

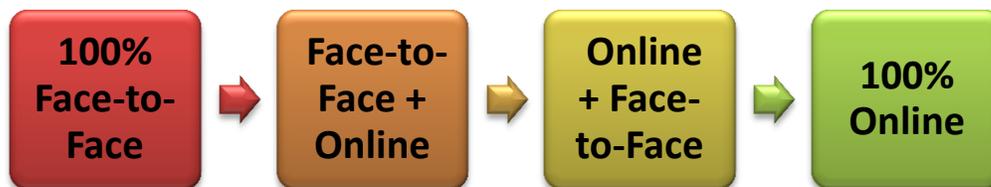
Blended Learning

What is Blended Learning?

Blended learning combines face-to-face “methods with computer-mediated activities to form an integrated instructional approach” (Pennsylvania State University, 2009, para. 1). In the broadest sense of the term, a blended learning environment could be completely face-to-face (F2F) where the instructor blends a variety of teaching methods, activities, assessments, and technologies. Today, however, the term blended learning narrows to represent a combination of F2F and online learning activities where the online activities replace actual “seat-time” in the classroom. It is the blend that makes each course unique; thus, blended courses can take on different attributes. For example, a course might include online discussions, Web tutorials and research activities, and student responses to a podcast. The combination of online and F2F activities is almost limitless.

Blended learning represents a combination of F2F and online learning activities where the online activities replace actual “seat-time” in the classroom.

Figure 1
Instructional Environment Continuum



The Instructional Environment Continuum

Figure 1 represents a teaching continuum beginning with the traditional teaching environment where all of the learning takes place in the classroom; two possibilities of blended learning; and a class taught completely online. The two center boxes represent equal distribution of F2F and online components although you could teach a course with an 80% F2F + 20% online structure or a 30% F2F + 70% online structure. Many possibilities exist and finding the right blend will take time to perfect and meet your teaching and learning needs. Most likely a blended course will change over time, and blended design will vary from one course to another.

Most likely a blended course will change over time and will vary from one course to another.

Designing a Blended Course

1. Redesigning a traditional course for blended learning will take more time and effort due to the requisite technologies used for the online portion of the class. Effective course design considerations should include student learning preferences and alignment of course goals and objectives with F2F and online activities.

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2. Media used in blended learning environments are not limited to the Internet and a set of computers. For example, students on the go use mobile technologies—MP3 devices, iPods, GPS systems, digital cameras, laptops and tablet PCs. All of these comprise the mobile communication culture of today’s students (Milne, 2006). Mobile learning (mLearning) is yet another way instructors can blend course content and better meet the requirements of students on the go.
3. Consider both the physical and virtual “classroom” space for learning and how they complement one another. Blended learning environments do not occur strictly between a traditional classroom and someone’s home office. If team work is a course expectation, provide opportunities for team work to occur both in and out of the classroom by designing in-class activities which can be completed after class: Blackboard groups and discussion fora, social networks to foster online learning communities, course-related Wikis (collaborative website), and electronic peer assessment.

Advantages of Blended Learning

Flexibility—Blended learning environments allow students to access a variety of media which support different learning preferences—video for visual learners, podcasts for auditory learners, and hands-on activities for kinesthetic learners.

Social atmosphere—Online learning components such as synchronous chats, question and answer sessions, and asynchronous case studies and group work give all students, especially those who tend to be quiet in face-to-face classrooms, the opportunity to speak up in a safe and open learning environment. Also, group collaboration can be easily facilitated by allowing students the ability to share files, create discussion threads, and participate in virtual chat.

Reusable learning objects—Materials such as tutorials, simulations, case studies, and assessments can be repurposed for use in other learning environments to save on design and development time.

Challenges of Blended Learning

New course design—You cannot take an existing course and just “put it” online. Initially, identify which content would best be presented face-to-face and which content would be presented online and be accessed 24/7. Align course learning goals and objectives with instructional strategies, activities and assessments that work best face-to-face and online.

Technology adaptation—Instructors and students must be given time to adapt. Blending an existing course by small increments will allow everyone to work out challenges and difficulties they might encounter with the technology. Discussing with students the purpose of using the technologies in the course can help them to adapt more quickly as well.

As more content is presented online, the instructor's role will shift from being a presenter of information to a facilitator of knowledge.

Roles and responsibilities—Students who are new to blended learning environments must learn to adapt to this mode of delivery which often requires more writing than face-to-face courses. Students also must make use of good time management skills as blended courses require them to balance both online and face-to-face course activities. Finally, as more content is presented online, the instructor's role will shift from being a presenter of information to a facilitator of knowledge (Northeastern University, 2007). Although the instructor creates the blended learning environment, the technology takes center stage as students interact with the technology through its delivery, accessibility, flow, content and activities.

Summary

Through careful planning, blended learning can help impart knowledge in new and exciting ways. Traditional face-to-face courses can be modified to fit a blended model which meets student learning needs and expectations and the pedagogical requirements of the instructor. With time and practice, blended learning will become a standard and expected method of instructional delivery.

References

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