BEST PRACTICES GUIDE

Translating Traditional Courses to a Blended Learning Format

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As a trainer and instructional designer, a combination of many factors may be influencing you to convert from traditional course delivery to a blended approach of using both face-to-face and online methods. The desire for more student-centered learning, new technologies, and new theories of learning are all influencers in the blended and distance learning movements (Dziuban, Hartman, & Moskal, 2004). As you make this transition in your training, it is important to approach it as a redesign or translation instead of a conversion. When designers "convert" courses, it implies a simple one-to-one transition, whereas "translation" and "redesign" signify a more comprehensive and considerate approach (Pennslyvania State University, 2009).

There are many best practices, tips, and considerations to keep in mind when translating a face-to-face course to a blended learning format. This guide will provide you with information in the form of narrative explanation, checklists, and tables to help guide you as you convert to and facilitate blended courses.

> Blended, or Hybrid Courses, have 30% – 79% of content delivered online, and combine both face-to-face and online education and learning methods (Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007).

PRE-PLANNING STRATEGIES

Teaching in a blended learning environment requires a great emphasis on planning because distance learning is a complicated and multifaceted education method (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). When planning your blended redesign, the National Center for Academic Transformation (2005) offers five principles for success to remember:

1. Redesign the whole course: Approach the redesign as a comprehensive project, and work on the course as whole, not just parts or sections.
2. Encourage active learning: Make the educational experience learner-centered and use the online components to complement, reinforce, and enhance the face-to-face portions.
3. Provide students with individualized assistance: Plan to offer students help and assistance when they need it, especially with technology issues, and create a community beyond the face-to-face environment.
4. Build in ongoing assessment and automated feedback: Increase the amount and frequency of feedback through the use of automated, online tests, detailed rubrics, and personalized feedback comments.
5. Ensure sufficient time on task and monitor student progress: Create a structure of expectations and deadlines within the distance environment just as in the face-to-face portions, and frequently monitor the students' work.

When redesigning a course, it is beneficial to go back and review the learning objectives, content, resources, learning activities, and evaluation methods to determine what could change in the blended environment. For each module of the course, it is helpful to have an outline, which can be shown in a table such as the one below (Chacon, 2012).

Objective	Content	Resources	Learning Activity	Assessment
• Expected learner outcomes, written in the form of measurable behaviors	• Topics and skills related to the objective	• Information and material supporting the content	• Student actions related to using the resources and achieving the objective	• Methods of measurement to determine achievement of the objective

As you prepare for your redesign, here is a table of questions to use:

Question	Answer
1. Who are the learners (technical ability, learning characteristics, etc.)?	
2. What online delivery methods will you use?	
3. As you think about learning objectives, which would be better achieved online and which would be best achieved face-to-face?	
4. What types of distance learning activities do you think you will be using that will make it challenging, engaging, and complementary to the face-to-face portions?	
5. How will the face-to-face and online components be integrated into a single course? How will the work done in each component support the other?	
6. What do you plan to do to help your students address the issues of time management and work schedules?	
7. How will you divide time between the face-to-face and the online portions of your course?	
8. How will you divide the evaluation between face-to-face and online activities?	
9. What proactive steps can you take to assist students to become familiar with instructional technologies? If students need help with technology, how will you provide support?	
10. What are you going to do to ensure that you have not created a "course and one-half" (Requiring students to do more work in a blended course than a traditional course)?	
(University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, 2013)	

Overall, as you plan for the redesign keep in mind the distance learning environment will provide you with an opportunity to integrate more audiovisual resources, student participation and collaboration, and learner engagement beyond the classroom. Use the distance and online methods as a cohesive, complementary enhancement to the face-to-face portion of the course.

Enhancing The Course Through Distance Learning

The distance learning environment and online delivery method provide an opportunity to enhance the existing course during the redesign process. The new distance methods should focus on active learning and move to a more discovery type of learning experience (Simonson et al., 2012). To begin the process of enhancing your course through distance learning, ask yourself:

- "What isn't working in my current course?"
- "Is there a way to move that piece online that would improve the outcome?" (Aycock, Garnham, & Kaleta, 2002)

The following are selected approaches you can use to enhance the course through distance and online delivery methods.

Access to Resources

While certain text-based resources can be assigned to prepare for the content of traditional courses, blended courses provide an opportunity to utilize more and richer resources before and after the face-to-face sessions. Prior to and after live sessions, you can assign the following online:

- Reading such as book excerpts, articles, web pages, or professional blogs
- Videos
- Short, narrated presentations

The Internet provides a tremendous vehicle for access to resources. You can further engage the students and enrich their experience by asking them to search for, identify, synthesize, and share resources of their own related to the content (Bauer, 2001). As a culminating event, use your online delivery platform to create a comprehensive list of course resources with information and links for the students to use.

Pre-Module Work

The distance environment provides a method to both prepare students and motivate them to complete assignments. Prior to face-to-face sessions, students can be required to participate in online learning activities such as viewing certain resources. One source of motivation to complete this pre-work is assigning a mandatory, open-note quiz. Viewing resources prior to the live session and having a minor assessment ensures the students are familiar with the content, which will allow for a more meaningful learning engagement (Bauer, 2001).

Communication and Collaboration

Blended courses increase the amount of student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactivity by expanding the opportunities and means to communicate (Aycock et al., 2002). The distance environment allows communication outside of live course time via email, live chats, asynchronous discussion boards, wikis, and blogging. To increase communication and make learning more meaningful, consider using discussion board prompts to prepare students for class, continue a live class discussion in the online environment, or further reflect on course resources. Encourage students to collaborate with each other on course projects using chats, discussions, wikis, and group document sharing applications. Also consider students who do not regularly participate in live sessions may be more inclined to be active in the distance setting, as

the forum is less intimidating (Gould, 2002). Overall, a blend of face-to-face and distance methods tends to lead to more inclusive interactions and richer learning experiences.

Learning Styles

Another enhancement consideration to make is identifying modules in your current course that appeal to a limited number of learning styles and using the distance platform to supplement those modules that are lacking. Often, it is not feasible to appeal to a vast number of leaning styles in live sessions due to time, access to technology, or other factors; however, distance learning can fill in these gaps by providing further resources such as audiovisuals, games, expert interviews, virtual labs, projects, and structured reflection (Sorenson & Baylen, 2009).

Flexibility in Learning and Teaching

The addition of distance methods to a traditional course increases the flexibility and usability for both trainers and learners, which enhances the overall experience. Depending on the course structure, students may have the opportunity to access course information, resources, and assignments on their own schedules. As a trainer, consider making your job easier by integrating the use of online assignment submission, online assessments with automatic grading, online plagiarism detectors, and electronic grade books.

YOUR ROLE IN THE DISTANCE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Along with changing to a blended environment will come changes to your role as a trainer. In a blended learning approach, consider yourself more facilitator than presenter and more coach than lecturer (Oblinger as cited in Simonson et al., 2012). In this new role, you are responsible for the following:

- High amounts of quality interaction between you and the students in both live and distance forums
- Cooperation among students in distance discussions and projects
- Making a clear connection between the live course sessions and the distance assignments
- Providing prompt, detailed feedback on assignments and course progress
- Providing detailed, explicit expectations for both live and distance learning assignments and participation (Sorenson & Baylen, 2009)

Overall, there is an added layer of responsibility and commitment in the blended learning format, as all requirements of a traditional trainer must be extended to the distance environment outside of the face-to-face sessions. Although there is sure to be an increase in your workload as you manage a dual learning environment, be sure you are using the blended approach for its intended purpose and not creating a "course and one-half" for yourself, as mentioned previously (University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, 2013).

To further understand your changing role, use this checklist to determine your readiness to facilitate a blended learning course.

I know how to:
- ☐ use a course management system (CMS), learning management system (LMS), virtual learning environment (VLE), or other type of online course delivery medium (Simonson et al., 2012).
- ☐ use a variety of Web 2.0 tools including blogs, wikis, social networks, shared document editors, media streaming, and embedded media.
- ☐ proficiently operate the Internet including the use of various browsers and search engines.
- ☐ post, manage, and edit content on an online course site.
- ☐ create, post, edit, manage, and facilitate online asynchronous discussions.
- ☐ troubleshoot technical issues and help others work through challenges with technology as well.

ENCOURAGING COMMUNICATION IN A DISTANCE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Communication is critical to a successful blended learning experience, as it is the backbone to active learning and integral for learner engagement. As a trainer, there are many steps you can take to encourage successful, meaningful online communication amongst learners.

1. Provide students with protocol and etiquette for online communication and set expectations based on the protocol provided. The University of Central Florida's Online Learning Center (2010) offers a good resource for Online Course Protocol here.
2. Develop an icebreaker session during a live or distance delivery to allow students to get to know each other, and thus feel more comfortable communicating (Simonson et al., 2012).
3. Assign various types of mandatory communication in the distance environment such as large and small group asynchronous discussion, live chats, and wikis.
4. When assigning discussion groups, rotate students around so they have an opportunity to collaborate with everyone in the course.
5. Personally abide by the same expectations you set for the students and actively participate in online communication assignments as the trainer. Demonstrating your commitment to the course will likely increase the interest of others. Specifically, you can contribute to online discussions and further conversations with additional resources and expert information from your experiences (Illinois Online Network, 2010).
6. Prepare meaningful, well thought out discussion prompts with thought-provoking questions that make learners think critically and desire to participate.
7. Ask participates to use their own life experiences and stories, verses strict academia, in course communications.

CONCLUSION

As you utilize these best practices, tips, and considerations to redesign your traditional course, keep "translation" as the theme of your work. Be comprehensive and thorough in your approach, use the blended learning format to supplement and complement the course, and strive for a learner-centric outcome.

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