Chapter 45
Blended for Student Engagement and Retention:
The Case of Cinema and Visual Culture and Healthy Lifestyle Studies

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ABSTRACT

Facetiously described as the "third generation" of distance learning, blended learning is now the new kid on the block in the deployment of technology to support teaching and learning. Its versatility as a pedagogical strategy for creating learner-centered instruction lies in the capacity to exploit the potentials of both the traditional face-to-face instruction and online learning modality in order to provide students with multiple pathways of learning. Yet, developing a blended course to take advantage of these duo capabilities is a monumental challenge for faculty. This chapter presents an analysis of approaches and models employed by faculty at Northern Arizona University to develop and deliver two blended courses as part of the institution's strategy of using technology to enhance undergraduate student engagement and retention. The analysis shows that a multimodal approach that infuses technologies and media and a proactive institutional policy in favor of blended learning, coupled with strategic faculty development, provides the best pathway to developing robust blended courses that are truly learner-centered.

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INTRODUCTION

Blended learning is the new darling of higher education. Blogs, conferences and scholarship on teaching and learning strongly emphasize the (almost) unbelievable benefits blended learning offers. Higher education institutions worldwide are also extolling the virtues of this most recent development of online learning, almost without discretion as to its appropriate pedagogical applications. As is often true with any trend, blended learning in many cases is being implemented 'willy-nilly' with very little rhyme or reason.

Often defined as the intentional and complementary merging of online and face-to-face learning into one harmonious whole, blended learning certainly has much to offer. The potential advantages of well-designed blended courses are significant: students demonstrate better performance in blended courses compared to those in either fully online or face-to-face classes (US Department of Education, 2009). In that they combine the strengths of both online and face-to-face courses, blended courses deliver improved outcomes and increased student satisfaction (Zhao, Lei, Yan, Lai, & Tan, 2005; Dziuban, Hartman, & Moskal, 2010). And blended learning synthesizes several increasingly recognized approaches such as learner-centered teaching, active and collaborative learning, and social constructivist learning. As such, blended learning initially appears to have no faults, no flaws or weaknesses.

However, whereas the empirical literature clearly demonstrates the superior learning experience offered by blended courses, the design of blended courses presents a formidable challenge to faculty who may not be experienced with this format. When executed properly, blended delivery leads to optimal learning. But the challenge lies in proper design and execution of blended courses. Faculty are often ill-equipped to succeed in this modality, and there are other contextual factors which determine whether a blended course will function well to maximize the learning potential in that course.

To delineate these determining factors, we examine what the contemporary studies demonstrate about blended learning; then we analyze exemplary cases of blended learning at Northern Arizona University. We then discuss lessons learned from poorly executed blended courses, drawing conclusions regarding the required contextual factors for effectively designed and delivered blended courses. The analysis illustrates the centrality of a proactive institutional policy in favor of blended learning coupled with strategic faculty development in providing the best pathway to developing robust blended courses that are truly learner-centered.

BLENDED LEARNING THROUGH THE SCHOLARLY LENSES

The recent avalanche of scholarly literature on blended learning is indicative of the centrality that this pedagogical model has attained in the discourse on teaching. It also gives a false impression that this teaching approach has been late in coming. A scrutiny of literature, however, suggests that a "Johnny-come-lately" nomenclature for blended learning is off the mark. It ignores the fact that face-to-face instruction in combination with aspects of a non-classroom technology-mediated delivery system has been in use for the last couple of decades. A sense of recent novelty in pedagogical practices is driven largely by new pedagogical emphasis (from teacher-led to student-centered learning paradigm), new technological innovations (the internet, social media and personal computers including mobile computing devices) and new learning theories (brain-based learning and social constructivism). All these have elicited a reconsideration of traditional approaches to teaching and learning thereby contributing to a paradigm shift in higher education (Buckley, 2002; DeZure, 2000; Barr & Tagg, 1995).

It is now accepted that the platform that has provided the node for the evolution of these new teaching and learning models is the online