

Chapter 4: Blended Content and Assignments

Third Edition

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Questions to Ponder

- In what experiences (direct or vicarious) will you have students participate during your blended learning course? In what ways do you see these experiences as part of the assessment process? Which experiences will result in student work that you score?
- How will you present content to students in the blended learning course you are designing? Will students encounter content only in one modality (e.g., face-to-face only), or will you devise an approach in which content is introduced in one modality and elaborated upon in the other? What will this look like?
- Will there be a consistent pattern to the presentation of content, introduction of learning activities, student submission of assignments, and instructor feedback (formal and informal) in your blended learning course? How can you ensure that students experience your course as one consistent whole rather than as two loosely connected learning environments?
- How can specific technologies help you present content, provide meaningful experiences, and pitch integration to students in your blended course? With your planned technology use, are you stretching yourself, biting off more than you can chew, or just maintaining the status quo?

Content + Assignments = Modules

Having given due attention to articulating learning outcomes (Chapter 1) and designing assessments of learning (Chapter 3), it behooves us now to turn to the direct means of facilitating student learning: content and assignments (learning activities). Norberg and Jahnke (2014) situate the interplay of teaching/learning in the “European model of Didaktik (Didactical Design)” (p. 263) and note that implementations of blended learning can benefit from this model in which

teaching objectives, the plan of how to achieve those objectives in such a way that the learners are able to develop competencies and skills that the teachers have in mind, and different forms of feedback and assessment to assess the learning progress of the students (p. 263)

combine to form an “enabler” (p. 264) of learning with a particular emphasis on student-centeredness. Thus, learning activities are seen not as mere “methods to support learning” (p. 263) but as a more holistic construct.

In many face-to-face courses, students come to class to hear content and then leave class to complete their assignments which they then submit in the next class session. In blended learning courses, this process can be more confusing for students. However, if pursued with the module structure common in online teaching, blended courses can bring about higher levels of student engagement and more effective face-to-face time management.

O’Reilly and Kelly (2008) see course assignments as an extension of the assessment process and bound up with an array of possible technology-based tools, noting that it is important

to facilitate the student work in the online environment, or to provide avenues for students to submit their work to you. More online tools emerge every day, it seems, and with them come new opportunities for students to perform activities related to the learning objectives and for us to assess student performance (p. 241).

Online materials are central to a blended course’s success, and the students’ work online must be relevant to the in-class activities. Aycock, Garnham, & Kaleta (2002) in reviewing the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee’s faculty development for blended learning discovered the importance of such integration between the online and face-to-face portions of blended courses:

The project’s participants emphasized this point repeatedly. When asked, ‘What would I do differently?’ they were united in their response: ‘I’d devote more attention to integrating what was going on in the classroom with the online work.’ This was true even though the project’s faculty development sessions repeatedly emphasized the importance of connecting in-class material with out-of-class assignments. One instructor responded emphatically, ‘Integrate online with face-to-face, so there aren’t two separate courses.’ We found it impossible to stress integrating face-to-face and online learning too much (Lesson #4 section, para 2).

Students can be critical of blended instruction if they feel the face-to-face and time-out-of-class components of the course are not well integrated.

In fact, if implemented consistently, online modules provide a platform for ensuring integration of the face-to-face and online environments within blended learning courses. For instance, if students know that they can always find the details of the assignment introduced in the last class session by turning to the online modules or that they will always submit assignments via a particular online tool, students are likely to perceive the course as one consistent whole. However, it is important to remember that it is the manner of implementation, rather than any affordance of the modality itself, that will bring about this perceived consistency. As Kaminski and Currie (2008) note:

A uniform approach to presenting the units of study not only makes sense, but helps reinforce learning. A common mode of organization is a hierarchical module—sections—lessons—supportive activities approach. Within each learning activity, uniformity also helps to guide students through the content (p. 205).

Dee Fink (n.d.) observes that we can more effectively facilitate learning (face-to-face or online) when we plan for students to encounter content, participate in active experiences, and engage in sharing their personal reflections. He summarizes these ideas in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Learning activities for holistic, active learning

	GETTING INFORMATION & IDEAS	EXPERIENCE		REFLECTIVE DIALOGUE, with:	
		“Doing”	“Observing”	Self	Others
DIRECT	Primary data Primary sources	“Real Doing,” in authentic settings	Direct observation of phenomena		Dialogue (in or out of class)
INDIRECT, VICARIOUS	Secondary data and sources Lectures, textbooks	Case Studies Gaming, Simulations Role Play	Stories (can be accessed <i>via</i> : film, oral history, literature)	Reflective thinking Journaling	
ONLINE	Course website Internet	Teacher can assign students to “directly experience ____.” Students can engage in “indirect” kinds of experience online.		Students can reflect and then engage in various kinds of dialogue online.	

Having already discussed interaction in Chapter 2, we will now consider the design of learning activities in a blended learning context and then examine options for developing or adapting technology-mediated content. In both the face-to-face and online portions of a blended learning course, technologies can play supporting roles in the ways learning activities are experienced and content is encountered by students.

Technology Affordances

Technology extends the classroom walls (see Image 13) and thins the structure of courses. Experts and resources outside of the university are readily available for educators to use. For example, a psychology course directing learners to view a presentation of the Stanford Prison Experiment is much more vivid and meaningful than reading an article about the experiment alone. Technology can open doors closed by geographical distance or time.

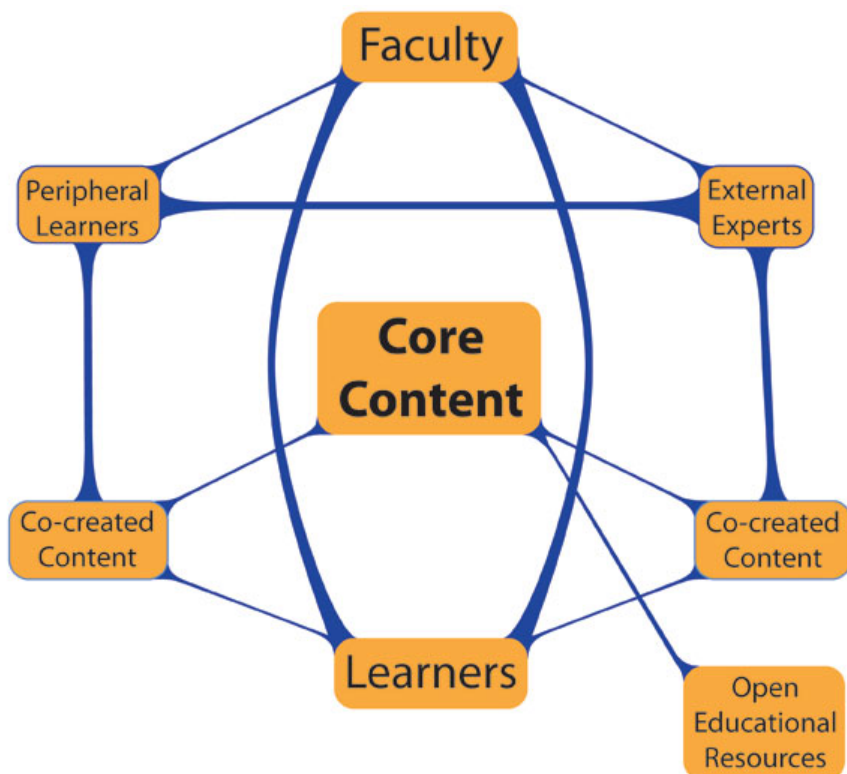


Image 13 – Extending courses

Learning Activities in Blended Learning

Littlejohn and Pegler (2007) in *Preparing for Blended e-Learning* outline five learning activity techniques based on Laurillard’s Conversational Model. They produce the following matrix (reformatted):

Table 2. Learning activity types with technology-integration ideas

Type Of Learning Activity	What Is It?	Media Forms	Technologies	Tools	Technique (How)
Assimilative	processing narrative media – managing and structuring information	lectures, DVD’s or reading texts	concept mapping, brainstorming, buzzwords, crosswords, defining,	word processor, presentation software, text, image, audio, video	CMAP , Hot Potatoes , Google, Office Products, Social Bookmarking , Blogs, Wikis, Symbaloo , The Old Reader , and other syndication tools

			mind maps, web searchtexts		
Adaptive	an environment that changes according to learner input	simulations, games	modeling	virtual worlds, models, simulations, games	RealizeIt (http://realizeitlearning.com/), Acrobatiq (http://acrobatiq.com/), Smart Sparrow (https://www.smartsparrow.com/)
Communicative	discussing	asynchronous or synchronous discussions, chats, text messages	reasoning, arguing, coaching, debate, discussion, negotiation, performance	electronic whiteboards, email, discussion boards, chat, instant messaging, voip, video conferencing, web conferencing, blogs, wikis	online bulletin boards, Skype , IM, Facebook, Social Bookmarking , Blogs, Wikis
Productive	learners producing something	creating, producing, writing, drawing, composing, synthesizing, remixing, mashups	artifact, book report, thesis, essay, exercise, journaling, literature review, multiple choice questions, puzzles, portfolio, product, test, voting	creative applications (image editing, CAD, design software) computer aided assessment tools, electronic learning environments	InDesign , Photoshop , YouTube , Google Video , Office Software, Sketch-Up , Gimp
Experiential	interactive activities that focus on problem solving	practicing, applying, mimicking, experiencing, exploring, investigating, performing	case-study, experiment, laboratory, field trip, game, role-playing, scavenger hunt	virtual lab, 3D immersive environment	Google Earth , MMORPG, Second Life

Learning Activities + Technology

As McGee and Diaz (2007) have observed, technologies are adopted more readily when cast in the “context of existing teaching and learning activities” (“Matching Pedagogical...,” para 1). Perhaps a simple framework of the traditional activities associated with teacher and learner roles is useful at this point.

Table 3. Teacher and learner activities

Teacher Role	Learner Role
Communicate	Read/listen

Assess	Present a point of view
Provide Feedback	Search/collect/analyze information
Observe	Practice
Present Information	Create
Organize Activities	Respond

Each of the educator and learner tasks can be augmented through use of different technologies. For example, educators can provide a short lecture via a podcast, and learners can respond to course materials through a blog post or through a short recording in a tool like [Jing](#). For many educators, however, the task may appear onerous or too complex. Small scale experimentation – with high payback – can be motivating. Adopting and exploring additional tools and concepts is more inviting once you've had success with certain tools.

Planning Blended Learning Activities

The use of technology for learning and instruction requires demarcation between what learners can (and should) do for themselves and what the instructor should do for learners. Traditionally, in a lecture format, the instructor provides motivation (scheduled class time) and content in pre-planned units according to the course's relation to the program of study. As information has become more public and distributed, the role of instructor as organizer and dispenser of information has shifted. Learners can readily access online lectures, articles, podcasts, and other resources to augment the information provided by the instructor.

Media have certain affordances which define their potential use. When applied to learning, certain activities can be utilized to greater effect when appropriate matching occurs between: the technology used, the learning desired, the context of use, the learner experience, the instructor experience, and the nature of content.

Creating (and Finding!) Content for Blended Learning

Tools for creating content for online learning have improved significantly over the last few years. [Articulate Presenter](#), [iSpringFree](#), [Audacity](#), [Jing](#), and [Camtasia](#) are just a few examples of content-creation tools that novice users can master in a short period of time. [Technology Tools for Student Engagement](#) is an annotated list of many online content-creation (and interaction and assessment) tools. Of course as content-creation tools enable easier production of multimedia resources, it is important for faculty and designers to ensure that all learners have equal access to content. [The [Accessible Digital Media Guidelines](#) maintained by the [National Center for Accessible Media](#) is one source of guidance in providing such access.]

While textbook publishers often provide valuable tutorials or simulations, the increased proliferation of freely available online learning resources provides an opportunity for educators to either link to or create derivative works based upon many educational resources. Projects such as MIT's [OpenCourseWare](#) initiative, [Connexions](#), [OpenLearn](#), [OERCommons](#) and others often provide excellent materials, videos, or podcasts. (For more structured guidance, you may wish to review an [annotated list of discipline-specific open content sources](#) compiled by UCF instructional designers. You might also find it useful to explore further the possibilities afforded by open educational resources (OER). The online (or print) text [Opening Up Education](#) provides a good foundation for doing so.

Finding Your Place

The prominence of social media has created an opportunity for educators to increase the level of learner-learner and faculty-learner dialogue and, indeed as noted above, extend the dialogue beyond the traditional course structure to involve outside experts and peripheral learners. Interaction can occur with content, with others around ideas/content, or simply as open discussions.

New options to create and share information have significant implications. How we as educators teach, present content, allow learners to interact with content and with each other, and how we keep content sources current

require new approaches. If we are open to combining the best of online and face-to-face courses, we may come to realize the promise of blended learning.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have considered how “learning activities,” those combinations of content and assignments designed to facilitate student learning, present particular challenges to designers of blended learning courses. Students may be uncertain how the online activities and face-to-face activities relate to each other within the blended course. Online technologies can be useful, but they introduce even more variables. Learning activities may overlap with interaction strategies and learning assessments. Design choices abound. We have examined the affordances of creating online modules as a clear anchor point for students in navigating their learning activities. In the next chapter we broaden our perspective further as we review how all the disparate parts of a blended course can come together to form one high quality learning experience for students.

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