

The Evolution of a Hybrid Course

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from *Inquiry*, Volume 10, Number 1, Spring 2005, 14-19

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Abstract

Brotton offers practical advice for designing and conducting a hybrid course that will meet the needs of a diverse student body.

I suddenly became the teacher of a hybrid course during the snowy winter of spring semester 2003. The class was English 115 – Introduction to Technical Writing, which includes an overview of terminology, formatting, and audience expectations, and provides extensive practice in the preparation of documents and reports generally produced by technical writers. Two of my once-a-week night classes had been cancelled because of snow, and a third cancellation loomed before spring break. To permit students to move forward despite the snow, I set up the course on Blackboard. In the process, I learned a great deal about both student expectations and hybrid course preparation.

A Challenging Scenario

As spring 2003 predated the widespread use of Virginia Community College System (VCCS) student e-mail accounts, I mailed notices to all students. The transformation to partial Internet delivery initially seemed simple: I would provide students with information on accessing their Blackboard accounts and navigating the Blackboard system to find their assignments. This night class was comprised mainly of two types of students:

- Working adults taking the course to help with their job, often at their supervisor's direction.
- Younger students taking the course as a requirement for their majors, which were usually computer-related.

Surely, I thought, such students would quickly adapt to Blackboard's technology.

A flood of irritated e-mail messages and telephone calls quickly proved me wrong. The few students who had previously taken distance courses using Blackboard or similar delivery systems were enthusiastic. They moved right into the Internet content. But the remainder of the students – although they included a public relations director, a magazine publisher, and many computer wizards – had no prior Blackboard experience. They insisted that an online delivery system would be too complex for them. They also insisted that they were unable to go to the VCCS help site to learn their passwords.

However, upon return to class after spring break, within the camaraderie of the classroom, the majority of students quickly found their passwords by using the VCCS help site. They then cheerfully assisted any of their peers who still had difficulty. Although we remained an on-campus course for the remainder of the semester, all students now accepted homework assignments that could be completed on Blackboard. In addition, they often resolved questions and exchanged information with other students through their newly activated VCCS e-mail.

Teaching this course taught me three lessons about hybrid courses:

- Students need to know in advance that part of their learning will be accomplished outside of the classroom by accessing Internet content and completing assignments on line.
- Students gain confidence and trust in Blackboard delivery from an initial introduction within the classroom

setting.

- Students feel more connected and involved in outside work when they have formed alliances with fellow students in the classroom setting.

I recognized that all of these needs *can* be addressed in a hybrid course that is identified as such in the schedule of classes and meets on campus for at least the first week. Eager to see where my snow-inspired experimentation might lead, I scheduled the course for hybrid delivery in the fall.

A New Hybrid Format

I have taught distance learning for several years, but that winter experience taught me that hybrid classes differ both in the expectations of students and in the diversity of content-delivery options; selecting those instructional modules best suited to off-campus or on-campus sessions requires careful planning.

Consequently, I signed up for a summer seminar co-presented by the Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC) Technical Applications Center (TAC) and the Extended Learning Institute (ELI), the distance arm of the college. I learned much about assessment possibilities and student technology requirements. Armed with new ideas for motivating students to complete readings and assignments outside of class, I approached fall with reading quizzes and assignments for the off-campus weeks posted on Blackboard.

I had decided that students would meet for three weeks on campus and then alternate between campus classes and independent work. Every other week, we would be on campus until the last three weeks of the course, when the students would present oral reports based upon written feasibility studies developed over most of the semester. They would use the presentation software aids (usually PowerPoint) that they had honed both on and off campus. That first night of class, I learned something about terminology clarification when one student wondered where we would meet on off-campus weeks. *Lesson 4:* Be sure that students realize that on the weeks they do not meet on campus, they will work from their own computer facilities.

From then on, the semester was a runaway success. By the end of the third week, the students had formed strong bonds. They had paired up to interview each other during the second week and reported their partner's occupation and special interests to the rest of the class. As a result, two people discovered they were both employed as conference organizers. Students from Russia and China at first focused on a comparison of their different but similar cultures and then found that they held similar positions in information technology. Two women found that they were both about to make career changes. Discovering these similarities and differences helped the students to choose semester friends. Attendance remained strong for the on-campus sessions, as students were anxious to meet in person again.

As in most community college classes, the students varied greatly, although night technical writing students may vary more. This class included

- a doctoral-degree candidate (former student of mine) who was using the feasibility study to clarify his dissertation,
- a doctorate-holding scientist improving her English language speaking and writing skills,
- an experienced computer programmer transferring to the field of horticulture,
- a recent four-year college graduate adding technical writing credentials to her English degree, and
- an assortment of young computer wizards.

As a former NVCC student, Sergey, the doctoral candidate, related well to the young students in the class. And as a current teaching assistant at his university, he was able to involve the entire class in his interactive report presentation. The recent college graduate, who was seeking a job involving technical writing, found encouragement and a vision of possibilities: a networking opportunity with fellow students already in the workforce. Those young computer wizards stepped forward to help the nervous scientist with her very first PowerPoint presentation. All of these students met their own needs and found and gave support. They also gained flexibility to balance their career, academic, and personal requirements.

That flexibility also made it possible for one student to complete the course successfully after a previously undiagnosed heart ailment interrupted her semester with the need for a pacemaker and follow-up surgery. Many of the students in the class kept in touch with her during her recuperation, as they were already used to e-mailing her regularly on VCCS e-mail.

Hybrid courses offer students a chance to know each other in both structured and unstructured situations, which is often difficult in a totally online distance course. The hybrid method also allows for elasticity in scheduling that is not possible in a strictly on-campus course.

Further Refinements

In the spring 2004 semester, I again offered the evening technical writing as a hybrid course. The class seemed even better. I had the advantage of knowing which assignments – such as the quizzes and the abstract of a *Wall Street Journal* article – worked best for off-campus weeks. I had also refined the syllabus, adding graphic symbols to the outline of activities for hybrid weeks. A hybrid course can be organic, as it is a fresh approach for an instructor that allows for flexibility in design as well as scheduling.

As an example of that flexibility, Cheryl, the computer programmer making a career change into horticulture, was unable to complete the fall 2003 semester on schedule as a result of a family emergency. She chose to take an incomplete and submit her feasibility study during the spring 2004 semester. Because she had both the oral presentation and written report to complete, I asked if she would be willing to come in halfway through the semester to present her oral report to the current class. She agreed. The class was impressed with the quality of her PowerPoint slides and began revising those they were working on. They were also impressed with the organization and research that went into her feasibility study: an examination of possibilities for integrating the NVCC horticulture degree into two university programs. They also noted her well-expressed rationale for choosing an academic plan that would enable her to gain the degree that met her personal goals. Through the remainder of the semester, students often referred to her presentation as they discussed their own feasibility study plans. My two semesters blended as my spring students gained not only from the content tested by their predecessors but also from one of those previous students as well.

The flexible scheduling and extra preparation time I gained also permitted me to arrange for Suzanne Nikolaus, president of the Northern Virginia Community College Advisory Board for the Certificate in Professional Writing, to come to an on-campus session as a guest speaker. As a human relations director with long-term experience in the Internet Technology (IT) area, she reviewed the students' resumes, which were prepared outside of class and due that evening. She patiently made recommendations to each student on how that resume could be made more effective. Students felt more professional in relating to an IT human relations director because of their many weeks of independent on line work. Of course, such an advisory session could be arranged for Internet delivery, but it would involve more technical planning and be less personal than the in-class visit.

Hybrid Harmonies

The on-campus sessions and face-to-face meeting features of hybrid courses harmonize with their flexibility to create a promising new form of instructional delivery. In reviewing success statistics, I found that of my three semesters of hybrid students, 76.5 percent passed the course, which compared favorably to the 82 percent of my previous three classes of totally on-campus students. I attribute the slightly higher non-hybrid rate to the momentum of the classroom and the help of the instructor provided on site. Those who did not complete were usually unable to adapt to the technology or independent work required. However, the completion rate compares favorably to the 50 percent or less often reported for on line courses nationwide and as noted for a specific course by Professor Thomas Long of Thomas Nelson Community College in his 2001 Modern Language Association paper entitled "Virtual Walden: Where I Taught and What I Taught For in Cyberspace."

For those who are considering teaching a hybrid course, my three-week–alternating weeks–three-week plan is only one option. In fall 2004, I began an experiment of alternating weeks for an evening honors section of English 111–Composition I. Some of my colleagues have had excellent success with teaching two-day-a-week classes that alternate use of the same classroom space. Remember that hybrid courses are flexible enough to meet both your students' and your own needs, so choose your format and give it a try.

Helpful Sites

For further information about hybrid courses, visit the University of Wisconsin Hybrid Course Website. This site will lead you to definitions and descriptions of hybrid course activity at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee as well as link you to other helpful sites. Also, check your local college for training opportunities, and visit the VCCS website for more information on hybrid teaching and learning.

University of Wisconsin information site on hybrid courses:

<http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/LTC/institutions-using-hybrid.html>

Professor Long's interesting paper on a totally online experiment:

http://www.tncc.vccs.edu/faculty/longt/papers/virtual_walden_mla_paper.htm

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