Experiences With A Hybrid Class: Tips And Pitfalls

Joy L. Colwell, (Email: colwell@calumet.purdue.edu), Purdue University, Calumet

ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss the author's experiences with converting a traditional classroom-based course to a hybrid class, using a mix of traditional class time and web-support. The course which was converted is a lower-level human relations class, which has been offered in both the traditional classroom-based setting and as an asynchronous online course. After approximately five years of offering the two formats independently, the author decided to experiment with improving the traditional course by adopting more of the web-based support and incorporating more research and written assignments in "out of class" time. The course has evolved into approximately 60% traditional classroom meetings and 40% assignments and other assessments out of class. The instructor's assessment of the hybrid nature of the class is that students are more challenged by the mix of research and writing assignments with traditional assessments, and the assignments are structured in such a way as to make them more "customizable" for each student. Each student can find some topics that they are interested in to pursue in greater depth as research assignments. However, the hybrid nature of the class has resulted in an increased workload for the instructor. The course has been well received by the students, who have indicated that they find the hybrid format appealing.

INTRODUCTION

These observations are based on experiences with a student population at a regional campus which is approximately half traditional college age students and half non-traditional or returning students. Purdue University Calumet is a regional campus of Purdue University and is located in Northwest Indiana. Its students are primarily commuters and were strictly commuter students at the time of this experiment with course format, but there are now (as of Fall 2005) some residential students. It serves approximately 9,100 students, and about half of those are part-time students.

The hybrid course under discussion here is in the Organizational Leadership and Supervision (OLS) program, which is part of the Manufacturing Engineering Technologies and Supervision Department on the Calumet Campus. The OLS program offers its own degrees and certificates and also serves the engineering technologies majors.

In order to serve its diverse student population, the OLS program began to offer many of its courses in the online or distance learning format. Since 1998, the OLS program has offered most of its classes in the traditional classroom-based setting as well as online. In the spring of 2004, the author decided to experiment with improving the classroom-based course by offering it in the hybrid format. It should be noted that sections of the classroom-based course were scheduled during the day. The daytime schedule attracts the traditional student population, usually freshmen and sophomores. The course chosen for this hybrid improvement was OLS252, Human Relations in Organizations. The course is a survey course, and is often taken by students throughout the University, as well as by OLS majors. The course was first offered as a hybrid or blended course in Spring 2004 and is a three-credit hour course which was scheduled to meet twice a week for approximately one-and-one-half hours each session.

BACKGROUND

For purposes of this paper, the hybrid format is a course format which includes meetings in person in the traditional classroom based setting, and also makes use of web support over the Internet. According to Osguthorpe and Graham, hybrid courses are also known as blended learning or blended learning environments. (2003, p. 227-228) Those authors state that blended approaches base their pedagogy on maximizing the benefits in face-to-face interaction and online learning; finding a harmonious balance in blending the benefits inherent in face-to-face interaction and inherent advantages in online access to knowledge. (2003, p. 228) Dzuiban, Harman and Moskal also discuss blended learning and hybrid class formats in the ECAR Research Bulletin *Blended Learning* (2004).

For several years preceding the hybrid offering, the course was available to students either as a class-room based traditional course or as an online course (completely asynchronous). Based on research about hybrid or blended classes, the author decided to revise the course to modify the traditional class to adopt the hybrid format. The initial decision was to have the class meet for approximately 70% of the scheduled sessions and 30% of the scheduled sessions were “out of class” research assignments. The assignments were intended to give the students opportunities to expand on the topics in the course and improve their research and writing skills (information literacy skills). The use of the online component would also serve to introduce students to the University’s course management system and encourage their use and/or development of technological skills.

The supporting course web site was created in WebCT Vista course management system, and contained the course syllabus, the class handouts from the “live” meetings, practice examination questions, and the assignments. Grades were posted and available to the student in the site. Announcements and reminders could also be posted there.

Depending on the material to be covered in a particular week, the instructor chose to schedule the first meeting of the week as the traditional meeting, and to use the second scheduled meeting for “out of class” assignments. Since the course was scheduled for Tuesdays and Thursdays, the class met on every scheduled Tuesday, and did not meet on several Thursdays when assignments were scheduled. On a few weeks the Thursday meeting was used for group work in class or for testing. For the first semester with the blended format, of about thirty-two scheduled class meetings, approximately nine were “out of class” research assignment days when the course did not meet. The remaining sessions were traditional class meetings, group work, or tests.

The assignments were designed to be flexible or “customizable” to the student’s interests in the material. Some assignments were common to everyone in the class, but most assignments were structured so that one part of the assignment was mandatory for everyone and then the students could pick two out of three or three out of five additional portions of the assignment to complete. The mandatory portions were often reflective or self-assessment type assignments. The remaining chosen portions were usually based on research by the student, to be written up and submitted as a short paper or written assignment. During the sixteen week semester, the assessments of student work consisted of either eight or nine written assignments, plus the traditional tests.

TIPS AND PITFALLS

In experimenting with the hybrid format, the author has some guidelines to help instructors in structuring hybrid classes.

One change the author has made since the first semester with this hybrid format is to make the schedule regular. Students seemed to have a very hard time figuring out which Thursdays we met and when we were scheduled for out of class work. Despite being listed in the syllabus, announced in class, and otherwise listed in the website, several students had trouble tracking with the “some Thursdays on some Thursdays off” schedule. Because of this issue, the author has since taken steps to make the schedule more regular.

It is also helpful to make the assignments flexible, meaning the three-out-of-five or five-out-of-seven type format. The students seem to respond better to having some choices in their work, and it allows them to pursue their own interests in the material to a certain degree. (It is also somewhat of a benefit for the instructor, because then there

is some variety in the grading of the assignments). The decision to use this pedagogical approach was based in part on research about younger students and their values, and in part on research concerning active learning. (See for example Dziuban, Harman and Moskal, 2004, pp. 9-10 discussing values and attitudes of younger students.)

Students also responded positively to guidelines or samples of assignments. An exemplar of what the teacher expects, or a detailed rubric, seems to help students, especially the freshmen and sophomores. The students seem to appreciate the guidance on teacher expectations on items such as citation style, number and type of sources, etc. The author posted assignment guidelines which applied to all assignments, and then some specific directions with each assignment.

It is the author's impression that this type of hybrid class is good for helping students make transition to independent learning. Many younger students (traditional freshmen and sophomores) seem to have some difficulty making the transition from high school to more independent learning required at the college level. The hybrid class structure builds in a supervised method of helping students become more independent learners.

It is also important to review with your students how to access the course web site and how to navigate within the site. This will save a lot of time later for the instructor. Many students will not know where to find the course web site or how to get their login names and passwords. A review with the students on the first day of where to find course information and how to access it will save a lot of questions later. At the very least the instructor should plan on doing this during the first week of the course. The author also includes some basic access information in the course syllabus which is distributed to the class on the first day.

The biggest pitfall is that the hybrid or blended course is definitely more work for the instructor. While some inexperienced colleagues may greet this arrangement as "half the work", it is, in this instructor's experience, at least half again as much work. The course went from some traditional assessments and in-class presentations with group work to the traditional assessments (tests) plus eight to nine assignments. Since the average enrollment in the class is 25-35 students, this creates a minimum of 225 additional assignments to grade (usually closer to 270 assignments). If the instructor is doing all the grading him-or herself, this creates quite an additional workload.

Although the issue of faculty satisfaction has been discussed in the literature, and has generally been positive (that is according to Dziuban, Harman and Moskal faculty report having been satisfied with blended learning (2004, p. 7)), it is not clear that additional workloads were discussed as a specific issue as they have been for online classes. In *A Survey of Traditional and Distance Learning Higher Education Members*, commissioned by the National Education Association, June 2000, and *Distance Education Guidelines for Good Practice* (May 2000 Report of the Higher Education Program and Policy Council of the American Federation of Teachers) increased faculty workloads for distance education courses were specifically discussed. It would make logical sense that incorporating elements of distance education into the classroom-based course would add some of these acknowledged elements of increased workload. Anecdotally, the author would report being satisfied with the course for pedagogical reasons, but would definitely report an increased workload in conjunction with the blended or hybrid approach.

The hybrid format also tends to create more student email to the instructor. This also creates additional work for the instructor. Also, if the instructor is not currently using a website for support of the traditional class, a website will need to be created for the hybrid class. Depending on the class and the experience level of the instructor, designing and building the class web site can also be quite labor intensive. Since this author was already using a website for support of the traditional class, it was relatively easier to change the site for the hybrid format. The entire course needs to be rethought to take advantage of the blended nature of the course and get the benefits of both the "out of class" time and the face-to-face meeting time.

Another serious consideration is student access to computers. It is often assumed that students have easy access to a computer off campus, which is often completely inaccurate. Students without easy access to a computer can, of course, still use the computer labs or facilities on campus, but are often resentful of having to do so. Likewise, many students are not nearly as computer literate as commonly assumed. An instructor becomes the first line of "tech support" for these students. Many of the newer students (freshmen and sophomores) often do not know what

resources for support are available on campus, or how to access the course management system, etc. It is a good idea to review available resources for labs and tech support with students the first day of class.

BENEFITS FOR THE STUDENTS

Student response has been very positive. The author has asked for mid-semester evaluations on the format, as well as course end class evaluation data. Although the instructor received one complaint about the format in the first semester the hybrid format was tried, the response has been overwhelmingly positive and at worst neutral. It is the author's suspicion that the complaining student was unhappy with the increased student workload, rather than the format change.

Although no statistical analysis has been done yet, it is the author's impression that the student grades are as good as or better than with the traditional format. The author plans to further improve the hybrid format by having students post a summary of their assignment results in a discussion board, or by having them present the results of their research in class.

CONCLUSIONS

The hybrid or blended format seems to offer many benefits for students, although it creates an increased work load for instructors. If an instructor has no additional help such as graders, instructional designers for the website, etc., the extra work can be appreciable. In an attempt to address some of the issues created with irregular scheduling, the author has modified the class further to include testing online, which created a more regular schedule of meeting one day a week (after the first week). Apart from the work for the instructor in converting the tests to an online testing format, the change was well received by the students and has worked very smoothly with very few technical problems. Grades for the online testing are about the same as grades for in-class testing. Using online testing has resulted in the 60/40 mix, with classroom meetings still predominating.

REFERENCES

1. A Survey of Traditional and Distance Learning Higher Education Members, commissioned by the National Education Association (June 2000).
2. Distance Education Guidelines for Good Practice, May 2000 Report of the Higher Education Program and Policy Council of the American Federation of Teachers.
3. Dziuban, Charles D., Hartman, Joel L., and Moskal, Patsy D. (2004) Blended Learning. *Research Bulletin of Educause Center for Applied Research*, Volume 2004, Issue 7 March 30, 2004.
4. Osguthorpe, Russell T. and Graham, Charles R. (2003) Blended Learning Environments Definitions and Directions: *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, Volume 4(3), 2003, pp. 227-233.