Chapter 38
Blending in the Humanities:
Course Model and Assessment Results

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ABSTRACT

Does technology de-place opportunities for meaningful engagement? Is the reduction of face-to-face time in a blended course a loss to students? And if so, what students are most affected by this shift? Can a blended course only work in disciplines that rely on teaching "facts" or can the recent emergence of digital humanities serve as a framework and provide disciplinary-specific insights for the use of teaching technology in the humanities? This chapter explores the use of learning technology and blended design in an introductory humanities course. Further, the chapter presents a blended course model, assessment data, and ideas for contextual reflection about how change in higher education paradigms is affecting the humanities in order to address them in a cooperative, non-disruptive way. Finally, the unique context, assumptions, and causes for resistance to change in the humanities with regard to technology and blended pedagogy are discussed. This chapter is intended to help readers anticipate and address particular disciplinary perceptions of blended learning.

INTRODUCTION

Why blend in the humanities? This chapter will explore the use of learning technology and blended design in an introductory cinema studies course offered in the humanities. Often it is asserted that technology does not allow for types of learning contexts deemed central to humanities such as social and communal interaction, spontaneity, and embodied presence. Does technology de-place opportunities for meaningful engagement? Is the reduction of face-to-face time in a blended course a loss to students? And if so, which students are most affected by this shift? Can a blended course only work in disciplines that rely on teaching "facts" or can the recent emergence of digital humanities serve as a framework and provide disciplinary-specific insights for the use of teaching technology in the humanities? Surveys of students, faculty and administrators have shown distinct perceptions of

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the effectiveness of blended courses, in contrast to fully online courses (ECAR, 2013; Allen, Seaman, Gerrett, 2007).

This chapter will present a blended course model, assessment data, and ideas for contextual reflection about how change in higher education paradigms is affecting the humanities. The chapter seeks to address these issues in a cooperative, non-disruptive fashion. It will also discuss the unique context, assumptions, and causes for resistance to change in the humanities with regard to technology and blended pedagogy. It will help readers anticipate and address particular disciplinary perceptions of blended learning.

The pace of change in higher education is increasing. Competition to the traditional undergraduate residential model comes from more than for-profit universities; it comes from MOOCs, competency-based/personalized learning programs, and from online degree programs, some largely built by corporate partners of universities. This chapter will not discuss the merits or even pace of this change. Rather, the guiding questions are: How will the humanities be affected by the inevitable changes? How will the call for professionalization and the pressures to prepare students for specific careers with specific skills be answered? How can the core values of the humanities for all students' education be preserved while ongoing changes seemingly privilege "fact-based" knowledge? Furthermore, how can humanities scholars and teachers be in charge of the changes that affect the field? How can we answer the call to be more efficient while preserving the quality of instruction and student learning outcomes? The basic premise of this chapter is to enable colleagues in higher education to take charge of change rather than resign to passive resistance. Our blended course design model permits preservation of the essential core values of teaching the humanities for student success with institutional demands for efficiency in mind through the use of teaching technology.

COURSE MODEL: CINE 101, INTRODUCTION TO CINEMA, AND VISUAL CULTURE

At Northern Arizona University in 2012, a course in Cinema Studies was redesigned as a blended course in the first round of the President's Technology Initiative. The course has since served as a pilot and model across all disciplines, as faculty redesign more courses in the second and third rounds of the initiative. Total enrollment in the multi-section course (and thus the number of class sections offered) since the blended redesign was implemented has increased by over 1000%, from 31 to 347 in just two years, and helped bolster a small humanities program (Cinema Studies).

The course has increased efficiency in delivery—one of the main institutional goals of the President's Technology Initiative—through its hybrid schedule: it meets once a week, instead of twice, for 75 minutes of face-to-face time. The other half of the course is conducted online. The utilization of classroom space has thus increased by 100%, as the course can share a 150-minute time slot in the same classroom among pairs of its sections. The course has also been able to more than double enrollment capacity in each section (from 30 to 70), increasing efficiency for the university and the department. (However, it has not reached its goal of conserving faculty effort, as managing the higher number of students in each section has more than outweighed the in-class time saved for the instructor.)

The course was designed for two programs, and its design principles were aligned with their respective student learning outcomes: 1. The Liberal Studies program at Northern Arizona University and 2. The new interdisciplinary minor in Cinema Studies, housed in the Department of Comparative Cultural Studies.