The Hybrid Online Model: Good Practice

A hybrid approach to online learning offers important lessons for institutions entering the online arena

By **Margie Martyn**

The growth in online education in American colleges and universities continues at an astounding rate. The International Data Corporation predicts that by 2005, 90 percent of all higher education institutions will have e-learning programs.[1] E-learning is a subset of distance learning that uses audio, video, and computer delivery modes. Distance learning, which can be described as any learning setting where faculty and students are physically separated, encompasses a broad category that spans a range from low-tech correspondence courses through high-tech delivery options. E-learning provides nontraditional adult students, who are juggling full-time employment and family responsibilities, an opportunity to leverage the new technologies of the Internet to achieve the skills they need to stay competitive in an increasingly digital job market.

Colleges and universities are responding to pressures from a range of forces to move into the delivery of courses via online methods. Many institutions find it difficult to enter the distance learning arena because of resource constraints or restrictive mission statements. This critical connection to mission has been emphasized by accrediting organizations that evaluate the relevance of the distance learning program to the institution's mission during the accreditation review.[2]

Baldwin-Wallace College, a small liberal arts college in suburban Cleveland, Ohio, developed and implemented a successful hybrid online model that serves institutional needs and also follows the paradigm of "The Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education"[3] developed almost 20 years ago, updated specifically to target the new communication and information technologies being used in higher education.[4] The hybrid online model employs the best characteristics of online education and the interactivity that typically characterizes face-to-face classroom instruction.

The Hybrid Online Model

The model was developed two years ago, in response to a variety of requests from nontraditional adult students. Three professors agreed to transform their traditional face-to-face courses to online courses, understanding that the two delivery methods were different and that courses needed to be significantly adapted to succeed in the online environment. Facing a college culture that was adverse to distance learning, the team developed the hybrid online model to ensure the college's mission, "a quality education with a personal touch,"
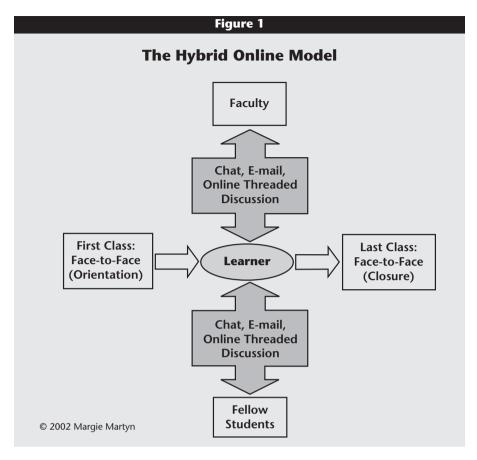
would be upheld. Approaches to developing a distance learning program vary, but should reflect the culture of the institution. For example, a Florida institution offers a variety of online options including a face-to-face class that uses technology to augment the class, online classes with no face-to-face contact, and courses that meet somewhere in the middle.[5] The challenge is to find the optimal mix of online and face-to-face instruction that will leverage the major advantage of asynchronous learning (any time, any place), while still maintaining quality faculty-student interaction.

This type of hybrid model has gained increasing acceptance in the business arena under the banner of "blended learning."[6] Several definitions of blended learning exist, including the use of multiple technology modes, combining pedagogical approaches, or the blending of instructional technology with face-to face student and instructor interaction. A two-year research study conducted by Thompson Learning included 128 learners from both industry and higher education. The group using the blended curriculum (consisting of both online and face-to-face instruction) performed tasks with 30 percent more accuracy and 41 percent faster than the online-only group.[7]

During the past two years, the three professors taught a total of eight classes using the hybrid online model. This learner-centered model emphasizes the dynamic nature of faculty-student interaction as well as student-student interaction. See Figure 1 to view a visual representation of the model.

First Class: Face-to-Face

The initial face-to face meeting familiarizes the students with the technology and provides the opportunity to create a sense of community that will continue throughout the course. During this four-hour session, students are introduced to the course management software that will be used as part of the course. The software has all the features required for interactivity, including the ability to post course content material, instructional links to other resources on the Internet, online assessments, and computer-mediated communication tools.

Figure 1

The Hybrid Online Model

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These tools, which include e-mail, synchronous chat, and asynchronous online threaded discussion tools, provide a means for communication to occur electronically. Synchronous chat occurs on a specified schedule when the instructor and students meet online at the same time, whereas online threaded discussion occurs whenever the instructor or student chooses to post responses to online threaded discussion topics. The students are given the opportunity to use each tool through the hands-on practice of sending the instructor and other students e-mail, posting a new thread to the online discussion board and replying with a good-quality post, and participating in a chat.

Feedback from the students indicates that this hands-on practice is critical to their success. The students also receive quick tip sheets to take home with them, and are shown how to download course materials from home.

The course instructors usually provide refreshments for the class, at their own expense, so that the class members have the opportunity to socialize and start to build a feeling of community. The first class presents the outline of the course, learning outcomes, assessments, and projects. Instructors stress that taking an online course is not easier, only more convenient. The students are also given the opportunity to practice an online assessment (quiz) so that when the time comes to take a real one, some of the technology-related anxiety is alleviated.

Building a sense of community in this first face-to-face meeting has resulted in a near 100-percent completion rate in the hybrid online courses. In the eight hybrid courses offered, with a total enrollment of 107 students, only one student failed to persist in the course. Retention has continued to be an issue in many distance learning programs, but personal touch and ongoing technical support may have a positive impact. Student feedback on this initial face-to-face class has been extremely favorable. One student reported, "I was very apprehensive about taking an online class, but after this orientation, I feel ready to go!" Another student indicated a similar sentiment: "I was afraid that I didn't have the computer

skills necessary to be successful, but after practicing the chat and e-mail functions I feel a lot better."

E-mail

Instructors and students communicate regularly through e-mail. The course management system has an internal e-mail function that allows faculty and students to e-mail the entire group or selected members. Both faculty and students use this feature throughout the class. Students indicate that this is one of their favorite features of the software. Whereas traditional students' e-mail accounts can often be found on the campus Web page, nontraditional adult students often use an alternative e-mail address. Communication can often be difficult, but using the course management software, the student can simply go into the e-mail area and e-mail the entire class, the instructor, or selected members.

Chat

Each week, the students participate in a one- or two-hour synchronous chat with the instructor to clarify course concepts. This constructive, interactive exchange of ideas has been dubbed "the missing link in online instruction" because the instructor engages students through posing thought-provoking questions.[9] To prepare for the chats, the students are expected to read the text, review a chat outline, and take an online quiz. These preparations ensure that the chat time is used efficiently, motivate the student to stay current, and provide an additional opportunity for students to interact with course content.

Based on the lessons learned, the instructors have implemented several practices. For example, the instructor types in all capital letters. "Netiquette," or proper etiquette on the Web, would normally indicate that typing in capital letters denotes yelling, but this procedure helps students follow the instructor's questions more easily. When responding to a question, a student can indicate that he or she still needs more time by typing "…" to let the instructor and other students know they should wait before continuing with another question or response. To use time efficiently, the instructors will often ask several students to start preparing answers and then call on each in order. Parentheses ( ) are used for side conversations. While one student is preparing a response, the instructor can communicate to another student, for instance, by typing (Tom, you are his follow-up).

Through the software, the chats can also be archived, downloaded, and printed at a later time. Students earn points for participating in the chat and for being prepared. The faculty members have found a way to maintain organization, yet enable very active participation during the chat time.

Online Quizzes

Weekly online quizzes provide the opportunity for students to test their understanding of the material. They also provide an incentive to stay current with the reading assignments. The online assessments are timed and programmed so that the student can only take each quiz once. The student obtains instant feedback on which questions were answered incorrectly and receives correct responses. This immediate feedback helps the student review difficult material before the chat begins. Another option allows the student to take the online quiz several times, with alternate questions being selected from a test bank.

Asynchronous Online Threaded Discussion

The asynchronous discussion board lets the students post technical and content-oriented questions, clarify assignments, and build community. Some threads, such as technical issues, continue throughout the course, while others begin and end on a weekly basis, targeted specifically at course content. Intricate or challenging concepts can be analyzed and examples can be posted to clarify.

Instructors require students to post their own examples, which helps ensure that they understand the material and are ready to progress in the course. A minimum number of posts are required for each student to earn discussion points. Only good-quality posts that show careful thought earn points.

Students' feedback to the discussion threads has been extremely positive. A student stated, "When I first learned I had to post, I saw it as another pain in the neck—now I'm addicted! I log on every day to see what people are writing." It is common to have more than 100 posts per week in a class of 15 students. The posts allow students to apply course material to their own work situations and find current situations in the news that relate to course content.

Student perceptions of the online threaded discussion component, based on an online survey, appear in Table 1. This 10-question perception survey was completed by a convenience sample of 31 students in two sections of a distance learning course. The survey was posted in the course management software after the final grades for the class were compiled, and 100 percent of the students completed the survey. This participation reflects the sense of commitment and community established in the hybrid online course.

Last Class: Face-to-Face Final Exam

The students come to campus one more time to take the final exam. The issue of testing online and ensuring that the actual student is taking the exam has been a concern for administrators and faculty, and is a point for evaluation in an accreditation review.[10] Along with addressing this concern, this last class provides an opportunity for closure. Students can see the faculty member one more time to resolve problems. The class also provides a logistical benefit in that it allows the instructor to return any projects or assignments that could not be returned electronically. The other benefit is that some students may feel more comfortable giving feedback or asking questions face-to-face. This meeting gives those students one more opportunity to do so. The combination of elements has resulted in a positive experience for both students and instructors.

Learning Outcomes

The faculty members who taught the courses reported that students in the distance learning courses achieved learning outcomes at a level equal to or higher

Table 1

Survey of Student Perceptions of Online Threaded Discussion*

	Average
1. Participation increased score on final exam	3.57
2. Participation improved quality of course project	4.07
3. Participation increased total course points	4.64
4. Participation improved course grade	4.29
5. Participation increased understanding of content	4.21
6. Participation increased understanding of technical aspects	3.93
7. Participation increased feeling of community	4.07
8. Participation increased interaction with instructor	4.64
9. I enjoyed participation in online threaded discussion	4.64
10. Online threaded discussions should be used again for this course	4.86

* Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Unsure, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

than the traditional face-to-face classes. As a part of the approval process through Curriculum Review, the major course projects for all courses offered in the first semester were assessed by outside assessors using a blind-review process. The scores for projects in the distance learning classes averaged between 10 and 12 percent higher than those written by students in the traditional lecture format. In interviews, each faculty member reported that projects produced by the distance learning students were superior. One faculty member responded, "All three of the projects produced by this class [distance learning] were superior to projects produced by the traditional format. The reason for this is obvious. I was involved in the learning process on a daily basis."

Feedback from Students

Perceptions of students during the past two years have been extremely positive. To date, 107 students have enrolled in the eight hybrid online courses. Students were asked to complete a 70-question survey covering the areas of student satisfaction, perceptions of learning outcomes, technical difficulties, faculty teaching methods, and lessons learned. There was a 90-percent response rate from students who were asked to complete the surveys after the course was

completed. The surveys were distributed and returned via e-mail. Excerpts from the survey include the following comments by students related to their participation in the hybrid online courses:

"This course worked well as an online course, and I feel that we went over the material adequately."

"It was nice to stay at home and not be on campus."

"It was a pleasure to receive feedback as quickly as we did, most often in the same day or less. It allowed for a smooth progress toward learning the material."

"The online chat sessions helped me with learning the course material."

"I really enjoy the discussion board format. It's really a great way to see how concepts can be applied at work!"

Feedback from Faculty

Although many of the comments from the faculty were positive, they also had reservations and issues of importance to be considered when implementing an online program. The main factors that impacted their success included comfort with the technology, especially familiarity with the course management system, and having a fluid and less structured teaching style. Professional development and ongoing support were thought to be key issues.

Responses to the question of whether

the online hybrid model required more or less time were mixed. One professor thought the model required more time than traditional teaching, while the other two thought the time was about the same, only the time periods were shorter and more frequent with the online hybrid format.

The faculty members reported that they needed to develop alternative methods of determining whether a student understood the course content. One faculty member indicated, "The online version of the 'deer in the headlights' look is shown in the way a student responds in the chat. Instead of hearing vocal stammering, I see a lot of written stammering!" Another faculty member commented, "Ill-prepared students cannot hide in an online chat like they may be able to do in a traditional class." All three of the faculty members reported that they had more contact with students in the online classes than in the traditional face-to-face classes.

The three faculty members reported being willing to teach another hybrid course. The college has continued to offer two hybrid online courses each semester with plans to double that number in the following year. All three instructors recommended that other faculty consider teaching a hybrid online course. Their perception was that the benefits of teaching an online class outweighed the negative aspects. The three faculty members have continued to improve their content and instructional materials for their respective courses.

Good Practice

The online hybrid model illustrates how the components of good practice can be incorporated to create an effective student-centered learning environment. See Table 2 for a matrix depicting an analysis of the hybrid online model and good practice.[11] These seven components are critical quality indicators.

Good Practice Encourages Contact between Students and Faculty

Quality student-faculty contact is an important factor in student motivation. Faculty-student interaction may impact learners' persistence and satisfaction in

Table 2						
Matrix for the Seven Principles of Good Practice						
	First Class Face-to-Face	**E-mail**	**Chat**	**Online Quizzes**	**Online Threaded Discussion**	**Last Class Face-to-Face**
Student-faculty contact	x	x			x	x
Student-student collaboration	x	x			x	x
Active learning	x		x	x	x	x
Prompt feedback		x	x	x	x	
Emphasize time on task			x			
Communicates high expectations					x	
Respects diverse talents					x	

distance learning courses. Distance learning students are more likely to find their interaction with the instructor a factor in determining their overall satisfaction with a course than do traditional classroom students. The hybrid online model encompasses both face-to-face contact in the first and last classes, and extensive computer-mediated communication through the use of extensive e-mail, weekly synchronous chat, and asynchronous online threaded discussion.

Good Practice Develops Reciprocity and Cooperation among Students

Interaction between and among students provides a valuable form of interaction for many learners, but often has been ignored in distance education. Computer-mediated communication can be used to facilitate collaboration among students as peers and teachers as learners, and also to incorporate outside specialists who can add a valuable dimension to the learning. Many students seek an online group-learning environment because they enjoy collaboration with other students.

The adult students appreciate the creation of a learning environment that exposes them to different points of view, lets them express and explore their own views, and supports them in formulating their own opinions. This venue allows learners to apply their knowledge to problem solving while stimulating critical thinking, providing the outcome that educators strive to achieve through using discussion as a learning strategy. Once students start to interact with other group members, they quickly discover that an online learning environment can be rich and personal. Students typically find that they are drawn into the subject matter of the class much more deeply than in a traditional course because of the discussions in which they become involved. The hybrid model fosters collaboration in the initial face-to-face meeting, continuing throughout the course.

Good Practice Uses Active Learning Techniques

Active participation in the educational environment is a critical component of the learning process. Often the best learning is accomplished through the active involvement of students: "Distance educators are challenged to provide interactive opportunities within a distance learning context. Active, collaborative participation in the educational environment is a critical component of the learning process."[12] This principle aligns with the constructivist learning theory, which holds that learners ultimately construct their own knowledge based on personal experience. Students who participate in integrated lessons using discussion groups as a component engage in more constructivist learning and may exhibit deeper thought through written communication.

Through online threaded discussion, students can view other students' answers and learn through the exposure to multiple perspectives. This exposure benefits the students because they can combine new opinions with their own and create a solid foundation for learning. Discussion-based teaching methods can be effective for long-term retention of knowledge and for higher-level cognitive and affective objectives because students actively engage in the process. Internet technology has the power to transform education from a passive, one-way approach to a meaningful interactive learning experience that can connect students and teachers all over the world.

Good Practice Gives Prompt Feedback

The hybrid model supports prompt feedback through the use of e-mail, the digital drop box for assignments, and the weekly chat. Asynchronous discussion boards provide faculty the opportunity to respond to students at any time. All learners need feedback, and feedback is frequently mentioned as a concern of online learners.

Instructor immediacy was the singular predictor of affective and cognitive learning in a study of threaded discussion in the online classroom.[13] Faculty can provide rapid and continuous feedback to students rather than having to wait to collect and grade assignments. When assignments are submitted via the digital drop box, faculty can add comments and drop the assignment back to the student imme-

diately. This type of learner-centered feedback provides students with the opportunity to incorporate the faculty feedback into the current study session.

Good Practice Emphasizes Time on Task

Teaching strategies that help students learn at home or work can save students time and money. Online education allows educational content to be delivered to students wherever and whenever they can log on to the Internet. This flexibility saves time for students with full-time jobs, family responsibilities, or who reside in remote locations. By saving time on travel, students can use that time to interact with course content.

This efficient use of technology will benefit students in their current work situations as well as in future endeavors. In addition to the educational potential of online discussion, adult students find value in its use. With exposure to computer-mediated communication increasing in the workplace and in daily life, it is not surprising that working adults find value in the computer-mediated learning environment.

Good Practice Communicates High Expectations

The hybrid model provides an excellent venue for instructors to emphasize the high demands of taking the online class during the first face-to-face class meetings. The first class meeting gives instructors the opportunity to thoroughly discuss the learning outcomes, assessments, and projects with students.

Communication using asynchronous postings to the discussion forum allows the learner to reflect on the contributions of others and construct a thoughtful, well-prepared response before posting to the forum. Outside reference materials can be integrated and synthesized with course content. As a result, the quality of the discussion may reflect a higher level of scholarly discourse than in many face-to-face classes.[14]

Good Practice Respects Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning

The students in online courses begin the program with a wide range of technology skills and backgrounds, which increases the importance of consistent, simple, and user-friendly materials. The first face-to-face meeting allows the instructor to get all students to a minimum technology skill-level to ensure success in the online class.

Computer-mediated communication can benefit the student who does not feel comfortable expressing his or her opinions in the classroom. The opinions of these students can benefit the entire class. Asynchronous communication means that the extroverted personalities may leave more messages than quieter members; however, they cannot dominate completely as in a face-to-face situation. Quieter members still have the opportunity to formulate answers and contribute. This provides students with various personalities and learning styles the ability to be effective contributors. According to Berge and Collins,[15] "As a result, the lack of social cues and the asynchronous nature of the medium afford those with physical limitations or personal reticence the possibility of participating fully and equally in communicative activities within a mainstream environment."

Conclusion

The hybrid model, which encompasses a first class face-to-face meeting, weekly online assessment and synchronous chat, asynchronous online threaded discussion, e-mail, and a last class face-to-face exam, provides an excellent way for institutions to enter the online arena and still ensure quality courses. This model demonstrated effectiveness for adult learners at a small liberal arts college for the past two years. Based on this success, the college plans to increase the number of hybrid online courses offered in the next year. With the pressure to enter the online education arena, the hybrid online model may be an excellent fit for many institutions. *e*

Endnotes

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