

# Moving Into Blended Instruction

## Guidelines and Best Practices

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### Starting Points

My Distance Learning class in Walden University's M.S. in Instructional Design and Technology program poses a question about guidelines for converting a class from face-to-face instruction to a blended curriculum. In the problem definition, we are told merely that the instructor feels that the students need to improve their communication. Given those broad parameters, I have crafted the following set of guidelines. Please note: I assume that the instructor has some ideas about the nature and scope of these communication problems, and that the instructor may therefore be able to comment on those issues.

### How to Use This Guide

I have built this guide as a checklist of things to think about in moving a class into blended instruction. As with many high-level documents, you may find that it raises more questions than it answers. That's good—your students will thank you for the time you spend answering those questions. You can print out the checklist and check items off as you move through them. If you do that, I would recommend placing the completed checklist in your folder of course design materials, since it may later help you to remember what you thought about.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at [hollis.easter@waldenu.edu](mailto:hollis.easter@waldenu.edu). Thanks, and good luck!

Course Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Pre-Planning Strategies

- ☐ **Develop clear objectives for the course.** What does the desired end point look like? What will you see, hear, or read from your students that will tell you that you've met that objective? You might think of this as "beginning with the end in mind".
- ☐ **Ask yourself whether teaching a particular way is necessary or merely a habit.** Since our focus is on converting a pre-existing class to a blended format, you will probably want to keep some training methods. That's good! But ask yourself why you teach things a particular way in the face-to-face environment. If you have activities you particularly love, there's probably a way to integrate them into the blended course.
- ☐ **Plan to re-evaluate most aspects of the course.** You'll need to do more than just videotape your existing lectures or translate your activities into online formats. You will need to examine your course design to figure out how to help your learners reach the instructional objectives in the blended environment. Things may not work the same way in a blended course than in a strictly face-to-face setting, and you should be prepared to assess how all the pieces of the new course are working.
- ☐ **Think about how you will evaluate the success of the blended class.** At the end of the experiment, how will you determine whether it was worth doing the class in blended format? Where will you get your data? Who will decide whether the course was a success?

### Aspects enhanced by distance learning

- ☐ **Determine which course modules are primarily concerned with delivering content and which focus more on practicing and cementing understanding.** Both types of modules can be delivered effectively online and in the classroom, but it's helpful to know what you're trying to accomplish in each section.
- ☐ **Provide your content-delivery modules in a way that makes them easy to use and reuse.** Learners will have access to instructional materials on a constant, reusable basis through the course site, meaning they can listen again to statements they didn't understand. It's best to make this as easy as possible, by providing information in fairly small chunks with good indexing. Include page numbers for texts, links to journal articles (rather than mere citations), and time markings for videos whenever possible.

- ❑ **Examine each "practice-oriented" module to see whether it can be done online.** Depending on the nature of the course, it may not be possible to do all the different activities online. For example, in a course about workplace violence, it may be difficult to portray and assess menacing behavior through online means. In that case, a face-to-face demonstration might be more appropriate. Similarly, if a module doesn't really need face time, use the classroom time on something that would benefit from that experience. You might find it helpful to imagine each course module as both an online and a face-to-face workshop—often one format will be the clear winner.
- ❑ **Make online discussion participation a requirement for all participants.** While some students may find that the discussion format cramps their style, others are likely to find it much easier to communicate with their classmates—and with you. This is especially important for making sure that you reach your quiet or shy students.

## Changing Roles

- ❑ **Think of yourself as a guide rather than a teacher.** Blended instruction requires and rewards a higher level of learner independence than face-to-face instruction does, which also means that the instructor takes a different role. Students will likely do most of their learning in discussions and activities, and your job is to make sure that those experiences flow smoothly. This can be psychologically difficult for teachers who are used to being the main providers of information and learning.
- ❑ **Lead discussions at first, then turn responsibility over to the students.** A rule of thumb from experts in the field is to "make about 1 posting for every 4 student postings early in a course and gradually reduce postings to about 1 in 10 near the end of the course" (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009, p. 188). Think of your discussion participation as a way to teach students what you expect from their discussions—they will quickly understand your purpose and begin to run the discussions themselves.
- ❑ **Accept that teaching a blended class will be a lot of work.** Most teachers report that teaching a blended or distant class is a lot of work—often more work than teaching a face-to-face class! Think of the blended class as a way to help your learners understand better, not a way to save time or effort.

## Steps to encourage communication

- ❑ **Participate in the discussions as much as you expect the students to participate.** Lead by example; show them that you are interested and enthusiastic by posting regularly. Students report highly negative impressions of instructors who don't interact with them except by grading. They also report strongly positive impressions of instructors who post frequently and interact directly with student posts in a meaningful way.

- ❑ **Give clear feedback that challenges and supports your learners.** Remember that your new role is to serve as a guide—help your students to find the answers you want to hear. Lead them with your feedback, complimenting approaches you like and specifically explaining why you dislike other approaches. Pay particular attention to your choice of words; learners won't have the benefit of your body language and tone during the online portions of the course.
- ❑ **Give students a voice in evaluating the new course design.** Make it clear from the beginning that you plan to seek their feedback in order to continue improving the course; make sure you follow up on this commitment. They may have insight about aspects of the course that seem obvious to you but are opaque to others, and they may also offer positive feedback to you!

## References

Simonson, M., Smaldino, S., Albright, M., & Zvacek, S. (2009). *Teaching and learning at a distance: Foundations of distance education* (4th ed.) Boston, MA: Pearson.