The Best of Both Worlds: Teaching a Hybrid Course
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Abstract
While online education alone has strengths and weaknesses, the benefits of online learning can be used to enhance face-to-face teaching. This article will discuss an example of capitalizing on the strengths of online courses to improve interaction and student performance within a traditional class setting.

Introduction
While distance education programs have exploded in recent years, a new trend within the field has emerged: hybrid or blended courses. A hybrid course is a traditional, face-to-face course that has incorporated online elements, using the same course management software that underpins courses taught entirely online. This model can appeal to a wide range of instructors, even those who are critical of online learning, and can be used to improve a variety of courses or solve particular problems. Some universities have used the hybrid model to solve classroom space shortages, to improve communication between students and instructors in large classes, and to address students’ needs for computer and technology literacy.[1] This article will explore an example of using a hybrid course to increase communication and improve a problematic course assignment.

Online Teaching and Learning
Distance learning has shown substantial growth in the past decade. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that during 1994-1995, 33% of colleges and universities were offering distance courses, with another 25% planning to begin within 3 years.[2] During another study in 2000-2001, NCES learned that 56% were offering distance courses and 12% were planning to begin.[3] Additionally, according to these two reports, the number of institutions responding that there were no plans to offer distance learning opportunities decreased from 42% to 31%. Further comparison of the two reports also shows extensive growth in number of students and number of courses offered. According to the data, 753,640 students were enrolled in distance courses in 1994-95, while enrollment jumped to 3,077,000 for the 2000-01 academic year. As Christopher R. Wolfe reminds us, teaching online is teaching, and quick, easy access to information is not a replacement for education.[4] Teaching online requires instructors to have different skills than needed in teaching face-to-face. Planning and developing asynchronous courses must be done completely before the course begins. Transforming assignments, texts, and other course materials into an online environment can be difficult, and learning to communicate effectively in a different medium can also be challenging for instructors.[5] Moving gradually into online course delivery by using a hybrid system is an attractive model for many instructors.[6]

Participating in an online learning environment also requires students to have or develop skills beyond those needed for being a successful student in traditional classrooms. Without the live interaction in a classroom, distance learners must be able to process written materials and texts at least as efficiently as they process lecture and discussion. Further, they must be able to make “connections between new and existing knowledge” on their own.[7] Studies of the psychology of learning online and issues related to communication in the online environment abound.[8] Most of these explore the issues that arise due to the concrete difference in the space where learning happens. The difference between physical and virtual spaces leads to profound changes in social
interaction, from the simple process of holding a conversation to larger issues of depersonalization and identity.[9]

In a hybrid course, some of these issues will be moot, since there will be live, in person class sessions available for covering material and clearing up problems. In most hybrid courses, though, what often moves online is a portion of the communication process. As Priscilla Y. Romkema notes, using the online course area for asking questions allowed for the face-to-face sessions to be devoted to instructor lecture and other class activities; time was not taken away from those elements and the question and answer bank became a permanent feature that could be consulted by any student at any time.[10] Although face-to-face contact will continue in a hybrid course, it important to design and monitor the online communications to ensure that they are effective and productive.

Key studies of teaching information literacy online have focused largely on the needs of the students and a perceived tension between information literacy and online learning.[11] Leslie J. Reynolds discusses the importance of addressing learning styles and designing courses to foster interaction, noting that "regardless of the learning environment," students must be "vested in 'coming' to class," regardless of where the class takes place.[12] Kate Manuel also describes the impact of online learning on students. Manuel’s students were taking the online information literacy course in addition to on-campus courses and were all new to distance learning, which led to numerous difficulties for the students.[13] Elevating the threaded discussions to the level of a lively, in-class discussion also proved difficult, which affected those students who learn best in a collaborative environment and need direct interaction.[14] All of these issues should affect the design process of any online course. To be most effective, these issues should also be considered in transforming face-to-face courses into hybrid ones, although the dynamics and demographics of these courses can be different.

Course Transformation
Gen Ed 300, Accessing Information for Research, is a one-credit, eight-week elective course taught by library faculty members at Washington State University. It covers all aspects of information literacy and helps students understand and excel in the process of doing research. Different sections are designed for specific majors. For example, one section is geared for humanities and social science students, while another is tailored for science and engineering students. The section I teach is for students who are also enrolled in an education course, who are being trained to become peer facilitators for our freshman seminar program. These students need to know about issues and concepts related to information use, but they also need tools and strategies for teaching their future students how to find, access and evaluate information sources.

A colleague had taught this section once before I began my current position, and I used his syllabus the first time I taught the course. One of the requirements was a research journal. The purpose of this ongoing assignment was to encourage reflective thinking about the research process and to help the students organize their thoughts and identify areas that needed more attention. The journals were collected halfway through the course and at the end of the course. The research journals were disappointing on many levels. This type of assignment is a prime candidate for procrastination, and it was obvious that many students had written all the entries in one sitting. Although clear instructions had been given and several discussions were held in class about what reflective writing was and what kinds of topics they needed to think about for their journals, a significant number of the research journals were merely narrative accounts of what transpired during each class session, rather than what they thought about it, how it would affect their own research practice, or how they planned to use the
information for their future role as peer facilitators. Written feedback and continued discussion reduced the number of the “Dear Diary” or “blow-by-blow” styles of research journals that were submitted at the end of class, but there were some students who could not break out of that mold.

Although I believed that this assignment was useful and had a place in the curriculum, two major problems led me to reconsider it. Collecting journals twice did not provide enough opportunity for me to give feedback and, more importantly, gave no opportunity for peer feedback. It was also clear to me that many students were not comfortable with loosely focused, reflective writing assignments. Instead of removing the research journal from the class, I decided that both of these issues could be addressed by restructuring the research journal and moving it into an online course space. With experience in teaching classes completely online, where I never meet the students, and in teaching in traditional classroom settings, I could quickly see that using the threaded discussion format, one of the strengths of online course management software, could remedy the two problems. Although asynchronous, the threaded discussions would allow for more timely feedback from the instructor and would open the possibilities for the students to give each other feedback. Setting up the journal in this way would also allow for more structured discussion questions; students would have more guidance and would be much less likely to post inappropriate or unfocused material in response to the direct prompts. I believed that this format also could eliminate or reduce the procrastination problem.

In practice, this was all true. The research journals have been much more focused in recent semesters than before, feedback has increased among the peers, and the instructor feedback is not delayed for weeks. However, some limitations remain. Some students still post late and do not keep up with the assignments on a weekly basis. Some students give little or no feedback to their peers, even if it is required or encouraged. The online format also changes the instructor’s role. It is important to log in regularly and keep up with new postings in order to provide better feedback. These additional requirements certainly add to the instructor’s workload. Expectations need to be clearly defined, as well, so that students do not expect the instructor to always be available online. Although the hybrid approach is not perfect, the increased discussion between students and instructor and the improvement in the quality of the students’ reflective thinking and writing have been significant.

Conclusion
Studies have shown that students believe the hybrid approach improves communication and interaction, both between students and between the students and instructors. For example, one study showed 66% of the students saw a marked improvement in interaction while 27% felt that communication was the same.[15] Another survey showed that 90% of students in a hybrid course felt they learned as much or more than in a traditional course.[16] A high school even introduced hybrid courses and found it helped lower their drop-out rates.[17] An added benefit was that the online course space served as an information center for the course. Since the capability was available, I posted the syllabus and assignments into the course space, meaning that students who lost or misplaced their paper copies always had access to the materials without having to contact me. Although moving this part of the course into the online space increased my workload and did not solve all problems completely, I have continued with the hybrid approach, because the benefits have been significant enough to warrant the extra effort. Using this approach may work in many cases to increase peer interaction and enhance instructor feedback.

Notes and References


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