]. The issue, then, is not whether technology is present, but whether the course asks students to read, discuss, compare, decide, and produce in ways that approximate managerial work.

2.3 Why Digital Literacy and Engagement Matter Most

Two conditions determine whether blended teaching improves learning in practice. The first is digital literacy. Students in blended courses must navigate learning platforms, locate resources, judge information quality, communicate online, and sometimes produce multimodal work. Digital literacy therefore includes technical operation, cognitive judgement, and social communication rather than mere device use [8-11]. Without this capability, flexibility can quickly turn into confusion, fragmentation, and passive dependence on teachers.

The second condition is learning engagement. Engagement includes behavioural participation, cognitive investment, and emotional connection to the learning process [12,13]. Students may have access to excellent online materials, but access alone does not guarantee sustained attention or meaningful effort. Research on educational technology repeatedly shows that engagement is the link between instructional design and learning outcomes [14,15]. In introductory management courses, where students often enter with uneven academic preparation and limited confidence in theoretical study, engagement becomes especially decisive. Blended teaching works when it lowers entry barriers, increases relevance, and keeps students actively involved over time.

3. A Mechanism Framework for Blended Teaching Reform

3.1 Blended Teaching as an Integrated Pedagogical System

Blended teaching is sometimes reduced to a ratio between online and face-to-face hours. That view is too narrow. A more useful understanding is to treat blended teaching as an integrated pedagogical system that redistributes learning tasks across time, space, and media [1-3]. In this system, online components are not appendices; they prepare, extend, or deepen classroom work. Face-to-face sessions are not reserved for repeating content that students could read alone; they are used for interaction, clarification, judgement, and practice. The quality of blended teaching thus depends on sequencing, coherence, and feedback rather than on technological density [17,18,23].

For introductory management courses, this means that concept explanation, case interpretation, peer collaboration, reflective writing, and assessment must be designed as a connected whole. A short video on planning or motivation, for example, only becomes valuable when it leads into discussion questions, application tasks, or classroom scenarios. Likewise, digital quizzes matter not because they automate marking, but because they provide fast diagnosis and inform subsequent teaching. The reform of blended teaching is therefore a matter of course architecture.

3.2 Digital Literacy Development as an Enabling Pathway

Digital literacy is the first enabling pathway in this framework. In blended introductory management courses, students repeatedly work with online platforms, digital resources, collaborative documents, discussion boards, video materials, and simple data-based tasks. When such activities are designed well, students gradually develop the ability to search, compare, judge, organise, and communicate information more independently [8-11]. This capability reduces their reliance on teacher explanation for every step and allows them to participate more productively in pre-class preparation and post-class consolidation.

The key point is that digital literacy should be cultivated through disciplinary tasks, not taught as a separate technical module. A student learns more from comparing two online case reports, checking the credibility of managerial advice, and preparing

a brief digital presentation than from passively receiving instructions about platform buttons. In vocational management education, digital literacy can also include everyday workplace practices such as drafting collaborative schedules, summarising customer feedback, or interpreting simple operational data. Once students become more competent in these practices, the blended environment becomes easier to navigate and less cognitively wasteful.

3.3 Learning Engagement as a Sustaining Pathway

Engagement forms the second pathway. When blended teaching is structured around relevance, interaction, and timely response, students are more likely to participate consistently. Behavioural engagement grows when tasks are clear, manageable, and visible. Cognitive engagement deepens when students are asked to compare alternatives, justify decisions, and connect concepts to concrete cases. Emotional engagement strengthens when they experience progress, recognition, and a sense that the course speaks to real work situations [12-15].

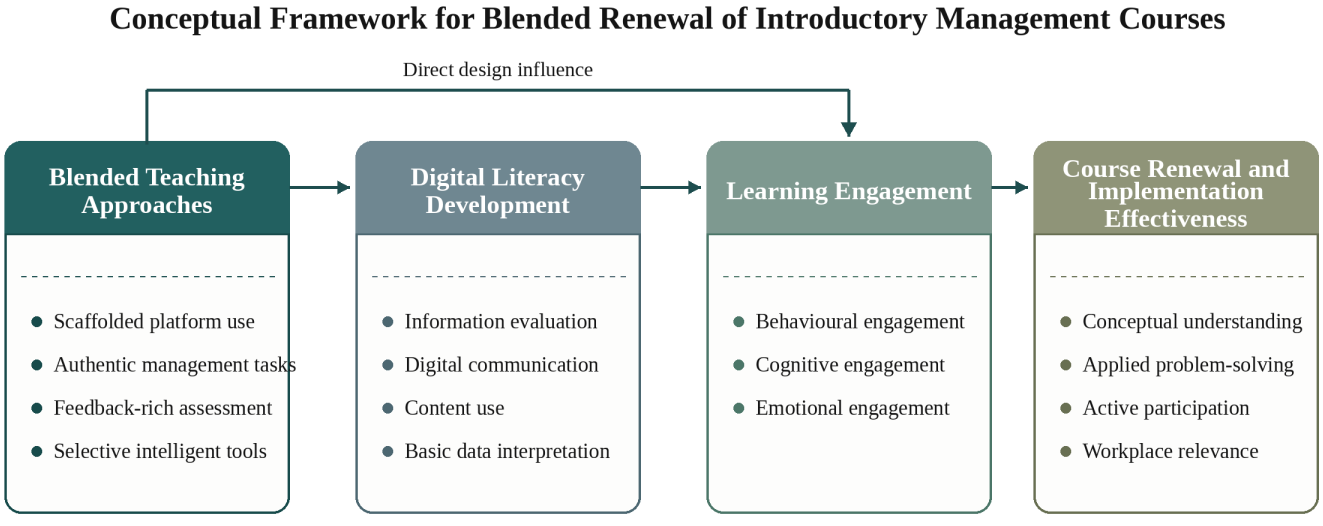
In introductory management courses, engagement can be fragile because abstract content often feels distant from students' everyday experience. Blended teaching can address this by expanding the range of interaction. Short preparatory questions, in-class polling, collaborative case notes, peer comments, and reflective posts can draw more students into the learning process than a single lecture-discussion pattern. Importantly, engagement is not created by novelty alone. It depends on whether students see a reason to invest effort and whether the course gives them structured opportunities to do so.

3.4 The Link Between Digital Literacy and Engagement

Digital literacy and engagement should not be treated as isolated variables. They reinforce one another. Students who can navigate digital platforms confidently are more likely to prepare before class, participate online, and sustain effort after class. At the same time, engaged students practise digital tasks more often and gradually expand their competence through use [9,14,19,24]. In other words, digital literacy lowers participation barriers, while engagement turns digital opportunity into actual learning behaviour.

This linkage is especially important in higher vocational settings. Students often differ in prior academic habits, self-management, and familiarity with formal learning technologies. If blended courses assume a level of digital readiness that students do not yet possess, engagement may decline. If courses simplify all digital work to avoid difficulty, students lose an important chance to build relevant capability. Effective blended teaching therefore calibrates challenge: it introduces digital tasks progressively, provides support where necessary, and connects those tasks to visible learning purposes. The overall mechanism proposed in this paper is summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework linking blended teaching, digital literacy development, learning engagement, and course renewal.



Digital literacy is positioned as an enabling capability; engagement is treated as the immediate learning mechanism.

4. Persistent Constraints in Current Course Implementation

4.1 Weak Connection Between Theory and Workplace Situations

A recurring weakness in introductory management teaching is the gap between textbook concepts and the realities of vocational practice. Students may understand formal definitions but fail to apply them to customer service, frontline supervision, team scheduling, or small-scale operational problems. This weakens both retention and motivation. When concepts remain decontextualised, students often see management courses as descriptive or exam-oriented rather than useful for future work [4,6,25].

Blended teaching can narrow this gap, but only if digital resources are built around practical situations. Uploading reading materials alone does not create relevance. Courses need short cases, scenario prompts, workplace videos, and discussion tasks that translate principles into decisions and actions.

4.2 Uneven Digital Readiness and Self-Management

A second constraint is the uneven digital readiness of students. Access to devices does not necessarily mean students know how to evaluate online information, manage platform-based learning, or collaborate effectively in digital environments [8-11]. Some students are comfortable with entertainment-oriented digital use but uncertain when asked to search academically, synthesise information, or manage deadlines independently. This problem becomes more visible in blended teaching because learning extends beyond the teacher's immediate supervision.

Self-regulation is closely tied to this issue. Research comparing online and blended learners suggests that planning, monitoring, and study management are important for success in technology-mediated learning [24]. In higher vocational colleges, where students often balance multiple pressures and may have uneven study habits, blended course design must include explicit support rather than assuming autonomous learning will emerge spontaneously.

4.3 Superficial Participation and Weak Peer Collaboration

A third difficulty is that participation is often visible but shallow. Students may log in, download files, or attend class without investing much thought. In some cases, online discussion turns into short, repetitive responses written only to satisfy attendance rules. In others, group work is unevenly distributed, with a few students carrying most of the task. These patterns reduce the educational value of blended teaching and can create resistance among both students and instructors [14,15,18].

For management education, this is a serious issue because collaboration itself is part of the learning outcome. If blended teaching does not improve the quality of peer interaction, it misses one of its main advantages. Students should not simply coexist on a platform; they need structured reasons to exchange views, negotiate decisions, and respond to one another's work.

4.4 Assessment Structures That Over-Reward Recall

The fourth constraint lies in assessment. Many introductory courses still rely heavily on final examinations. This approach is simple to administer, but it captures only a narrow portion of what management education is supposed to develop. Students can often pass by memorising terms and reproducing standard answers, while weaker performance in discussion, application, collaboration, or reflection remains invisible [7,21]. Such assessment also discourages sustained engagement because students learn that regular participation has limited value unless it directly affects grades.

In blended settings, this mismatch becomes more obvious. If a course includes pre-class work, online discussion, case analysis, and collaborative tasks, then assessment should recognise those forms of learning. Otherwise, students will treat them as optional or symbolic. A rebalanced system of formative and summative assessment is therefore essential to the credibility of blended reform.

5. Practical Pathways for Course Renewal

5.1 Reorganising Content Around Managerial Tasks

The first pathway is curricular reorganisation. Instead of arranging the course only around textbook chapters, instructors can cluster content around common managerial tasks: setting work goals, allocating responsibilities, coordinating teams, handling service problems, motivating staff, and monitoring performance. Foundational concepts remain important, but they are

introduced as tools for understanding and solving situations rather than as isolated definitions [4,7].

This task orientation is particularly appropriate for higher vocational education because it respects the applied logic of the sector [6]. It also gives blended teaching a clearer purpose. Pre-class resources can introduce necessary concepts; classroom time can be used for scenario analysis; post-class tasks can ask students to transfer the idea to new settings. In this way, digital materials support rather than fragment learning.

5.2 Designing a Three-Stage Learning Loop

The second pathway is to design a stable pre-class, in-class, and post-class learning loop. Before class, students can work with short videos, concise readings, vocabulary explanations, or simple diagnostic quizzes. The aim is not to complete the whole lesson online, but to reduce passive listening later by ensuring that students arrive with a preliminary grasp of the topic. During class, emphasis should shift to clarification, debate, case analysis, role simulation, and group decision-making. After class, students can submit brief reflections, respond to feedback, revise misconceptions, or complete applied mini-tasks.

This three-stage loop supports both digital literacy and engagement. Students use digital tools with a clear learning purpose, while teachers gain more room for interaction in class. The loop also makes progress visible. Students can see what preparation is expected, what is done collectively, and how learning continues after class. Coherence of this kind is more valuable than adding multiple tools without a clear sequence [2,3,17].

5.3 Embedding Digital Tasks That Build Literacy

The third pathway is to embed digital tasks that cultivate literacy within disciplinary learning. For example, students may be asked to compare the credibility of two management websites, summarise a short workplace case using collaborative software, prepare a digital briefing on service improvement, or interpret basic operational data presented in dashboard form. These tasks strengthen information judgement, communication, and platform use while keeping attention on management problems [8-11].

The design principle here is moderation. Not every lesson needs a new application or complex platform. Overly technical tasks may distract from learning goals and frustrate students with weaker readiness [18]. What matters is repeated practice with a limited set of meaningful digital actions that gradually become part of the students' learning repertoire.

5.4 Strengthening Engagement Through Interaction and Assessment

The fourth pathway is to make engagement observable, supported, and consequential. Observable engagement means that students' preparation, participation, collaboration, and reflection leave traces that instructors can see. Supported engagement means that tasks are scaffolded and feedback is timely. Consequential engagement means that these learning processes count within the assessment structure [12-15].

In practical terms, this may involve participation rubrics, short response notes, peer feedback sheets, case discussion records, group presentations, and reflective journals. Low-stakes but regular assessment can help students stay involved without turning every activity into a high-pressure event. In introductory management courses, this approach is particularly useful because it rewards gradual development and reduces the temptation to postpone learning until the final examination. It also aligns better with the communicative and collaborative nature of management work [7].

5.5 Developing Teachers' Digital-Pedagogical Capability

The fifth pathway concerns teachers. Blended reform does not succeed simply because a platform is available. Instructors need the capacity to redesign learning tasks, sequence activities, moderate online interaction, read student learning traces, and give feedback efficiently [5,17,16]. In management education, teachers also need to connect digital design with the practical rhythm of case-based and discussion-oriented teaching.

Professional development should therefore move beyond basic platform training. It should help teachers make decisions about workload, task difficulty, assessment balance, and the relationship between online and classroom components. This is especially important in higher vocational colleges, where teaching often involves diverse student backgrounds and strong expectations for applicability. Teacher capability is not a peripheral issue; it is one of the conditions that determines whether blended teaching remains superficial or becomes transformative.

5.6 Building Institutional Support and Quality Assurance

The final pathway is institutional. Even well-designed courses are weakened when platforms are unstable, devices are unequal, or teachers work without resource support. Colleges need reliable learning management systems, accessible digital resource banks, manageable class sizes where possible, and shared standards for formative assessment. They also need realistic expectations about workload. Poorly planned blended reform can increase administrative burden without improving learning [17,18].

Quality assurance should pay attention to more than platform usage statistics. Useful indicators include the coherence of course design, student participation patterns, feedback timeliness, the relevance of learning tasks, and the alignment between assessment and learning outcomes. At the institutional level, blended teaching should be treated as a pedagogical strategy, not as a simple indicator of digital modernisation.

Table 1: Practical pathways for blended renewal of introductory management courses.

Pathway	Design emphasis	Expected contribution
Content around managerial tasks	Connect concepts with vocational situations such as coordination, service problems, and team supervision.	Stronger applied understanding and workplace relevance.
Three-stage learning loop	Link pre-class preparation, in-class application, and post-class reflection.	More coherent participation and learning continuity.
Embedded digital tasks	Use information search, collaborative documents, digital briefings, and basic data interpretation.	Gradual digital literacy development within disciplinary learning.
Interaction and assessment	Make preparation, discussion, peer feedback, and reflection visible and consequential.	Higher behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement.
Teacher capability	Strengthen task design, online facilitation, feedback, and use of learning traces.	Less superficial platform use and more adaptive instruction.
Institutional support	Provide stable platforms, resource banks, workload support, and quality assurance.	More sustainable course implementation across programmes.

6. Discussion

6.1 Implications for Management Education

The analysis suggests that blended teaching has special value in management education because it brings instructional practice closer to the communication patterns and problem-solving conditions of contemporary organisations. Management work increasingly involves digital coordination, distributed information, and collaborative decision-making. Introductory courses should therefore expose students early to learning forms that mirror these conditions [4,5,16,22]. A course that integrates case discussion, platform-based preparation, peer feedback, and digital communication is not merely following a technological trend; it is rehearsing part of the environment in which students will later work.

6.2 Implications for Higher Vocational Colleges

For higher vocational colleges, the core lesson is that blended reform should begin from student capability and curriculum purpose rather than from technology procurement. Students need gradual support in digital practice, and teachers need time to redesign tasks. Institutional strategies that emphasise platform adoption without pedagogical adjustment are unlikely to produce deep change. Evidence from higher vocational settings indicates that blended learning often performs well when it combines practical relevance, teacher support, and appropriate resources [19,25]. This means that reform efforts should remain grounded, selective, and closely tied to course characteristics.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

This paper is conceptual and practice-oriented. It does not test causal relations through original survey or experimental data. Its value lies in clarifying a mechanism framework and translating existing scholarship into a coherent set of pathways

for introductory management courses. Future research can build on this framework in at least three ways. First, empirical studies may examine whether digital literacy and learning engagement operate as parallel or sequential mediators in blended management courses. Second, comparative studies may investigate differences across majors, institutional types, or student groups. Third, qualitative work may explore how students actually experience the shift from lecture-centred teaching to blended course design in vocational contexts.

Conclusion

Blended teaching can renew introductory management courses in higher vocational colleges, but its value does not lie in the simple coexistence of online and face-to-face activities. Its real contribution lies in redesigning how students prepare, participate, apply knowledge, and receive feedback. The analysis developed in this paper argues that digital literacy and learning engagement are the two central mechanisms in that process. Digital literacy enables students to work productively in a technology-mediated learning environment, while engagement converts access and flexibility into sustained learning effort.

For vocational management education, this argument has practical implications. Course reform should reorganise content around managerial tasks, establish coherent learning loops across class stages, embed meaningful digital tasks, recognise process-based engagement in assessment, strengthen teachers' digital-pedagogical capability, and provide institutional support. When these elements are aligned, blended teaching can move foundational management courses away from abstract transmission and towards applied, participatory, and digitally informed learning. That is the direction in which introductory management education needs to move if it is to remain educationally credible and vocationally relevant.

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