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IDEAS FOR EFFECTIVE ONLINE INSTRUCTION

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Recommendations for Blended Learning Course Design

By Rob Kelly

Blended learning course design entails more than simply converting content for online delivery or finding ways to supplement an existing face-to-face course. Ideally, designing a blended course would begin with identifying learning outcomes and topics, creating assignments and activities, determining how interaction will occur, and selecting the technologies to best achieve those learning outcomes. However, a variety of constraints often affect the way blended courses are developed, which can compromise their quality. In an interview with *Online Classroom*, Veronica Diaz, associate director of the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, talked about how to avoid common mistakes in blended course design.

- **Mistake 1:** adopting an add-on model—Diaz recommends designing a blended course from scratch; however, a lack of time and resources often means that instructors will redesign existing courses. "Nine times out of 10 there are going to be pretty significant constraints, so you're likely to do this on the fly, where you will put some things online

as a supplement rather than truly having an online component that is integrated with your face-to-face component. That's when the problems really start. You end up having what they call 'a course-and-a-half,' which is a lot more than either the faculty member or students bargained for," Diaz says.

- **Mistake 2:** lack of coherence between online and face-to-face modes—The add-on model of blended course design can lead to a disconnect between the face-to-face and online modes within a blended course. When students do not see the connection between the two modes, they tend to participate less, Diaz says. When faced with constraints, instructors often "end up adding things with really little thought given to the relationship between the online and face-to-face components," Diaz says.

- **Mistake 3:** attempting direct conversion from one mode to the other—Those who are new to blended (or online) course design tend to convert content from the

face-to-face classroom without taking into account the differences between the two modes. When instructors try to convert their face-to-face lectures to the online format, the lectures often are less effective. "They don't translate well. They're not effective for students. Students do not [view or listen to lectures], because who wants to sit there and listen? There are too many distractions," Diaz says.

This is not to say that lecture capture, narrated PowerPoint, or other similar content is inappropriate. "I think short lectures that are very topically based are helpful…I think there are still a lot of folks out there who will record an entire lecture. That's not translating, that's just converting," Diaz says.

Recommendations

Diaz offers the following advice for creating a better blended course:

- **Begin with a solid foundation in online learning pedagogy and technical knowledge.** "If you are an experienced online instructor, you are much more likely to produce a much higher-quality blended course because you've been involved in all the technology-mediated types of issues that you would have come across in an online modality. So you're familiar with what can go wrong. You have something you can really build on.
  "Whenever you talk to online instructors who are moving into blended, they say, 'I'm so glad I can do this because there have been these three or four units

that I've always struggled doing online, and I would love to do them face-to-face.' They're really eager and have a really good sense of what they want to do in the classroom, which is something that the face-to-face instructor does not necessarily have the benefit of."

- **Use a modular design.** A blended course that is composed of modules or discrete chunks is easier to update as the instructor gains experience and finds ways to make incremental improvements, Diaz says.

- **Integrate the two modes.** "I think when content is properly integrated there's an interdependence between what goes on in the classroom and what goes on online. There needs to be an ahead-of-time accountability measure, such as a quiz, so that when students show up in class or when they show up online you have a way of knowing beforehand. I don't necessarily mean the day before but maybe two or three days before so that you have a chance to intervene," Diaz says. "For instance, if you're going to have some project-based work in your class and you would have had to have spent some time mastering concepts to be able to execute or apply something in the class environ-

ment, you ideally would know that a few days in advance. If they're not participating, you have a chance to do something about it.

"That implies that you're doing higher-stakes work in class than you did before, so students cannot just come and listen to you for an hour because they're going to be doing something. It's less of a transmission model, where the instructor is just lecturing and students are just listening."

- **Get help.** Take advantage of support within your institution even if you are not required to do so. Under the best circumstances you will have the time, compensation, and technical and pedagogical support to help design your blended course. In addition to general faculty development, Diaz recommends seeking a mentor within your discipline to address issues that are specific to your course content.

For more information

On November 2, Veronica Diaz will lead the Magna Online Seminar "Best Practices for Designing Successful Blended Courses." For information, see *www.magnapubs.com/catalog/best-practices-for-designing-successful-blended-courses/*. @

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