

# Engaged: Making Large Classes Feel Small Through Blended Learning Instructional Strategies That Promote Increased Student Performance

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## ABSTRACT

*It is not enough to be great at sharing information in a large classroom setting. To be an effective teacher you must be able to meaningfully engage your students with their peers and with the content. And you must do this regardless of class size or content. The issues of teaching effectively in large classroom settings have presented ongoing problems with enormous implications for both student learning and faculty performance. Issues about student engagement with the content, peers, and faculty persistently are discussed with little change in practice. However, the effective infusion of technology targeted through strategies for large-class instruction and management have great potential for increasing student performance. In this work Blended Learning Instructional Strategies (BLIS) are highlighted to effectively address common issues related to teaching and student engagement in large classroom settings.*

**Keywords:** Blended Learning; Blended Learning Instructional Strategies; Technology in Instruction; Student Teacher Engagement

## INTRODUCTION

Instruction in large classroom settings provide faculty with a unique challenge in the realm of education. Things that seem simple, or common sense, in the small classroom setting may pose huge problems in the large classroom setting. Add to this the basic premise that the advent of the Internet, hand-held mobile technologies such as iPads, iPods, smart phones, wireless computers and other mobile learning technologies have provided students with a greater access to information in the classroom. These same instructional and mobile technologies also create an increased potential for distractions through such avenues as e-mail, Facebook, Yahoo, and Twitter. Simple class size and access to technology can lead to students having a greater opportunity to be off-task and disengaged in the classroom. This type of situation can have an adverse impact on student learning and student performance in the classroom.

*"Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing prepackaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write reflectively about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves."* (Chickering & Gamson, 1987), and in the current environment of instant access to the Internet and online information, Blended Learning Instructional Strategies (BLIS) provide the avenue to move large classroom setting instruction into the realm of effective and engaging instruction. Through BLIS there are a number of effective, research-based strategies available to faculty to promote student engagement in classroom activities, and to make positive instructional uses of commonly available technologies in the large classroom setting. Key aspects for effective instruction in large classroom settings include engaging students in appropriate activities, and utilizing available technology. In this work several strategies are presented to make effective use of Blended Learning Instructional Strategies (BLIS) to engage students and promote student performance and learning in the large classroom setting.

## **WHY IS STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT?**

Student engagement in their learning is an essential component of effective instruction. Chickering and Gamson (1987) demonstrated general principles for effective practice in undergraduate education that consistently reflect the need for student engagement for effective learning. Also, many authors indicate the impact student engagement has on learning and the learning process. Marzano, Polling, & Pollock (2001) contended that the nine essential instructional strategies they identified had the potential to increase student performance and impact learning. Smith (2001) contended that large classroom settings “provided students with the opportunity to be disengaged from learning” and the “key to effective teaching and learning is in the instructor-student interaction.” Fisher, Reiss, & Young (2005) concluded that active learning is essential to any student learning. And while many authors agree Cooperative Learning is an impactful instructional strategy, almost no specific strategies were reported to impact learning in the large classroom setting.

According to Tewksbury & MacDonald (2010), faculty “must find ways to make students more actively engaged with material during lecture in order to improve student learning.” Prevalent throughout the literature are recommendations for strategies for student engagement. In *21 Ways to Engage Students in School* (National Center for School Engagement, 2010) various strategies are suggested. While in *How Teachers Learn to Engage Students In Active Learning* (National Center for Research on Teacher Learning, 2011) numerous strategies are presented. In addition, Felder (1997) contends that the principal benefit of student engagement is their active engagement with the content and their potential for reflective activity.

## **USING BLENDED LEARNING INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES (BLIS)**

With the continuous improvement and availability of Internet-based, and mobile learning technologies, Blended Learning Instructional Strategies (BLIS) emerge as an important tool in large classroom instruction. Blended Learning has been described as “combining online delivery of educational content with the best features of classroom interaction and live instruction” (iNACOL, 2010), and also as “combining classroom methods with computer-mediated activities to form an integrated approach (PSU, 2011). In recent years the term “Blended Learning”, as an approach to college level instruction, has continued to evolve and expand. Colleges and Universities have begun the process of examining the features of Blended Learning, and faculty have started exploring with new and revised strategies for teaching in this unique and exciting environment. It has been of particular interest to faculty teaching in large classroom settings who are looking for more effective, and more engaging, instructional strategies.

In this work, BLIS are defined as those strategies that use mobile learning technologies to engage students with content, the faculty, or their peers. For it is through this engagement that students are prompted to learn. Although there are many areas where BLIS can provide enhanced opportunities for students to be engaged in their own learning, in this work the focus is on Six (6) instructional opportunities that are enhanced through the use of BLIS in the large classroom setting. These opportunities in the large classroom setting include: using advanced organizers, checking for student understanding, asking questions during lectures, doing Cooperative Learning in large classroom settings, completing One-Minute Papers, and stopping student web-surfing during large classroom instruction. Ideas related to each of these topics are presented in the following sections.

Keep in mind that the following BLIS are only suggestions for effective practice, and do not represent an exhaustive list of Blended Learning Instructional Strategies to promote effective teaching and learning. These strategies are selected for the specific connection to instructional activities in the large classroom setting and also are free or very low cost, and very low effort and skill to implement. This work does not discount the effective and potential application of such systems as blackboard, Banner, and Angel. However, as subscription only services, access to potential BLIS opportunities through these systems for exploration and evaluation is not feasible. In addition, many of the features shared in the following sections are available through these systems as a part of routine classroom packages.

### **How can I use an Advance Organizer?**

The use of Advance Organizers is a widely accepted and effective instructional strategy used typically at the beginning of a class. Asubel (1960) first described the use of Advance Organizers as a cognitive strategy to help students learn and retain information. Since then faculty have developed many forms of effectively organizing information such as K-W-L charts (Ogle, 1986), pre-class questions, writing, and many other effective strategies to get students engaged at the beginning of a class meeting.

In many instances Advance Organizers take the form of a question, problem, or issue to be considered, and results in some form of student response. An effective way to use a BLIS in this situation is to post the question or problem, either in the room on a screen, or send directly to student's e-mail accounts. Then use survey monkey to collect the responses to the question. It provides a hands-free mechanism to verify student participation in the process and allows faculty to quickly compare and monitor student responses. Students can be prompted to submit anything from a simple yes/no response, to a few sentences. Depending on the prompt and the expectations of the instructor.

Of course the same basic result can be achieved if you develop a Twitter-based approach to the idea of posting an Advanced Organizer. All you, as the instructor, need to do is establish a Twitter feed, and then students can "follow" your feed and respond at your request. Issues with Tweets include the limited number of characters allowed in the Tweets, and some level of discomfort with converting Twitter accounts to actual names for recording of information and grading.

### **How can I check for student understanding during my lecture?**

Although there are a number of strategies for checking for student understanding, or using brief formative assessments during class such as "thumbs up/thumbs down" (Bowman, 2011), raising a hand to vote, or many others. Technology provides opportunities to expand these simple activities through BLIS and not only check for student understanding, these BLISS can also be employed to verify information. For example by establishing a simple SurveyMonkey survey, student responses can be captured and monitored. The responses, anonymous during many research projects, can be readily identified if needed to provide additional student assistance. However, during class it is a simple task to holistically review the generated responses to determine the degree to which students are understanding and communicating information. These surveys can be either pre-loaded with student e-mail addresses, or can be left unpopulated and open for student responses. By using the BLIS in this situation, all students are held accountable for responses. Students cannot hide or be evasive with their responses. They are all there for faculty to review.

### **How can students submit questions during lectures?**

There are times when students may not be comfortable in raising their hand and asking a question in a large classroom setting. In this situation BLIS provide the opportunity for students be engaged with the lesson and their learning, and not feel intimidated or timid about asking a question. There are a variety of BLIS that promote student engagement through asking questions. Two examples are Backchannel (Atkinson, 2011) software and PollEverywhere.com. Backchannel is a freeware computer application from Harvard University that allows faculty to moderate online conversations in real time during class. Most frequently this includes permitting students to post questions for faculty to respond to. In most instances the postings are left anonymous in efforts to prompt students to participate and be engaged in class. Students can post questions, or comments that are moderated by faculty, or can also vote on previously posted questions. These actions provided faculty with feedback to help guide instruction and best meet student needs.

A second option is Poll Everywhere. This is an online tool available at [www.poll.everywhere.com](http://www.poll.everywhere.com) and, is listed as a website that provides instant audience feedback. This website provides faculty the opportunity to post questions and have students respond in either a yes/no, multiple choice, or extended response formats. It is easy to use and can provide a variety of metrics related to responses and participant feedback.

### **How can Cooperative Learning group responses be reported effectively in class?**

Cooperative Learning is one of the instructional strategies being heralded as effective across all content areas and grade level configurations. It is a face-to-face strategy for structuring working groups to complete specific tasks to meet specific learning objectives (Bainbridge, 2011). However, the use of the strategy in the large classroom setting has always presented a number of unique challenges.

One extremely effective BLIS to use with Cooperative Learning activities is to pre-assign students to groups. Then, at the beginning of class, faculty can send an e-mail with the tasks, assignments, and prompts for the group. As the group works through the process the recorder in the group makes notes and generates the e-mail response to the faculty and to the other members of the group. In this manner, all students and faculty have copies of the responses and there is no need to wait for papers to be reviewed or graded before moving on with the activity. The information is accessible to everyone for use and review.

One issue with this strategy is the volume of e-mails. If the class has 200 students and you use the typical Cooperative Learning strategy format of Four (4) students, the faculty would be receiving 50 e-mails in a very short period of time. One solution to this is to establish an alternative e-mail address through the institution to allow classroom assignments or submissions to go to the alternative e-mail address and not “clog up” the faculty member’s everyday e-mail account.

### **How can I have students complete an “Exit Ticket” or “One-Minute Paper” in my class?**

One effective and realistic way to prompt students to be engaged at the end of a class is known as the “Exit Ticket”, or in some settings as the “One-Minute Paper” activity. In this activity the faculty asks or posts a question, and students respond with their response in about one minute. The response must be submitted prior to the end of class for students to get credit, or to presumably leave the classroom.

One effective BLIS for this type of activity is a Blog. Once the faculty establishes a blog, and this is easy to accomplish through Blogger, WordPress, or many other free sites. The fundamental idea is that the faculty, as the blogger, posts a question, idea, task, or problem. Students, as subscribers, react to the post with their own responses. This does not happen in real time. The faculty must go to the blog and either permit or reject the student comments and solutions. However this BLIS does allow students to develop an extended response to a question or problem. The faculty can review this during a class activity, or after class. In addition, this BLIS provides the faculty the opportunity to expand, revise, and comment on general student remarks, to provide additional feedback or further engage students in an ongoing discourse.

### **How can I make sure students “aren’t just surfing the web during class”?**

If students are web-surfing, facebooking, or googling during class, it is not their fault. They are simply not engaged. One option is to have students close laptops and turn off mobile phones. However, that defeats the great educational value of the potential instant access to the Internet. A different solution would be to use the BLIS of a WebQuest. The WebQuest is an Internet-based research activity available through [www.WebQuest.org](http://www.WebQuest.org) and is a free service through San Diego State University. This online system provides faculty the opportunity to generate a web-based activity that directs students to specific websites and connects them with specific information. Then by connecting key lecture points with the WebQuest, students are more likely to be engaged and connected to learning.

As an alternative, faculty can develop similar learning activities through word processing programs, blogs, or wikis. In each case, the information in the form of text, pictures, and URL addresses, is provided to the learner as an individual or as a part of a group. The activity is then completed and submitted via e-mail, blog post, or other Internet-based venue. This might mean providing a 5-minute mini-lecture followed by a short review of an article, website, video, or activity that is submitted by the individual or group (Francis, 2011). Again, the key is to engage students in the activity, and the learning.

## CONCLUSION

It is apparent that instruction in the large classroom setting creates issues for faculty and students alike. In the case of the faculty, the effective delivery of instruction and the active engagement of students are key elements to be considered. However, technology applications, mobile handheld learning technologies, and web-based assignments, when united with effective, research-based classroom instruction in the form of Blended Learning Instructional Strategies (BLISS) provide an opportunity to address issues related to instruction in the large classroom setting and effectively engage students in meaningful learning opportunities. BLIS are here to stay, and as faculty we must consistently review the available technology to integrate the available instructional technology with effective instruction in the large classroom setting. There will always be large classroom instruction settings on college campuses. However, through the use of BLIS, faculty can make these large classroom settings feel smaller through active student engagement, and at the same time promote increased student performance.

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#### **ONLINE WEBSITES AND RESOURCES**

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2. PBworks (formerly PBwiki) is available at [www.pbworks.com](http://www.pbworks.com)
3. Poll Everywhere is available online at [www.polleverywhere.com](http://www.polleverywhere.com)
4. SurveyMonkey is available online at [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)
5. Twitter is available online at [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)
6. WordPress is available online at [www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com)