Ten Strategies to Improve Blended Course Design

This Magna White Paper is based on a March 6, 2012, Magna Online Seminar titled Ten Ways to Improve Blended Course Design. The seminar was cosponsored by Magna Publications and The Teaching Professor, and it was presented by Dr. Ike Shibley. Dr. Shibley is an associate professor of chemistry at Penn State Berks, a small four-year college within the Penn State System. He lectures and consults extensively on blended learning and incorporating technology into higher education.

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ABOUT THIS WHITE PAPER

This white paper is based on a seminar cosponsored by Magna Publications and The Teaching Professor. It was originally delivered by Dr. Ike Shibley on March 6, 2012.

Dr. Ivan A. “Ike” Shibley, Jr., is associate professor of chemistry at Penn State Berks. He has won both local and university-wide awards for his teaching, including the Eisenhower Award presented to a tenured Penn State faculty member who exhibits excellent teaching as well as mentoring other teachers. His research involves pedagogical approaches to improving science instruction at the college level. He received his Ph.D. in biochemistry from East Carolina University. He now teaches organic chemistry, biochemistry, philosophy of science, bioethics and the senior science seminar.

Dr. Shibley became involved in blended learning as part of an 18-month project to completely redesign the general chemistry course at Berks. As part of a team of six professionals who invested more than 1,000 hours in the redesign, Dr. Shibley helped provide the pedagogical and subject matter expertise. The course is now delivered in a blended format with an average GPA almost 25 percent higher than prior to the redesign. Dr. Shibley presents his work on blended learning at professional conferences and has become a recognized advocate of blended learning.
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INTRODUCTION

Blended course design combines face-to-face and online learning to increase flexibility for students and improve the learning process. Realizing these benefits requires careful planning and an understanding of blended course design.

Blended learning takes a fair amount of technical savvy and requires careful attention to course-design characteristics. An instructor hoping to teach a blended course must be even more organized than usual in order to keep students on track and minimize frustration. A blended course is a more accessible course, but sometimes—especially in the first few offerings—it can result in more time spent teaching, not including the time spent designing the course in the first place. Another reality is that instructors need to be more responsive to student questions electronically, and this can feel like more of an imposition than it does in a traditional course. Instructors often feel as though they are always on call.

Blended learning is garnering more and more attention, and much of that is deserved. Blended learning is not just a way to minimize face-to-face class time or to increase campus building availability. Blended courses can also make real and significant impacts on student academic development, as it can improve both learning and accessibility. In fact, a well-designed course creates learning opportunities that did not exist before.

The reality is that technology has changed the way students can learn. A conscientious teacher willing to invest substantial time in understanding the elements of course design (such as class guides; online quizzes and homework; rubrics for papers, blogs, and chat rooms) and the elements of effective pedagogy (understanding students’ prior learning, allowing adequate rehearsal time, providing opportunities to remediate) has the opportunity to revolutionize the concept of the classroom. It is an exciting time for higher education in large part because of the large potential of blended course design.

WHAT THIS WHITE PAPER WILL DO
This white paper will give educators 10 tangible strategies they can employ to dispel myths about the role of the instructor and to improve the quality of their blended courses. This will ultimately increase learning and accelerate the academic success of students.
BLENDED LEARNING DEFINED

Colleges and universities today have new options when it comes to delivering education. In the traditional classroom, instruction is delivered face-to-face. It is taught by credit hours, and the number of hours is determined by the amount of time the faculty is physically present facing students each week.

Higher education institutions can also deliver education entirely online with no face-to-face time with faculty and no requirement of physical presence on campus. Everything in the course is technology-driven.

The variety of these combinations of face-to-face and online strategies are seemingly endless.

Web-assisted instruction maintains the credit-hour amount of faculty presence in the classroom, but it incorporates some online materials or components. It’s the beginning of using technology to enhance the way students learn.

Blended course design, by definition, requires both face-to-face and online components. A quote from Garrison and Vaughn’s book Blended Learning in Higher Education (2008) captures it well: “Blended learning is the thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences.”

The beauty of blended learning is that the variety of these combinations of face-to-face and online strategies are seemingly endless. In all cases, though, the goal is to employ the technology to make the face-to-face instruction more effective than it would be without the online enhancements. Instructors must decide, then, how they want to capitalize on their face-to-face instructional time and use those goals to drive the design of online components.

Blended learning will lessen the amount of time an instructor spends in front of the class. Administrative requirements might dictate exactly how much time is cut, but how the instruction ultimately happens, and what is taught face-to-face and what is taught online, is usually up to the individual instructor.

Ultimately, a blended course will require reconceptualization of the entire learning process. Blended learning does not simply involve shifting portions of face-to-face instruction online. The online components must be uniquely conceived, and new technology will enable instructional vehicles that simply do not exist for face-to-face courses.