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HYBRID LEARNING: BALANCING FACE-TO-FACE AND ONLINE CLASS SESSIONS

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Abstract

This paper raises the question: What is the appropriate proportion for face-to-face and online sessions when courses are taught in a hybrid learning format? Proportions of online and face-to-face sessions in six institutions that utilize hybrid learning format were reviewed. The review indicates a loosely defined proportion between the two formats, with ratios varying from 75% online and 25% face-to-face to 13% online and 87% face-to-face. The paper proposes three stakeholders: students, professors, and institutions that need to be considered to determine the proportion of online and face-to-face sessions. The paper highlights some attractive features of hybrid teaching format with 50% each for online and face-to-face. The paper concludes by recommending future research to consider the concerns of the primary stakeholders.

Keywords: Hybrid learning, blended learning, distance learning, asynchronous teaching, synchronous teaching

Introduction

E-Learning is gaining popularity (Hentea, Shea, & Pennington, 2003; Driscoll, 2002; Kiser, 2002); many universities have adopted online courses and many are experimenting with them (Rosbottom, 2001). E-Learning is not however without its share of problems. These problems include: a failure to attract students (MacLeod, 2006), courses being viewed as inferior by employers (The Atlanta Journal constitution), online learning not solving new problems (Chronicles of Higher Education), a lack of staff training to teach and support the courses, inadequate course design, a lack of software, improper use of emerging technologies, inappropriate student selection and flawed methods for assessment (Hentea, Shea, & Pennington, 2003). Does hybrid learning (sometimes referred to as blended learning) resolve these issues? Hybrid learning was found to be favored by both students and professors over face-to-face (traditional in-class sessions) and completely online courses (Garnham and Kaleta, 2002; Kaleta and Garnham, 2001). What proportion of online learning is appropriate?

Four E-learning types have been proposed by the Center for Tele-Information at Technical University of Denmark: 1) E-learning without presence and without communication, E-learning where the teacher and the students never meet physically, and where no dialogue between students or students and the teacher takes place; 2) E-learning without presence and with communication, E-learning where the teacher and the students never meet physically, but where the dialogue between the participants is supported by use of IT based communication services. 3) E-learning combined with occasional presence, E-learning where parts of the learning takes place in a class room and parts of the learning is done elsewhere, where the students work on a computer on their own – e.g. at home or at their place of work. and 4) E-learning used as a tool in class-room teaching, E-learning where all teaching is done in a

classroom, and where computers are used as a learning tool (Falch, 2004). Hybrid learning belongs to the third classification: E-learning combined with occasional presence.

Hybrid courses are courses where a portion of the learning activities have been moved online and time traditionally spent in the classroom is reduced but not eliminated (Garnham and Kaleta, 2002). By providing part of the learning in the traditional classroom format hybrid learning takes an evolutionary approach to online learning, where students still use the familiar classroom format. It is important to give students adequate orientation about this new learning format (Garnham and Kaleta, 2002).

The hybrid format is often not clear for students; one of the most common questions that arise about hybrid learning is: How much of the course should be online (Aycock, Garnham, and Kaleta, 2002)? This paper considers this question by reviewing the proportion of hybrid courses in six institutions. Our specific research question is: What is the appropriate proportion for face-to-face and online sessions when courses are taught in a hybrid learning format?

Hybrid Course Proportion Review

Proportions of hybrid courses in the six institutions are shown below:

University of Wisconsin System Hybrid Course Project (Kaleta and Garnham, 2001)

University of Wisconsin System conducted several hybrid courses in their project; a few of them are summarized below:

- An Advanced Nursing Practice Intervention course was taught, where students conducted critical discussions related to literature. This course was conducted with 70% of the sessions in-class and the remaining 30% online.
- A business course for undergraduate students was conducted with 70% of the sessions in a face-to-face format and 30% of the sessions online. Students in this course were involved in online discussions and field activities.
- A Cross cultural study of religion was offered for undergraduate and graduate students. In this course, students were engaged in online forum discussions and the course was conducted with 70% face-to-face and 30% of the sessions online.
- An Undergraduate Management analysis course was conducted, where students engaged in an online forum discussion and completed online quizzes. The course was conducted with 75% face-to-face and 25% online format.
- An undergraduate course on site and public course. Students had access to streaming audio and video files that were used for online content and discussion. The course was conducted with 70% face-to-face and 30% online format.

Overall the University of Wisconsin System hybrid project used 70-75% face-to-face and 25-30% online format. Both professors and students positively supported the hybrid format (Kaleta and Garnham, 2001).

Baldwin-Wallace College, Cleveland, Ohio (Martyn, 2003)

Eight courses over a two year period taught by three professors were reported by Martyn (2003). Students participated in asynchronous and synchronous online learning. Students were engaged using e-mail, synchronous chat and asynchronous online threaded discussion. The course was conducted with first and last classes in a face-to-face session, with the remainder of the sessions conducted online. With an average of sixteen sessions in a semester, the Baldwin-Wallace College proportion indicates 87% online with 13% face-to-face. Similar approaches where face-to-face format were used only on the first and last classes was reported by Knutsen, Knutsen, and Slazinski (2003).

University of Florida (http://online.fiu.edu/casonline/hybrid_what_is.html)

Courses from the College of Arts and Science are offered using hybrid learning environment. Classes are supported by WebCT and a class website. Half of the class sessions were offered online; i.e. 50% each face-to-face and online.

Babson College (<http://www3.babson.edu/>)

A hybrid MBA program is offered at Babson College. Once a month students meet in the classroom, with the remaining classes conducted online, i.e. 75% online and 25% face-to-face.

Nova Southern University (<http://www.nova.edu/>)

Nova Southern University offers several online programs in hybrid format; among them a Ph.D. program in Information Systems. Once every three months students come to the campus for a weekend face-to-face meeting. On average students spend 18 hours face-to-face for each course. With the typical 16-week semester a 3-hour credit course would have a total of 54 hours ($16 \times 3 = 54$) per semester, i.e. 33% face-to-face, with the balance, 67%, online.

Kennesaw State University (<http://www.kennesaw.edu/>)

Kennesaw State University offers several online and hybrid classes.

-- Two Psychology professors offer hybrid classes supported by WebCT. Classes are offered twice a week. The professors share the same classroom alternating face-to-face and online classes. The classes for the two professors are scheduled for the same day, same time, and same classroom. The professors share the classroom by alternating between face-to-face and online classes. For example for a class scheduled for Tuesday and Thursday, Professor "A" would use the classroom on Tuesday to teach face-to-face while the Professor "B" teaches online. The professors alternate on Thursdays, with Professor "B" using the classroom for a face-to-face session, while Professor "A" teaches online. Such innovative hybrid classroom arrangement reduces the required classroom by half. The classes are split fifty-fifty between face-to-face and online sessions.

-- An Information Systems professor offers hybrid classes supported by synchronous and asynchronous learning environments. The online classes are supported by WebCT, online forum discussions, live video, live audio, and synchronous chat. The hybrid classes are offered with 40% online and 60% face-to-face.

Discussion and Conclusions

The online and face-to-face class proportions in the six institutions under review had mixed results. It showed courses offered at 25% online and 75% face-to-face as well course offered with 13% online and 87% face-to-face. We concur with the general definition of hybrid classes as: a portion of the learning activities have been moved online without eliminating face-to-face classes. While this definition is a "catch all" definition further study is needed to assess the differences, if any, between different proportions of online and face-to-face sessions.

Barriers to successful online learning environments exist and they need to be addressed in order for hybrid environments to succeed (Sands, 2002; Cho and Berge, 2002). This paper posits that a recommendation for the proportion of online and face-to-face sessions in a hybrid format should take into consideration the concerns of the three primary stakeholders: students, professors, and institutions.

Student challenges when taking online classes include difficulty of managing the high degree of control, overburdened by the shift of responsibility and control, feeling isolated, experiencing anxiety, and difficulty of time management (Piccoli, Ahmad, and Ives, 2001). Existing research identifies three reasons why students drop out of college: 1) situational barriers, 2) dispositional barriers and 3) institutional barriers (Cross, 1981; Morgan & Tam, 1999; Simpson, 2003). Situational and dispositional barriers are related to students' life situation (family responsibility, job responsibility, cost, lack of time, etc.) and attitude (perception of the learner), respectively. Institutional barriers include inconvenient course schedule and inconvenient location. Students' concerns fo face-to-

face classes include practical issues like finding parking space when driving up to school few minutes before class begins.

Professors concerns include work load, compensation, tenure and promotion, and assessment. Typical online class workload is 2-3 times more than a face-to-face classes. The workload concern is a challenge for wide spread adoption of online courses by professors. Evaluation for tenure and promotion and compensation are based on the traditional face-to-face model; we consider the lack of new models for evaluating tenure and promotion as a challenge for wide spread adoption. Lack of standard online student performance assessment places another challenge for professors.

Institutional concerns against hybrid approaches include abandoning longstanding mission statements and resistance to technology. Higher education institutions that built reputation based on high-touch classroom model will be challenged to reverse their longstanding mission. The positive institutional motivators to adopt hybrid formats include facility shortages, competition, and attracting a diverse prospective student. Building a physical structure is capital intensive, even if the funding is available some campuses may not have the space to put more buildings; in these instances hybrid formats provide attractive alternatives that increase utilization of existing facilities. Many students, even freshman that enter college directly from high school, are encumbered by situational and dispositional barriers (Cross, 1981; Morgan & Tam, 1999; Simpson, 2003). The activities of a typical student today are not limited to school work. Adult learners already have a busy life schedule that has to be accommodated with their desire to attend school. The “flat world” may position students from around the globe as prospective students. The potential of attracting prospective students from around the globe and the competition from rival universities already providing e-Learning components presents hybrid learning as an attractive complement to face-to-face learning.

Hybrid formats that offer 50% online and 50% face-to-face classes present attractive features for all three stakeholders. Students will be able to manage situational and institutional barriers; faculty will have half the class in the traditional face-to-face format with manageable workload and allowing time to develop new models for promotion; and institutions will be able to address their facility concerns by doubling their facility utilizations. Institutions would also be able to cater to diverse prospective students.

This paper recommends future research to consider the different concerns of all stakeholders when evaluating proportions for hybrid classes.

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