

Chapter 34

Designing Quality Blended Courses

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ABSTRACT

Over the last few years, a growing number of courses have been incorporating online elements into traditional face-to-face instruction. This movement has led to the emergence of a blended teaching and learning approach, which, in turn, has increased the need to discuss the educational benefits and underlying challenges of this type of instructional delivery. When developing a blended course, a number of important principles should be kept in mind to ensure the effectiveness of the course. Effective blended design takes into consideration the differences between face-to-face and online learning and incorporates different learning and teaching strategies. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss designing a quality blended course. This chapter discusses designing activities to encourage interaction, motivation, and engagement within a blended course that can be used in the online components. In addition, how to structure a blended course and benefits of working with a development team are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, a growing number of courses have been incorporating online elements into traditional face-to-face instruction. This movement has led to the emergence of a blended teaching and learning approach, which, in turn, has increased the need to discuss the educational benefits and underlying challenges of this type of instructional delivery. Blended learning mixes the best of face-to-face instruction with the best of online instruction. When developing a blended

course, developers and designers should keep a number of important principles in mind to ensure the effectiveness of the course.

Teaching a course in a blended style does not mean simply trying to replicate a syllabus for a face-to-face class. Effective blended design takes into consideration the differences between face-to-face and online learning, and incorporates different learning and teaching strategies. The class “meets” over a period of time, and this must be taken into consideration in the timing and pacing of activities. Communication occurs through

written text in the online environment, and the faculty role shifts to more facilitating than presenting. Activities must be intentionally designed to encourage learner interaction, and learner work is often more “public,” since it appears in tools like threaded discussions.

In converting a face-to-face course to incorporate blended elements, developers and designers need to consider the reasons for moving elements into the online components of the course including which elements remain the face-to-face portions of the course and those that move to the online portion. Working with an instructional design team can help instructors plan the activities and incorporate learning management system (LMS) tools into the course.

The biggest challenge in designing a blended course is developing the entire course ahead of time. This can be challenging for many instructors since in developing a face-to-face course many instructors have course outcomes, weekly topics, and a list of assignments. However, in developing quality blended courses, developers and designers need to clearly identify and align course components before the course begins. Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) stated that instructional objectives, many different personal learning styles and learning experiences, the condition of online resources and the experience of trainers play an important role designing an effective blended learning environment. Course developers and instructional designers need to ensure alignment of these components for effective learning.

COURSE ALIGNMENT IN BLENDED LEARNING DESIGN

Educational technology focuses on aligning the critical course component such as learning objectives, assessments, instructional materials, learner engagement, and technology (Quality Matters, 2011). Each of these components enables learners to achieve the desired outcomes yielding effective

learning. Effective learning requires constructive alignment of the curriculum, which ensures that the program, learning outcomes, instructional approaches, assessments, and course evaluation complement each other. However, many instructors and course developers lack training in educational technology (Bober, Sullivan, Lowther, & Harrison, 1998). A lack of training in educational technology may influence learners’ mastery of the course outcomes. The Center for the Study of Higher Education (2011) discusses the importance of alignment of assessments and objectives for effective learning. The relationship shows a direct correlation between the course components that is crucial for learner mastery.

An achievable goal for developing and designing blended courses is to have the courses become Quality Matters certified (Quality Matters Program, 2011). Seven of the essential standards that all quality courses must possess focus on alignment. Course developers need training on alignment and backwards design, so that these courses are certified. Backwards design is an instructional design methodology created by Wiggins and McTighe and is part of the *Understanding by Design* framework (Wiggins & McTighe, 2004). Backwards design begins with the end in mind by focusing on the course outcomes and then working backwards to develop the module or weekly objectives, assessments, and learning activities.

Outcomes and objectives should include an action verb that is measurable and a noun (Krathwohl, 2002). Each outcome/objective should include the learning behavior, appropriate assessment methods, and specific learner performance criteria. Course developers should write these outcomes as precise statements describing what the learner will achieve by the end of the course. Course developers write outcomes/objectives with non-measurable verbs such as understand and learn. Second, these course developers struggle with visualizing the entire course. Many course developers focus on one week at a time rather than

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