The Online, The Blended and the Flexible: Learning by Any Means Necessary

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The Online, the Blended and the Flexible
Learning by any means necessary -
UW Experience

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*Presented at the 6th annual conference on Hybrid Learning-ICHL-2013 held in Toronto, Canada, August 12-14, 2013. Also published in Hybrid Learning: Theory, Application & Practice (University of Toronto and the City University of Hong Kong, 2013), pp. 153-170.

Abstract. Learning science informs us that different people learn differently in terms of pace and learning styles and that all students learn best when they are engaged with the learning materials and when they understand and work towards clear learning outcomes, not only in terms of pace but also in terms of pedagogy, format and mode(s) of delivery. Successful experiences with the early efforts of online and distance learning paved the way for more aggressive advancements in this area which led us to other format of learning that married face-to-face learning with online and most recently with a new method of providing flexible degree programs that are not tied to physical location and take into account student assessment, competency-based credit for the bachelor’s degree with no class time required. These and other future changes are contributing factors to democratization of higher education and providing nations with the much needed educated and skilled workforce for national and international development. In a 2011 survey by the Pew Research Center of college presidents more than three fourths (77%) of respondents said their institution offered online courses. Half said they believed that most students at their schools will be enrolled in at least some online classes within the next 10 years (http://www.pewinternet.org/~/media/Files/Reports/2011/PIP-Online-Learning.pdf.) Expectations are that by 2014 more than 50% of all post-secondary learners in the USA will take some form of online classes. We have already witnessed the growing number of private online/ virtual universities in the USA and the spread and acceptance of these phenomena in the extremely conservative traditional education institutions overseas. Online instruction will be used as a good supplement or even a substitute for the old-fashioned face-to-face (F2F) educational process. Furthermore, with the widespread use of digital and social media particularly among young people and future learners in post-secondary education coupled with technological advancements and market-driven factors, colleges and universities will have no choice but to consider blended learning a necessity, not a choice. The Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project report surveyed over 1000 internet users and experts on how they saw higher education in the year 2020. Many respondents agreed that university-level education will have to adopt new methods of teaching and certification driven by opportunity, economic concerns and student and
parent demands. This paper addresses issues in blended learning (BL) in comparison with strict F2F instruction, market factors that will push more universities to blended learning, advantages and challenges of BL in general and the experience of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in particular, where the author has introduced the first UWM online and hybrid learning courses and programs and continues to teach online and hybrid graduate courses. Furthermore, the paper also describes the UW System’s newly introduced Flexible Degree Option (FDO) which will begin with a couple of disciplines on the UWM campus in late fall of this year.

**Keywords:** Blended Learning, Online Learning, Flexible Learning, Instructional Design.

1 Introduction

Historically formal instruction has undergone few changes, but in the past three decades noticeable changes in teaching and learning have taken place due to the influx of technology. Instructors have to adapt from their historic role of sage-on-stage in face-to-face (F2F) teaching environment to guide-on-the-side in the strictly online environment. A number of factors in addition to technology and pedagogy have also contributed to the change, among them economic conditions, market forces, time and physical constraints. In a recent survey of college presidents conducted by the Pew Research Center, half of them said that most students at their schools will enroll in at least some online classes within the next ten years.[1]

Consequently, colleges and universities have combined physical presence and DL technology in teaching. Instructors and course designers can now identify and choose the best practices from both F2F and OL learning experiences and best practices and combine the two methods in what is now known as blended or hybrid learning (BL/HL). For example, some of the best practices done onsite include: debates; individual and group presentations; reflexive response/thought, among other learning activities. What can best be done online include, among others: provision of content; deeper, reflexive discourse; document management and organization.

A successful BL course involves much more than simply transferring lecture materials into a webcentric mode of delivery. It requires faculty’s substantial time and commitment devoted to course redesign. In a hybrid class a major portion of the traditional course is revised and adapted to an online webcentric mode making it possible to reduce the amount of time spent in the traditional physical classroom for F2F instruction. The new technology has enabled us to have course management systems and virtual live classrooms and audio tools that make it possible to be creative and to do almost everything we are accustomed to doing in physical classrooms. Furthermore, we can often engage our students in more collaborative and more reflective activities. We can now build in options and opportunities for our students to collectively work together and individually in virtual as well as F2F classroom environments.
2 A Look at Blended Learning (BL) in General

In today’s school and college campuses, the intersections among physical campus space, digitized instruction, instructional technology, and collaborative learning are front and center of debates about learning, training and formal education. In particular on many college campuses faculty, administrators, governing boards, with or without input from students, are engaged in discussions and deliberations about the impact of and relationship between physical classroom spaces and instructional activities that promote an active learning pedagogy based on student engagement, satisfaction, success, retention and graduation.\[2\]

There are advantages and disadvantages for each mode of delivery of instructional materials and conveying new knowledge to learners. But since we are dealing with hybrid learning we will restrict ourselves to this new mode of instruction.

In mixing physical classroom presence with virtual learning, both students and instructors must learn to adapt and be more creative. Instructors should make the contents of their courses multi-media rich and become facilitators of learning and the guide-on-the-side instead of the old method of sage-on-stage. Furthermore, students must also take a more pro-active role in their learning instead of listening to lectures as teachers deliver the knowledge students come to expect and hopefully gain.

3 Advantages of Blended Learning

Personal experience, narratives from the literature and results of numerous surveys show a widespread acceptance of BL by college students, faculty and administration, as we present examples below. [3]

3.1 Advantages of BL to Students

- Students report that they become more active in their learning and gain technological empowerment that expands beyond the confinement of a traditional course. [4] BL is good for students who wish to experience an online class, but don't want to lose the face-to-face aspect of a course. BL helps students to take more initiative in their own learning.
- BL helps make students more independent and self-reliant as well as improve learning outcomes. Cooperation of instructors, campus technology staff and others is required to help students who are less technology savvy or have poor study skills.
- Technology-mediated approaches create a paradigm shift from the classic lecture to student-centered approaches to instruction where the students become active and interactive learners in both the online and F2F versions.
- BL can be helpful to technologically-challenged students as they can interact with the help desk and technicians on campus and improve this deficiency before graduation.
• Blended courses require students to take more initiative in their own learning, thus students who are self-motivated and organized would be ideal candidates for a hybrid course.
• In BL students gain valuable technology skills that will be helpful in their future employment in technologically-driven workplace environments.
• BL results in increase in student’s time and flexibility, and improved learning outcomes.
• Increased rate of retention and graduation has been reported as an outcome of BL. This is great not just for students and faculty, but for the institution, its reputation and financial well-being.
• Unlike online course delivery, BL gives students much needed opportunity for socializing; retaining a sense of college campus community, sharing information, expressing their own views about what they are learning, and sharpening their team work and communication skills.
• BL is useful for adult students in particular and those who have to work during traditional face-to-face class hours, or have family commitments that require them to be at home more during traditional class hours.
• A major advantage, especially on urban campuses, is the fact that having BL courses can help students spend less time hunting for parking, and more time spent on learning or earning a living.
• As the future movers and shakers in the next generation of our workforce and business leaders every college and pre-college student should have the opportunity to take some OL and BL courses prior to graduation. The benefits include better preparation to join a technologically proficient workforce.

3.2 Role of and Advantages for Faculty

• Contrary to certain negative public views of teaching faculty, many of us like challenges and experimenting with new pedagogical approaches to our teaching. As was the case with the advent of online learning and virtual classroom formats, faculty welcomes the new challenge presented to them by BL and the new ways of teaching.
• Faculty who opposed online only course delivery and favor the classic method of F2F found BL more to their liking and an attractive alternative to the strictly F2F method of course delivery. This could be useful to administrators on campuses where the majority of faculty have expressed opposition to online learning and any move away from the familiar F2F teaching.
• Learning to teach a successful hybrid course could lead faculty to use more instructional technology, and introduce new teaching methods and a sense of excitement for students and faculty as well as transforming the teacher-student relationship to be more centered on student learning. However, for a successful BL course, instructors must decide on learning strategies and outcomes different from the ones they are accustomed to in F2F courses.
• BL allows faculty to gain class time to delve into things they did not have time to do in class before. For example, redesigning and restructuring their modes of instruction; what will the instructor and students do when in F2F sessions on campus?: what elements of the course and what kinds of activities should be reserved for F2F instruction and which ones reserved for online mode?

• BL instructors reported self-satisfaction when realizing that their teaching has not been in vain, and that students in their BL courses learned more, wrote better papers, performed better on exams, produced higher quality projects and were capable of more meaningful discussions on course material, as was revealed in the UWM study on BL. [5] The study also showed that hybrid students receive better grades than students in traditional F2F courses or completely online courses.

• Instructors must be prepared to help students understand their active role in the hybrid, assist students in keeping their work on time and on track, and be prepared to offer strategies for trouble-shooting new course technologies.

• Instructors must re-examine their course goals and objectives, design online learning activities to meet these goals and objectives, and effectively integrate the online activities with the F2F meetings. Instructors must make the transition from lectures and presentation to a more student-centered active learning.

3.3 Advantages to the Institution

• Faculty who had experience teaching F2F, online and hybrid reported that hybrid/blended learning, if done well, can result in learning outcome gains and increased enrollment retention and graduation, a measure of faculty satisfaction and the success of the institution, its reputation and financial well-being.

• BL could also help in replacing some in-class time with out-of-class, online, interactive learning activities, thus making more room available for increased enrollment, smaller class sizes, and better financial health for the institution.

• As class sizes grow and classroom seats and facilities become more limited, in comparison to growing student enrollments, BL will help in accommodating more students, and relieve pressure on the limited seating capacity while maintaining cost efficiency.

• College administrators should provide the administrative, technological and financial support for faculty able and willing to develop BL courses. Compensation can be in the form of additional summer stipend or release time during regular semesters.
4 The UWM Experience With Blended Learning

After the successful introduction of online courses and a fully online master’s degree program in library and information science at the UWM School of Information Studies in the 1990s, the university saw the advantages and decided to initiate and support the advent of online course instruction on campus despite the expected reluctance of some faculty at the time. As an aging faculty at the time, most had been accustomed to F2F instruction, not underestimating the new methods of digital delivery of courses and teaching in a virtual environment. The campus administration with support from the University of Wisconsin System devoted financial, technical and managerial support to advance digital instruction on campus which resulted, *inter alia*, in the establishment of the UWM Learning Technology Center (LTC).

The objective of LTC was, and remains, to provide “timely support through a variety of methods ranging from one-on-one consultations to workshops, for faculty and instructors seeking to use technologies in pedagogically effective ways, including campus-wide tools such as Desire2Learn.”[6] The LTC is actively helping instructors take the leap into online and hybrid modes of instruction. The center provides expertise, counseling, training and courses to instructional staff. The Center also offers annual training courses and programs.[7] The UWM Faculty Development Team for blended teaching and learning has shared experience and expertise with our faculty and others around the globe. They are also the facilitators of the Sloan-C Certificate blended learning track representing a wide range of disciplines including the humanities, fine arts, social and natural sciences.[8]

The UWM LTC has focused on services such as: 1) working with faculty who are developing hybrid or online courses, and 2) working with faculty support staff who are designing faculty development programs to assist instructors who will be designing hybrid or online courses, and provide interested faculty with samples of UWM blended courses.[9]

A survey administered by the LTC found that while UWM faculty who have taught hybrid/blended courses are universally positive about this form of instruction, it also uncovered challenges getting additional instructors to accept, develop and teach hybrid courses. The survey also shows that hybrid courses are extremely popular with our students (e.g., in one survey 80% reported they would recommend a blended/hybrid course to another student), but faculty report difficulty getting their students to grasp the hybrid course concept, understand what is expected of them, and adapt to their changed roles in the course methodology.

Faculty should rethink the course instead of just adding the hybrid portion to the old course. Integration of online and F2F contents is essential for a successful blended course. Students should be trained on hybrid learning. At UWM our LTC has prepared a site for students to visit to become familiar with hybrid course concepts, examples of typical hybrid courses assignments and direct them to the technology labs and support. [10] Our UWM LTC offers a useful model for other faculty interested in developing their own blended learning courses. [11]
5 Observations From the UWM Faculty

While we have mentioned the advantages of BL in general, we will list below a few of the testimonials of BL given by UWM faculty in response to the LTC questionnaire about how hybrid courses benefited them and their students: [12]

• "My students have done better than I've ever seen; they are motivated, enthused, and doing their best work."  
• "Introverts, who are quiet in the face-to-face class, really participate online."  
• "Discussions are good, both in and out of class."  
• "This gets so much more student interaction."  
• "The hybrid allowed me to do things in my course that I've always wanted to do and couldn't."  
• "Students think they are learning more, and I think they're learning more."  
• "Hybrid is the best of both worlds."  
• "Give it a try once. I think people owe it to their educational mission of being a teacher and instructor to try one hybrid course."

6 Flexible Degree Option (FDO)

With the widespread interest in formal and informal online learning and courses, the growing recognition of competency-based education and programs, and the introduction to the market of, at least for now, free quality online courses from major national and international universities, along with changing attitude towards F2F traditional education, and improved widespread use of technology, the concept of Flexible Degree Option is gaining strides in higher education. The most recent program known as the Flexible Degree Option (FDO) at the 26-campus University of Wisconsin System (UWS) offers multiple, competency-based bachelor's degrees. In our FDO program there is no requirement for classroom time except for clinical or practicum work for certain degrees. We may be the first, but other colleges and universities such as Northern Arizona University are catching up and more are expected to join this innovative, technology-driven, competency-based learning option for college degrees.[13] As new technology, advanced courseware resources and free online courses offered by major national and international universities show more variety and high quality advancements, we will see more enrichment to our digitized, virtual and blended learning.

The newly introduced UW FDO will also enable our faculty to modify existing college courses and programs into self-paced, competency-based formats. The university has also signed up with Coursera and is in the planning and preparation stage of conducting 4-5 MOOCs late this fall or early January 2014 to be offered in support of our FDO. For instance, a MathMOOC course was recently developed by Dr. Robert Hoar from UW-La Crosse and offered free to all participants thanks to a grant from the Gates Foundation. In addition to these courses other options available
to students include assessment tests, written by UW faculty who teach related subject area classes. These assessment tests will take into considerations competencies gained by students from life experience, self-taught from personal experience, or knowledge in addition to online courses taken from systems such as Coursera, edX and Udacity among others, while pursuing their Flexible Degree Option.[14]

One of the major advantages of FDO is the ability to give non-traditional students with no time for traditional class time a second chance to obtain a UW Bachelor degree or Professional Certificate with additional help from FDO academic success coaches. Assessment tests are currently being written by UW faculty in preparation for the fall 2013 start of the FDO program.[15] The UW-Parkside campus is planning to offer FDO programs in 2014. In late fall 2013, the UW-Milwaukee campus is planning to introduce the following four FDO programs and one certificate program:

- Two Nursing degrees (R.N.-to-B.S.N. and R.N.-to-M.N.), for Registered Nurses who need additional college degree(s) to qualify for higher professional credentials
- A bachelor's degree-completion program in Diagnostic Imaging, targeted toward certified diagnostic imaging professionals
- A B.S. in Information Science & Technology, preparing students for jobs in tomorrow’s digital culture and economy
- A Certificate in Professional and Technical Communication, providing students with the essential written and oral communication skills needed in today’s workplace

For more information on the UW FDO, visit the web site and view the video.[16, 17]

In praising the FDO program, the Governor of Wisconsin Scott Walker, who did not finish his college education, said he hoped to use the Flexible Degree Option to obtain his college degree.

7 Conclusion

Our experience with BL at UWM underscores what has been mentioned in the literature regarding how useful BL could be to students, positive challenge to faculty and rewarding for college administration. The introduction of online and blended learning has contributed to increase in enrollment despite the limited physical facilities on a compact urban campus like UWM with no room for physical expansion beyond its original 100 acres campus in a congested residential area of Milwaukee. In the past three decades, the UWM enrollment has almost doubled from 17,000 students to the present more than 30,000 students. What began as an experiment with limited digital course delivery now boasts full graduate and undergraduate courses and degrees to students in other parts of the state of Wisconsin and throughout the USA. The SOIS MLIS degree recipients are employed throughout the world. We expect the BSIST and PhD programs to have a similar global reach and influence. Both modes of learning have been useful to and popular among our American and international students for the reasons mentioned in this brief paper. Faculty like the challenge and time management resulting from blended instruction. College administration is able to
increase student enrollment and revenue, manage physical facilities more efficiently and prudently, provide better service and accommodation to a growing adult population with family and job responsibilities. BL can only be expanded as new technology-proficient, multi-tasking students pursue graduate, undergraduate and lifelong learning. Traditional residential campuses will also find that blended learning and FDO programs add value to their students’ learning experiences on and off campus and prepare them well for the new and fast changing job market.

8 Selected Readings on BL

The author also recommends the following references for further readings on BL:

6. Delaney, S. Converting a Face-to-Face Course to a Hybrid Course. (2012)


References

4. Dziuban, Hartman, & Moskal, 2004