GETTING STARTED WITH BLENDED LEARNING

How do I integrate online and face-to-face instruction?

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Blended—or Hybrid—Learning

Blended learning is hot! Teachers at all levels are creating lessons, units, and even complete courses that combine traditional face-to-face (F2F) classroom instruction with online components such as video clips, discussion forums, and PowerPoint presentations that students access from home. It's clear that teachers are seeing advantages to both learning arrangements and want their students to benefit from both.

A lot of attention has focused on the growing popularity of online-only courses—and not just at the college level. During the 2013–2014 school year, 16 percent of K–12 students attended a fully online school with no F2F instruction, and 30 states offered fully online statewide schools (Smith, 2014). At least five states *require* each high school graduate to have taken at least one online course (Sheehy, 2012). Institutions of higher education, high schools, and middle schools are seeing how popular online learning is and are trying to catch up with the demand.

Not only are there compelling societal pressures to embrace some form of blended learning, there are also strong pedagogical arguments for doing so. It's evident that many students across the United States are demonstrating the possibilities of online learning outside of school as they curate their own inquiry paths: reading and writing many minutes per day on a screen, writing over 100 text messages

per day, and reading and writing hundreds of words per day on social networking sites (Pew Research Center, 2015). It's no wonder teens report being more comfortable writing in online environments than they are in other media (Applebee & Langer, 2013).

Due to a combination of pedagogical, political, technological, and economic factors, more teachers than ever before are confronted with the challenge of moving at least some of their instruction online. And this trend includes me! For the past 15 years, in books and articles, I have chronicled the adventures of teachers all over the world who are using breakthroughs in technology to craft new and exciting teaching strategies and assessments. A few years ago, I found myself in the position of needing to redesign some of my own college classes as hybrid courses. I had to quickly get up to speed but was not sure where to begin! I have gone on to teach hybrid courses almost every semester, including methods courses for undergraduates, research courses for doctoral students, and a first-year English composition course mandated for all majors at my university. I enjoy facilitating blended learning so much that I would find it difficult to go back to completely F2F teaching.

The feedback I have gotten has been impressive. Most of my students go on to become middle school and high school teachers, and I enjoy hearing about the elements of hybrid instruction they have incorporated into their own teaching, with positive outcomes for their own students. For example, one of my former students, Randy Rininger, employs a different hashtag phrase (such as #Mockingbird or #Hamlet)

for each piece of literature his high school students study. He has noticed that students tweet on the weekends and at all hours using the hashtag phrase, even when they were studying ancient Greek mythology! Another former student, Angie DiAlesandro, has her high school students take part in a plethora of online activities. She writes, "For a writing-intensive English project, my students create websites using Google Sites. The students use hyperlinks, site maps, image embedding, and other digital tools to complete the project. I use my Google account to leave comments on each individual page to provide feedback. I pair up each student with a partner, and they use GoogleDocs to collaborate on every major writing assignment. Students use the shared documents to provide and receive feedback. This has increased accountability and revision in my classroom."

The purpose of this book is to provide a quick synopsis of the best ideas I found to make the most of blended instruction. I believe the ideal person to speak to novices about teaching online is someone who was recently a novice himself. It's my hope to provide useful information for those of you who are excited about getting started with hybrid learning as well as those of you who are wary of the whole endeavor. A note about terminology—there are various definitions of hybrid and blended learning. In this book I use them interchangeably to describe any learning experience that is structured to be delivered partially online and partially in an F2F environment.

Although my own hybrid teaching experience has been at the college level, the process of examining course content

for ways to match different portions of it with the delivery model that suits it best is essentially the same. The examples and applications included in this book are usable for teachers of grades 4–12 and beyond. I provide some snapshot descriptions of engaging online assignments and assessments to help you navigate the possibilities of teaching and learning in a blended environment. Once you begin, I predict you'll become accustomed and even addicted to the responsive capabilities of a classroom that is 24/7—a classroom that never sleeps.

Where to Begin

When you take up the challenge of moving some of your F2F instruction online, there are several questions that you will need to answer. This section provides these questions as well as some of the answers that I've come up with as I've taught hybrid courses.

- Why do I want to make my lesson, unit, or course a hybrid?
- What hardware and software do I need?
- What is a learning management system, and how do I choose one?
- What are typical experiences that students will have in hybrid environments?