

Instructional Design for Hybrid Courses:
Deliberate design for the best of both worlds

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Abstract:

New technologies can present instructional design challenges as faculty consider the best ways to combine traditional teaching methodologies with new techniques to best meet learning objectives. While online courses have gained a great deal of popularity, some students and educators still resist because of an expressed need for face to face contact. Even when online communities demonstrate a rich and in depth discussion, allowing their members to learn a lot about each other, some individuals still crave that visualization of their classmates and instructors. Hybrid courses offer the opportunity to combine the best of each format. The frustration comes because little has been studied and research in this territory has been neglected. Finding out how to meet objectives in the most meaningful way to enhance student learning is crucial for having the best of both worlds. This manuscript presents a brief discussion of issues to consider when designing a course that combines face-to-face and online learning activities.

Introduction

The popularity of online course is certainly well established. The student profile has changed dramatically from the days of an overwhelming majority of college students coming directly from high school to live in campus dormitories where they easily walked to class and sat at their desks to listen to an instructor deliver a prepared lecture. Some of today's students still fall into that demographic, but most have had some life experiences since they graduated high school and live off campus. Many work to fully support themselves or at least contribute to their own support. For those who hold full time jobs, finding class schedules that mesh well with work ones is challenging. Online courses offer much valued flexibility. They also eliminate significantly time consuming tasks such as getting children to a baby sitter or finding a parking place once on campus. Students too shy to interact in a classroom often blossom on discussion boards in the online environment. In addition, the need for classroom space, at a premium on many campuses, is eliminated. With so many pluses, it's amazing that all college courses aren't exclusively online!

It is not very hard to find the arguments against online classes, however. Faculty and students alike voice opinions that they miss the face to face exchange of ideas. Online, facial expressions go unseen and messages in body language are lost. Dialogue that is spontaneous and meaningful often occurs as class members are walking out of class together and head to the grill or recreation center. Faculty can actually see students' responses to help them know whether or not an important concept is understood. Some faculty and students are simply not comfortable with using and trusting the technology involved in online courses.

A third option is gaining a great deal of attention as proponents of both online and face to face teaching stop their defense of the favored method and begin to look at ways that use what provides the best educational experiences. Hybrid courses are not new. They have been around as long as the technology that allows online options. What is new is the effort educators are making to seek the best of both worlds and create a learning environment that combines all the advantages of each.

Definitions

Part of the problem with early hybrid courses was that they were/are created mostly for convenience. Perhaps students come to class as usual and get their paper work online. Maybe the instructor is presenting at a conference so tells students that their lecture will be posted that week. Having the course power points available on a web site makes it handy for students who miss a class. All of these illustrate hybrid courses and, while nothing is actually wrong with using a combination in this way, none of these reasons point to good pedagogy. Probably, none are the true “best practice” of instruction. So what is the definition of a good hybrid course?

To some extent, the campus will define a hybrid course. Often terms such as hybrid, web-enhanced, on-ground and online courses are defined by the number of hours spent in each format. To a certain extent, this may be enough.

(Insert Box 1)

But, more than a time frame, it is important to think about what each format offers. What does each do best?

What Hybrid Courses Can Do

Apart from any particular definition, the real issue is to discover what a hybrid course is for the instructor and the student. What makes a course a “good” hybrid course? Certainly all agree that such a course will have components online as well as on ground. It means that an alternative design has been selected and that students are expected to navigate their way in some form of online format. Learning is facilitated by resources available on the web and shared with others across the world. Interaction is often at a faster pace and occurs immediately. Hybrid courses can put students in touch with others interested in the same issues and topics. Language is not a barrier because the technology provides an automatic interpreter. These are advantages of a well designed hybrid course.

However, making use of the technology available and combining online learning with on ground is not merely a matter of building on top of what is already being done in an existing course. Developing a hybrid course that is truly related to the best practices of learning and teaching means that the instructor has adopted a whole new philosophy of teaching. It involves using the time in the classroom to do those activities best suited for that setting while using the online time for learning experiences that can be best accomplished in that environment. A careful scrutiny of course objectives is necessary to determine which objectives can best be met through the face to face sessions and which are best met through other methods.

For a successful hybrid course, the instructor needs to pay close attention to meaningful scheduling, selection of learning activities and suitable assessment methods for the course. Trying to quickly add on to an existing course does not often work well in

creating a hybrid course. The result is piecemeal and neither enhances nor provides for student learning. A good hybrid course takes from each approach to teaching and results in students receiving superior learning opportunities.

Research and Resources

Research had shown several advantages to a hybrid course. Students prefer a mix of learning environments. When asked what they prefer, 56.3% prefer courses that use a moderate amount of instructional technology (IT) and 49.5% of students reported that the use of instructional technology enhances their learning (MTSU ECAR, 2008). Many (37.3%) say that they get more involved in courses that use IT. In addition, requiring the use of technology in courses assures computer literacy.

Apart from surveys such as the ECAR, little research has been conducted on hybrid courses. What is reported consists of many studies that show a “no difference” finding between online and on ground courses. Many have criticized the proliferation of the “no difference” studies. The fact that we can say with assurance that students learn as well online as on ground is widely accepted. Certainly individuals still hold preferences for one format or the other, but no one can argue that both don’t have an equal place in the current educational environment.

More important are studies that will show what makes the best learning within the on ground setting as opposed to the online one. Discovering which objectives can best be met in one way or the other, perhaps even asking which students do best in each environment , and for what topics, would give educators important information when creating new courses. Generally speaking, research needs to move into other

directions. Even deciding what questions need to be answered is critical to the development of the pedagogy needed in today's world.

Summary

It may be that the real wave of the future is in hybrid courses. Designed with the best of both, hybrid courses can offer students the newest in technology and the best of face to face interaction. Discovering how to make use of each format is an important area of research in learning and teaching. There is no longer a need to prove the value of online education. The need comes in structuring each learning experience to match the objectives of the course. Students today expect faculty to create courses that not only instruct, but engage them. Designing a hybrid course means adopting a whole new philosophy of teaching, not just building on top of what is already being done.

Box 1: Definitions

***Hybrid Courses - Hybrid** courses combine face-to-face (FTF) classroom instruction with electronic online devices. A significant amount of learning in a **hybrid course** occurs online. As a result, a **hybrid course** reduces the amount of classroom seat time.

***Blended Learning - Blended Learning** is the process of incorporating many different learning styles that can be accomplished through the use of 'blended' virtual and physical resources.

Mixed Media – In this context, **mixed media** refers to the use of more than one type of learning environment.

***eLearning - Electronic learning (or e-Learning or eLearning)** is a type of technology supported education/learning (TSL) where the medium of instruction is through computer technology, particularly involving digital technologies. E-learning has been

defined as “pedagogy empowered by digital technology”. In some instances, no face-to-face interaction takes place. *E-learning* is used interchangeably in a wide variety of contexts. Lately in most Universities, e-learning is used to define a specific mode to attend a course or program of study where the students rarely, if ever, attend face-to-face for on-campus access to educational facilities, because they study online.

Cyber-learning – **Cyber-learning** is a term considered synonymous with elearning.

Web-enhanced – When an instructor in an on ground course uses the web to post the course syllabus or other course materials, or, on occasion, has students visit web sites for additional learning, the course is considered **web-enhanced**.

*Source for these definitions is Wikipedia