

Hybrid Course Design and Instruction Guidelines

Terminology

There are no standard definitions for what constitutes a “hybrid” course, but some generally accepted descriptions follow. In online learning literature (and at most institutions reviewed as part of this research), the terms “hybrid” and “blended” are used synonymously.

- A hybrid course uses various delivery methods to best meet course and session outcomes. The blend may consist of any combination of face-to-face classroom instruction, asynchronous discussion forums, and synchronous sessions conducted live over the Internet, depending on course content.¹
- A well-designed hybrid course takes advantage of the best features of both face-to-face and online learning so that the activities of each reinforce, complement, and elaborate one another. In a poorly designed hybrid course, the online component is viewed as an add-on or a duplicate of what is taught in the classroom.²

The proportion and structure of online and face-to-face meeting times can vary widely, based on the goals and needs of the program/course.

Hybrid Course Design: Fundamental Questions

Faculty wishing to develop a hybrid course should consider the following fundamental questions.³ Subsequent sections of this document elaborate on related principles and best practices.

- What are the learning outcomes for your course?
- Which learning outcomes are best suited to the online environment and which are appropriate for the face-to-face classroom?
- How will you integrate your online and face-to-face course components?
- What will online discussions and activities add to your course?
- What challenges regarding online discussions do you anticipate? How will you handle these challenges?
- How will you assess the work in each setting?

¹ “Top Ten Do’s and Don’ts for Blended Learning,” Babson College Curriculum Innovation and Technology Group. Accessed July 21, 2011, at <<http://citg.babson.edu/innovation.aspx#/innovation.aspx?page=86&rid=2>>.

² “Hybrid Courses: Frequently Asked Questions,” University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Learning Technology Center. Accessed July 20, 2011, at <http://www4.uwm.edu/ltc/hybrid/about_hybrid/index.cfm>.

³ “Questions for Reflection on Creating Hybrid Courses,” University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Learning Technology Center. Accessed July 20, 2011, at <http://www4.uwm.edu/ltc/hybrid/faculty_resources/questions.cfm>.

Learning Outcomes and Methods of Delivery

As indicated above, the first step in designing a hybrid course involves developing/reviewing the course and module learning outcomes (opening with action verbs and indicating skills to be demonstrated upon course/module completion) and determining which outcomes are better suited to face-to-face instruction and which outcomes align with online instruction. Faculty should focus on the *integration* of face-to-face and online components, as this connection is essential to avoid teaching two parallel but unconnected courses.

Learning strategies well-suited to the online environment include⁴:

- Asynchronous discussions
 - Application of theory to personal and professional experiences
 - Case studies
 - Sharing news items
 - Peer review of work
- Group work
 - Private group discussion board
 - Group synchronous chat tool
 - Application/file sharing area or tool
- Guest Speakers on the discussion board
- Wikis to collectively compile knowledge
- Online self-assessment quizzes

These activities are included regularly in fully online courses. To be most effective, hybrid instructors should be trained in these and related online instructional methods including online discussion facilitation and evaluation techniques.

Hybrid Design Guidelines: Best Practices

Once face-to-face and online learning strategies have been selected for course/weekly outcomes, best practices for hybrid course design include:

- Create a well-defined syllabus that sets student expectations: define exactly what the outcomes are, how students will be assessed, when students need to be online, and when faculty will be available online.
- Create weekly checklists (assignment roadmaps) for students to ensure a smooth delivery and manageable workload. Clearly state what is due for each day/week. More structure is needed in hybrid (and online) course delivery.
- Develop an organized and consistent course site so that students can find face-to-face and online materials required for each session/module.

⁴ “Hybrid Course Design,” Northeastern University Teaching and Learning with Technology. Accessed July 21, 2011, at <http://www.northeastern.edu/edtech/teaching_learning/online_pedagogy/hybrid_course_design>.

- Use a variety of assignment techniques such as individual submission, group work, discussion post-and-critique, and discussion post-and-open-reply.
- Tie face-to-face and online interactions to grades.
- Integrate a small number of synchronous sessions to elaborate on a complex topic or to serve as virtual office hours.
- Create materials to help students with the technology and with time management challenges.

Hybrid Design Practices to Avoid

- Avoid the common tendency to cover too much material and include so many activities that it results in a “course and a half.” Online activities will take (students and instructors) longer than expected.
- Avoid using face-to-face sessions for videos or 100% lecture-based classes. When students are in the classroom, they want to interact with faculty and with each other.
- Avoid too many synchronous online sessions. Select appropriate asynchronous online activities and assignments, and define expectations clearly so that students don’t leap to a “let’s meet” (in-person or online) solution.

Instructing a Hybrid Course: Best Practices

- Provide an in-class orientation to the online portion of the course.
 - Explain the hybrid course format, meeting schedule, and assignments.
 - Make sure that students understand the workload expectations in both environments.
 - Highlight any technical needs or particular assignments that may require additional resources.
- Clearly state in the syllabus all of the information students will need to know about both delivery media.
 - Make all assignments and other course expectations as explicit as possible right from the start.
 - Clearly present the schedule of in-class and online work, with due dates stated explicitly and repeatedly. Intentional redundancy is necessary in hybrid/online courses.
- Provide online feedback at the end of each module/week.
- Stay current and engaged. Set aside time to focus on the online components, including reading and responding to student postings.
- Provide students with resources for live technology help.
- Develop back-up plans when technology fails, and share these with students.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the course by soliciting student feedback and evaluating results.

Instructing a Hybrid Course: Practices to Avoid

- Avoid distributing paper-based handouts in face-to-face sessions. Have all materials available electronically on the course site.
- Avoid making course site changes within two weeks of a due date.
- Avoid emails. Use discussion boards for class-wide and private communications.
- Don't minimize the importance of the online portion over the face-to-face meeting times. Similarly, don't rely on upcoming face-to-face meeting times to address questions or challenges that arise in the online portion.

Sample Hybrid Structures and Schedules⁵

Structures

- The instructor lectures and facilitates class discussion in the face-to-face classes. Students complete online assignments based on these classroom activities. The online assignments are posted to asynchronous discussion forums for online discussion.
- Students prepare small group projects online, and they post them to discussion forums for debate and revision. Students then present the projects in the face-to-face class for final discussion and assessment.
- The instructor places online course content (text-based lectures; articles; recordings) for students to review. Students use these preliminary online materials to engage in face-to-face small group activities. Subsequent asynchronous discussions take place in small group and class-wide settings.

Meeting Schedules

- Face-to-face meeting-weeks alternating with online-weeks
- Face-to-face meetings for the first 2-3 weeks, followed by an extended period of 4-6 weeks online, followed by a final set of face-to-face meetings
- Other variants are possible, but consistency and adherence to the schedule pre-defined at the outset of the course via the syllabus are important.

⁵ "Hybrid Courses: Frequently Asked Questions," University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Learning Technology Center. Accessed July 20, 2011, at <http://www4.uwm.edu/ltc/hybrid/about_hybrid/index.cfm>.

Common Pitfalls⁶

Confusion

In total face-to-face or total online classrooms, there is no confusion about where, when, or how classes will be conducted. Students meet three times a week, for example, or not at all. In a hybrid course, expectations shift, and research indicates that students can lose track of the course when they are not in the face-to-face mode (“out of sight, out of mind”). Also, if students are enrolled in multiple hybrid courses, each of which follows its own schedule for face-to-face and online work, managing expectations can become even more confusing.

Minimizing the Online Component

Research also indicates that there is a tendency for hybrid instructors to keep the online component of the class relatively superficial. If not given equal attention by faculty, then there is a tendency for students to do the minimum work required for the online component as opposed to the face-to-face interactions. Faculty who are used to being an active (“sage on the stage”) presence in the face-to-face classroom can face challenges adapting to online discussions where they must maintain an engaged but more collaborative (“guide on the side”) presence.

⁶ “Questioning the Hybrid Model,” by S. Reasons, May 1, 2004, *Online Classroom*, Magna Publications.

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