A Case Study
Transitioning From Traditional Face-to Face Course Instruction to a Blended Format

Darlene McDonough

Abstract

This case study briefly describes the journey that one professor took in transitioning from face-to-face course instruction to a blended model at the graduate level. The blended lesson format was based on the 14 Learner-Centered Psychological Principles developed (1993) and revised by the American Psychological Association Work Group of the Board of Educational Affairs (1997). The professor developed a student survey specifically to evaluate the blended course in areas not included in the university's evaluation. After the first and second semesters, data from the professor's course evaluations as well as the student surveys were used to improve the blended course design and implementation for the third semester. The professor comments on the challenges and the advantages of the blended format for both the professor and students including the impact on student achievement.

Dr. Darlene McDonough is an Assistant Professor Educational Leadership at St. Bonaventure University. She can be reached at St. Bonaventure University, Plassmann Hall B 40, St. Bonaventure, N. Y. 14778, Phone 716-375-4026, email dmcdonou@sbu.edu.

My challenge, as a new faculty member, was to combine best practices in a standards-based learner-centered curriculum and concepts of educational administration using the blended approach in the teaching of graduate students. The blended approach combines face to face and online distance learning as the method of instructional delivery. Staring the third week in August, this was a pretty tall order that had to be completed in time for the first class, in three courses, by the last Saturday in August. To do so, an instructor needed a minimum level of technological skills and the belief that the new wave of the future for teaching and learning for all students, Pre-Kindergarten through higher education including doctorial coursework, needed to include the use of technology. This was a tall order to accomplish with only three weeks to read the texts for the courses, develop the syllabus for each course, learn how use Moodle for interaction with the students, and get all the information for the courses into the blended technology format.

The Task

The Educational Leadership Program had piloted the blended format the year before for some of the courses in the School Building Leadership Program. One reason for piloting the blended format was to reach a larger group of students who would be interested in this format because of the distance they lived and worked from the University. It was hoped that knowing that they would only need to physically attend class three times a semester would be more attractive. A second reason was to attract another group of students who because of their busy schedules would be willing to take courses that would allow them to participate asynchronously, at times and places convenient to them. The courses in the pilot proved to be successful in several ways. The use of the blended course format had increased enrollment, decreased dropout rate, increased active engagement by students through participation in the weekly threaded

discussions, and produced an increase in student achievement than when the courses were offered face to face. As a result, my challenge was to redesign the rest of the courses that I would be teaching in the School Building Leadership and District Leadership Programs.

The Research

The instructional process in the Educational Leadership Program is composed of three steps: instructional planning, instructional delivery, and assessment of learning. This instructional process is based on student-centered learning research. Our belief is that there is a direct alignment between the written, taught, and assessment curriculum (Glatthorn, 2000). Preparation for instruction begins with the end in mind; the standard that the student is expected to learn and how that learning will be assessed. The following steps modeled after Wiggins and McTighe's Understanding By Design Model (2005) included: stage 1) identify desired outcomes and results, stage 2) determine what constitutes acceptable evidence of competency in the outcomes and results (assessment), and Stage 3) plan instructional strategies and learning experiences that bring student learning to these competency levels. Working from the end in mind, students are provided clear expectations through rubrics as to how to demonstrate their learning as well as a number of authentic, project based assessments from which to choose based on their prior knowledge and current educational and professional experiences.

The American Psychological Association Task Force on Psychology of Education along with the Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory developed 12 Learner-Centered Psychological Principles. This document included guidelines for school redesign and reform (1993). The principles were divided into four categories: 1) Cognitive and Metacognitive Factors; 2) Motivational and Affective Factors; 3) Developmental and Social Factors; and 4) Individual Differences Factors. The table below lists a summary of the factors in each of the

categories. The American Psychological Association Work Group of the Board of Educational Affairs (1997) revised the 1993 principles to the Learner-Centered Psychological Principles: A framework for school reform and redesign. The revision included two additional elements in the category of Individual Differences: 1) diversity focusing on differences in linguistics, culture,

Cognitive and Metacognitive Factors	
	Nature of the learning process-intentional
	Goals of the learning process-create meaning
	Construction of knowledge: connect new to known
	Strategic thinking: higher order skills
	Context of learning: environmental factors
Motivational and Affective Factors	
	Motivational and emotional influences: emotional state, beliefs, interests, goals
	Intrinsic motivation: creativity, higher order skills, curiosity, interest, choice, control
	Effects of motivation on effort, external effort, guided practice
Developmental and Social Factors	
	Developmental influence on learning, differential development in physical, intellectual, emotional, and social domains
	Social influences: social interactions, interpersonal relations, communication
Individual Differences Factors	
	Individual differences: different strategies, approaches, capacities based on prior experiences and heredity
	Diversity in linguistics, culture, background (1997)
	Standards and assessment regarding procedure and process (1997)

social background and 2) standards and assessment centering on high standards, diagnostic data, and procedure and outcome assessments of the learner and the process.

Laird (2003) indicates that blended courses transform the why, when, where, how, and what of learning that occurs in the 21st century. The courses are characterized by interactions between the learner and peers as well as the learner and instructor that can occur with any learner at a convenient time and place, with compatible equipment (Govindasamy, 2002). According to Lindsay (2004), blended courses improve communication and interactions between students and the professor and between students and students. Active engagement with the content material is also increased because all students are required to respond to the discussion question in some way (Sand, 2002). Research from the University of Illinois (2011) indicates threaded discussion used in the blended format increases adult learning because the discussion is interactive and is how most adults learn best. It is interactive and participatory. Included are opportunities for learners to analyze alternative ways of thinking and acting while assisting learners in exploring their own experiences so they can become better critical thinkers. Learners who have difficulty attending the traditional weekly classroom instruction can have their needs met by the blended course since it meets only three times a semester.

At the University, the blended format has transformed traditional instruction into on-line learning experiences based on the 14 Learner-Centered Psychological Principles with three face to face meetings during the semester. Instructional delivery contains multimedia presentations, simulations, videos, audio sequences, text commentaries, small group activities, and student contributions to the threaded weekly discussions. Based on research, hands-on learning experiences that actively engage students impact the amount of knowledge gained when compared to lecture and chalk talk of the traditional classroom. This provides the instructor the opportunity to be very creative and opens up the world of virtual field trips in the delivery of instruction. In this way, the learner has the ability to collect and organize digital content material

and resources as well as electronic textbooks on laptops in place of physical textbooks. This decreases the cost of textbooks and eliminates the transporting the large textbooks for the learners and the instructor. According to the University of Illinois, (2011), blended courses support self-directed learning by providing individualized, self-paced activities. The learner is proactive and takes the initiative in the learning. The learner has greater motivation which makes it more purposeful. As a result, there is a greater retention of new knowledge which increases the ability to apply the learning to new situations. Research indicates that the greater the expertise of the student in the area the technology usage, the higher the student attainment of knowledge and the more motivated the student is to participate in a blended course (Black, 2002). Black asserts that students learn more in blended formats, write better papers, produce higher quality projects, and are able to participate in more meaningful conversation on the subject being taught.

According to the research, there are some disadvantages or pitfalls to avoid when designing and implementing a blended course. Katela, Garnham, and Aycock (2005) state one challenge for a professor is to insure they have a working knowledge of the technology that will be used to provide instruction. This may be a learning curve that is different for each professor. The development of the course should be conducted slowly to insure it is done accurately. The more accurate the online materials are, including the syllabus and resources, the less frustration there will be for the students. Since this is a change from the traditional way of providing instruction, professors need to commit to spending the time to redesign and transform their traditional lessons to the technological format. It is also important for the instructor to set aside time to read and provide feedback to students on a regular basis. There will be students who do not participate as directed in the threaded weekly discussions and will attempt to complete the entire course the last

week of the semester. Carefully established due dates for assignments need to be determined and adhered to. The situation will then be avoided. The connection between the online assignments and the face to face class activities is crucial to avoid the 'course and a half syndrome' that can develop if the two parts of the course are not carefully aligned when designing the course. Course creation needs to focus on instructional design and delivery using technology. It is not just a matter of transferring the traditional lecture mode of delivery of content into the online tool. What is required is a rethinking the design of the course as well as adopting a new approach to teaching that will make the blended format a success. Course goals and objectives which include online learning activities make the learning more learner-centered with greater student active engagement. Learning to facilitate online discussions and providing more project-based assessments of student learning are challenges that professors face in the creation and implementation of hybrid courses (Learning Technology Center, Hybrid Courses, 2011).

It is important that students thinking about participating in the blended format are interviewed to determine that they are independent learners with the level of technology skills to be successful and have well developed study habits and time management skills. All these are needed for student success in a blended course (Katela, Garnham, and Aycock, 2005).

The Process

The first steps I took were to review the traditional course syllabus for each course that I would be teaching in a blended format. Also reviewed, were blended courses that had been changed from the traditional format the previous year. I conducted research to determine what the most important characteristics needed to be part of a blended course. Based on the data gathered, I determined the following elements were crucial: 1) making connections to the 14 Learner-Centered Principles as determined by the American Psychological Association Work Group

Board (1997), 2) using the lesson plan format model of understanding by design created by Wiggins and McTighe (2005), 3) integrating the online course content with the face to face components of the blended course (Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, 2005), 4) keeping the course plans and the technology simple (Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, 2005), 5) developing a way to effectively and efficiently monitor the design and online communications to ensure they are productive and effective (Lindsay, 2004), and 6) using the format of threaded discussion to provide timely feedback from the instructor while allowing students to provide feedback to each other through required online responses (Lindsay, 2004).

Several individual tutoring sessions on the use of Moodle, the University's online teaching tool were needed. After developing the syllabus for each course, which included the sequence of assignments for each week, the information was put on Moodle. The students were divided into three groups-Group A, Group B, and Group C, according to the student's home location. The purpose was to assign a group each week to answer the discussion question and the other two groups to respond to the first group's answers. The assignments were posted on Sunday of each week. The first group's answers were due by midnight of the Wednesday that the discussion question was assigned. The second and third groups' responses were due by midnight the following Saturday. The group assignments and due dates were included with each discussion question to eliminate any confusion. The dates of the face to face meetings were included in the syllabus. It was determined that the first meeting would be the first day of class to discuss the syllabus, the course requirements, and the assessment system as well as introduce the course content by activating prior knowledge.

Strategies to activate prior knowledge were used. One of these strategies is introduced in each of the first class so that when they appear in the threaded weekly discussion, the students will have an understanding of how to complete the graphic organizer. The KWL chart is composed of three columns as indicated in figure 1. In the column labeled 'KNOW", the students make a list of information that they know about the topic that is being discussed based on the title of the material that is being read. In the second column, the students list several questions that they want to have answered as they read the text. It is sometimes suggested to the students that the use of the question words 'who', 'what', 'where', 'when', 'why', and 'how' be used to help formulate the questions. As the students read and find the answers to their questions, the information is listed in column three along with the page and paragraph number where the information was found. Any prior knowledge they listed in the KNOW column that is confirmed during reading, the student also lists the page and paragraph number as by the information in column one. The students are then asked to write a summary of the information listed in the KWL chart including what they knew about the topic that was confirmed and what information was learned as what question still remain unanswered. APA citations are used in the summary to support ideas so this can conveniently be done using the KWL chart. During the weekly threaded discussion, when the KWL chart is used, all groups complete the chart and the first group shares their summary of the chart. The second and third groups respond to the summaries and extend the discussion by including in their responses similarities and differences in the completion of their charts. APA citations are used by students in the second and third groups to support their ideas.

Figure 1

KWL Chart

KNOW	WANT TO KNOW	LEARNED

Free writing on the topic is another way to activate prior knowledge before reading. Students spend five minutes writing, without stopping and skipping lines, everything they know on the topic. As the students read, information written in the free write is either confirmed or revised. Page and paragraph numbers are listed below the information that is confirmed and revised. In class, students use their summaries as a starting point for class discussions. During the threaded weekly discussions, students in the first group share their summary and indicate what was confirmed or needed to be revised after reading, including APA citations to support the ideas. The second and third groups respond to the first group's summaries and compare and contrast their learning using APA citations to support the ideas.

Another way to activate prior knowledge is to survey the text. The students turn all the boldfaced print into questions. These questions are written in a dialogue journal. To create a dialogue journal, students fold their paper in half, lengthwise. The questions that are developed from the bold face print are written in the left column with enough space allotted in the left column between questions so that the answer to the question that will be written on the right side,

will have enough space. In the right column, after the answer, the page and paragraph numbers are listed. During the class session, the answers are starting points for class discussion. When this strategy is used during a weekly threaded discussion, students in the first group write a summary of their answers using APA citations for support. The second and third groups respond to the first group's answers and expand the discussion through including similarities and differences in their thinking. Support for their ideas is provided through APA citations.

The list-group-label strategy activates prior knowledge that the student has on the topic that has been assigned. The students are given a topic and are requested to list all the words that they know that are related to the topic. During the class, students work in groups to combine their respective lists into one, eliminating duplication. The second step is for the students to put the words into groups in which there are commonalities. When this is completed, the students then label the groups based on the group's characteristics. During class, each group shares out their lists and labels. This begins the conversation on the topic. When used during the weekly threaded discussion, each student is asked to brainstorm a list of words and place the words into categories. As the students read the text, they indicate the page and paragraph number where they have gained information regarding the words in the list group label exercise. The students in the first group then complete a summary of the understanding gained from the reading. The summaries included the words from the lists with APA citations from the text to support the ideas. The second and third groups respond to the first group's category labels, words, and the summaries by indicating similarities and differences between their lists, categories, and summaries. APA citations are used to support their ideas.

The use of the online teaching tool, Moodle would be demonstrated and the students would be given an opportunity to practice how to use it. In the syllabus, three project

assignments were included with due dates and the grading rubric. Some courses included small group projects. The small group project members were the same as the groups assigned for the discussion questions but they had the opportunity to choose their group project based on interest, experience, and prior knowledge during the first class. Opportunities were provided during the first and second classes to meet as groups in person to organize the assignment. It is believed that the wave of the future is working on group projects using technology as group members will be no longer working at the same location but at multiple locations. This form of collaboration and communication is an important skill to develop in students. Other project-based assessments require the analysis of data to solve work association problem where the student prepares a solution options in form of short and long term actions plans. Any additional resources were placed on Moodle either as websites, multimedia presentations, simulations, videos, audio sequences, or text commentaries.

The second meeting would be a class half way through the semester when a follow-up to the weekly threaded discussions would take place and any concerns or issues regarding the blended format would be addressed. Experts in the field would be invited to share their expertise in the application of the course concepts. The last meeting would be the last class of the semester where the students would present their final projects with a whole class presentation in a variety of formats.

The Results

In the Educational Leadership program, students were immersed in the new information where the new information is connected to known to make meaning from experience and information. Demonstrations were conducted using explicit action, giving a visual or auditory representation of the new learning while being clear about what students are expected to know, be able to do, or

value using various skills and strategies. Every lesson started and ended with a focus on the expected learning. Students were encouraged to reach for the highest level of performance. Rubrics were provided when large tasks were assigned and anchor charts were used to define high quality work. Students were given the responsibility for their own learning as well as opportunities to use the new knowledge when choices of how to demonstrate their understanding were provided through various means of authentic activities and projects -based assessments related to real life experiences based on interests and intrinsic motivation. Project-based assessments were used since learners need time and opportunity to use, employ, and practice their developing control of new concepts in functional, realistic, non-artificial ways. It is important to keep contexts authentic and provide many practice opportunities to use the new information. Students began with near transfer practice by using their understanding of new concepts in the weekly threaded discussions. They moved to far transfer practice as students gained confidence with the new skill or knowledge by using the course concepts in project-based assessments. Opportunities that involved whole group, small group, and individual practice were included.

Differentiation of instruction occurred when students were given the opportunity to choose from a variety of assessments which was a way to demonstrate their understanding of the knowledge they gained during the course. The blended format of the courses encouraged interaction of all students on a weekly basis as they responded to discussion questions based on their prior knowledge and understanding of the new information. Learners received "feedback" from exchanges with more knowledgeable "others." The knowledgeable "others" included their peers as well as the instructor. Students were given realistic continuous feedback that was specific about the strengths and weaknesses of the weekly threaded discussions as well as the

project-based assessments that included next steps for learning helped to expand student knowledge and application of the course concepts.

The additional assessments, three research papers for each blended course that included a presentation of the last paper during the final class were graded using a rubric. The three assessments and the rubrics to determined student acquisition of knowledge were assigned during the first class. The papers and the presentations of the students participating in the blended courses were of higher quality than the students participating in the traditional face to face courses.

The university has a standard procedure that students use to evaluate each professor at the end of the semester. Students complete a five point Liker scale for each course of 50 questions that focus on six areas. A narrative section is also available for students to write additional comments. Not all questions pertain to the curriculum, instruction, and assessment of a blended course. Data was collected from my evaluation at the end of the 2010 fall semester to help me to reflect on the design, implementation, and assessment of the blended courses from a total of 16 students. The following information helped to guide my development of the blended courses for the spring 2011 semester. Students stated that the readings were always read and that the assignments connected to the readings were helpful was 100%. The syllabus was viewed as always useful, students indicated 100%. Students evaluated that the feedback from the instructor was viewed as useful was scored 100%. When receiving a grade, the students understood why they received the grade and the discussion board was very useful were both evaluated as 100%.

Some direct comments included:

"The professor always took the time to respond to our online discussion and highlighted the positives. This was helpful to me in knowing that my responses were appropriate and on point.

She always presented us with additional thought provoking questions (no need to respond to them) related to the content of the readings."

"Each of the assignments was beneficial in helping me to understand the depth of school law and its impact on what I do on a daily basis as an educator."

"The online discussion format facilitated thoughtful and critical analysis of the concepts presented in the readings."

"The professor insured that class discussions and presentations were relevant and applicable to our daily responsibilities as educators."

I reviewed my spring course evaluations to help me make adjustments and revisions to the fall 2011 course syllabus. Thirteen students completed the evaluation and the following data collected helped me prepare for the fall 2011 semester. The discussion board was somewhat to very useful. The course information (i.e. the syllabus and policies) were somewhat to very useful. The number of hours spend per week on the class were 2-4 (15%), 4-6 (38.5%), 6-8 (15.4%), and 8 or more (30.8%). The readings were useful to always useful. The student consulted the syllabus usually to just before class. The instructor response to email/phone was 100%. The instructor's availability during office hours or by appointment was 100%. The instructor encouraged students to ask questions was evaluated as 100%. The instructor stimulated interest in the subject was 100%.

Below are listed direct quotes from students which will guide this process.

"Emails were answered very quickly, much appreciated."

"The textbook was easy to read and offered practical ideas. It was relevant to principalship.

In the Moodle format, the readings were critical to the weekly assignments. The text selected was very useful and well-chosen for gaining knowledge and applying within the answer and response format. The feedback the professor provided was also integral within the assignment, and well versed in the knowledge she presented and commented on regarding the readings and the course. "

"The course was informative and aligned well with the requirements and expectations of what one needs to learn in order to be knowledgeable and effective in an administrative position. The course parameters and the content outlined by the instructor brought concepts and practical knowledge to fruition through a variety of textbook applications and also 'real world' working exercises."

Additional data were collected through a student survey that was developed by the instructor based on survey questions that were not asked in the University instructor evaluation and that were deemed important in the research conducted on blended courses. The survey was submitted to the Institute Review Board and was approved. Surveys from fall 2010 and spring 2011 were analyzed and the findings showed several areas for consideration in planning blended courses for the spring 2012 semester. For the analysis, levels 5, 4, and 3 were combined. One statement "I feel comfortable in the on-line environment." indicated a percent of 89. "I had the ability to effectively communicate with the instructor." was a statement that resulted in a percent of 96. "The course organization was defined and implemented." had a 96% rating. The statement, "The instructor was interested in me and helpful with my academic progress." was evaluated at a total of 96%. "The instructor was an effective teacher." obtained a total of a 96%. The statement, "The organization of the material presented was well done and easy to follow.", received a rating of 100%. "The professor helped me gain valuable knowledge about the subject

matter." was determined to have a 99% rating. The statement, "I was satisfied with the availability of the instructor.", received a rating totaling 91%. "The work requirement for this class, when compared to that of other similar classes were appropriate." was given a rating of 100%.

Of particular interest were the comments that were for question 32, "What did you like most about the course?" The following are a snapshot of the responses.

"Moodle was easy to navigate."

"I could work independently."

"Working within a cohort group was valuable."

"Alternating the group assignments weekly was beneficial."

"The guest speakers who discussed the practical application of the course concepts were useful."

"Weekly threaded discussion questions could be completed within my own personal schedule."

"The course layout of meeting face to face three times and then completing the threaded weekly discussion the other weeks worked well."

"Getting peer feedback during the weekly threaded discussion was eye-opening."

"Getting a clear, cut agenda with established due dates in advanced help me plan out the semester."

"Graded assignments were clarified at class meetings."

The analysis of the data from narrative data will be used in revising the blended courses for the spring 2012 and fall 2012. The feedback included:

"Too many questions to complete on some weekly discussions."

"Blended course, not for me."

"Moodle postings overwhelming with more than 10 students in a class."

The Conclusions

Several conclusions have been made based on the review of the results from this case study. It takes time and out of the box thinking to transfer a traditionally taught class to a blended format. The redesign process needs to be conducted in small steps which included specific learning goals that were easy to manage and assess. Keeping the technology simple helps the students be more successful and provides a greater opportunity to focus on the content instead of focusing on the learning of technology. Careful attention needs to be paid to aligning the blended part of the course to the three face-to-face meetings to avoid developing a 'course and a half'. Understanding that online course activities take time to implement is necessary so that the course does not become overwhelming for the students. Placing the students in groups and assigning specific groups tasks with due dates, helped to maintain continuous, consistent, and valuable participation of all students in the threaded weekly discussions. Even those students in a traditional format who would have not participated in a class discussion, did so in the weekly threaded discussion because of the safe, secure, non-threatening environment. Students were given a rubric that indicated how the weekly threaded responses would be graded. Strong weekly responses included a discussion of the major concepts, citations from the text and outside sources for support of the thinking, personal experiences that showed application of the concepts,

questions regarding the concepts, validation of the thinking of peers, and multiple responses throughout the week. Weekly feedback from peers and from the instructor that was specific and meaningful to each student helped sustain threaded weekly discussions that were high quality, were purposeful, expanded the concepts, included citations from resources for support of ideas, and contained personal experiences as examples. Weekly discussion questions included the application of the concepts to new situations through case studies, to personal experiences within the students' school or district, and to situations where the students were in an administrative position making leadership decisions.

There are several challenges that need to be considered to make the blended courses successful. They included: 1) rethinking the course design, 2) continuing to adopting a new approach to teaching, 3) managing two learning environments (on-line and face to face), 4) integrating online and face to face instruction to avoid the course and a half syndrome, 5) keeping the technology and course design simple, 6) spending additional time in planning, designing, and implementing the blended course including providing timely, specific, meaningful feedback, and 7) preparing the students to understand their role in the blended course and how it is different from the traditional face to face course.

The advantages to the blended course format are: 1) new teaching opportunities, 2) more actively engaged students in the learning, 3) increased student learning due to more active engagement, 4) new pedagogical approaches (i.e. learner-centered practices), 5) differentiation of learning, 6) efficient use of student resources including time and money because the learning can take place at any time or any place there is computer access and the many of the course materials are on-line, 7) interaction takes place not only between the student and the instructor but also between students 8) students gain insights from multiple perspectives, 9) students drill down

deeper into concepts, and 10) documentation and assessment of the process of learning as well as the knowledge gained.

The advantages far surpass the challenges. The blended model is a way for this university to move into the 21st century in the use of technology so high quality, equitable educational opportunities are available for adult learners. The structure of the model includes meeting face to face three times a semester; assessed asynchronous, threaded weekly discussions; and three research papers with one presentation during the last class. Based on the successes this year, the next steps in my journey of continuous improvement in the development of my blended teaching and course design is to include more during reading instructional strategies that I have used during my traditional face to face teaching.

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