Chapter 28
Blended Course Design:
Where's the Pedagogy?

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ABSTRACT

Blended or hybrid course design is generally considered to involve a combination of online and classroom activities. However defining blended courses solely based on delivery mode suggests there is nothing more to a blended course than where students meet and how they use technology. Ultimately there is a risk that blended courses defined in this way will not utilize effective strategies that have proven to improve learning for students. This study investigates pedagogical strategies or designs that have reported success in higher education coursework as published in articles that address blended pedagogy. A qualitative meta-interpretive analysis identified eight themes: definitions of blended design, meetings for the learner, online priority, technology with a purpose, focused e-interactions, active learning, distribution of time, pedagogical chunking, and outliers and omissions.

INTRODUCTION

Blended or hybrid courses have been adopted by institutions of higher education as a strategy to reduce classroom use, increase learner engagement, and increase utilization of information technology (Snart, 2010). The US National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT) set the standard for adoption of alternative course delivery models through course redesign models (see http://www.thencat.org/PlanRes/R2R_ModCrsRed.htm) yet the parameters of hybrid or blended courses are broad and the terms used interchangeably blurring the meaning. *Hybrid learning* typically refers

to multiple and distinct instructional modes that combine to produce an instructional sequence. This might involve combinations of classroom lectures, online tutorials, workshops, research, etc. Such modes may be intentional or optional, selected by the learner or directed by the curriculum, and occur in multiple locations with or without the interaction of peers. *Blended learning* has come to mean a combination of face-to-face learning with technology-delivered experiences/instruction that are integrated so the learner experiences a 'blend' as opposed to isolated experiences in different modes but not connected. In this format students work in a classroom, or extend their work

online then return to the classroom closing a loop of interaction and learning. These experiences are 'blended' so that learning is connected and integrated by design. Hybrid courses segment learning experiences rather than integrate them as do blended courses. In this sense, hybrid courses are closer to NCAT's Supplemental Model of course design where little changes in the classroom and online experiences are extras rather than requirements.

It is the author's contention that blended courses offer an affordance not possible through classroom only, 100% online, or supplemental courses. What does a well-designed blended course look like? Do common features in blended courses exist? What is effective blended pedagogy? This study attempts to articulate those characteristics of blended courses that contribute to an effective pedagogical approach.

PEDAGOGICAL ORGANIZATION IN BLENDED COURSES

This study builds on the author's previous work regarding blended course "best" practices (McGee & Reis, 2012). Best practice guides for blended learning are readily available from different countries, various institutions, and from a variety of businesses. The term "best" implies only one way to accomplish something well, and that is not the case with blended pedagogy. Effective *practice* is a more accurate descriptor. McGee and Reis (2012) analyzed effective practices for blended course design and found while many research-based recommendations are available, there is little articulation of *pedagogical* strategies to inform course design. Without understanding the unique pedagogy of a blended courses, it is difficult to design. McGee and Reis (2012) use the following definition to better communicate the essential components of a blended design:

Blended course designs involve instructor and learners working together in mixed delivery modes, typically face-to-face and technology mediated, to accomplish learning outcomes that are pedagogically supported through assignments, activities, and assessments as appropriate for a given mode and which bridge course environments in a manner meaningful to the learner.

No clearly articulated *pedagogical* models exist to guide course design, in spite of reported success and student preference for the blended delivery mode. Picciano (2009) believes we know so little about this delivery system because there is no taxonomy or commonly accepted framework that provides a foundation for critical study. "One school's blended is another school's hybrid, or another school's mixed-mode" (p.8). The lack of a coherent framework based on effective practices contributes to the ill-defined nature of a blended course. The metaphor of hybrid car versus integrated power systems illustrates the dilemma. Turning 'on' one mode while another mode is 'off' may be efficient and effective, however, such an approach is essentially different from an approach where there is no discernable segregation between power systems. In a learning context, a hybrid approach may be effective and appropriate for some courses, but hybrid is essentially different from a blended approach.

Khan (2007) alludes to five pedagogical designs in his dimensions of the blend:

1. Blending offline and online learning;
2. Blending self-paced and live, collaborative learning;
3. Blended structured and unstructured learning;
4. Blending custom content with off-the-shelf content;
5. Blending learning, practice, and performance report (p. 7).

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