THERE IS MUCH TALK in the news media these days about the advantages that online technology offers college professors, and how to use that technology most effectively is a near-constant topic of discussion among my colleagues. One oft-mentioned iteration of the technological classroom is the "hybrid," or "blended," course. But what do we really mean by "hybrid"?

In my experience, a hybrid course is usually composed of one online class per week plus occasional live classes scattered throughout the semester. While such a schedule might make life easier for professors, I’m not sure that approach best serves the needs of our students.

I’ve often heard that students are more willing to take part in discussions when they’re taking a course online. Well, sure: Online conversation is a passive experience where students are able to dictate the conversation on their own terms. And very often, what people say online is not what they would say in person. That might be good for a class that has stilted conversations, but the long-term ramifications can be detrimental for all types of courses and for the education of the student.

Don't get me wrong--there are many positives to "distance learning," including the ability to draw students from all over the world. But a key part of the learning process in any classroom comes with the spontaneous face-to-face conversation among students as well as between students and instructors. It's incumbent upon us as educators to graduate students who are able to communicate face to face, and that skill gets lost when you conduct classes online.

In my field of journalism, limiting classroom discussion to an online medium is detrimental not only to the classroom learning experience but also to our craft and profession. Students must be comfortable with face-to-face communication because having conversations, observing others in person, and interviewing people face to face are at the root of being a successful journalist. I know e-mail Q&A's are all the rage, but because body language plays such a major part in interviews, how can we possibly advocate such a passive approach--in journalism or any other field?

It's no wonder that students see distance learning as an attractive option, though: The generation now in college is one of texters. Every time I walk across the campus, I’m amazed by the number of students who are texting while walking. Yet you ask them to conduct a face-to-face interview for a project, and they shy away.
While electronic delivery and discussion boards are here to stay, and open huge windows of opportunity for all disciplines, we need to keep talking to each other as well. I would like to see us redefine the notion of a hybrid or blended course to a format that stresses in-person, classroom communication, yet uses online exercises to enhance that communication. How can we revise the traditional course to do that? A few ideas:

* Start a class blog. Post everything online: the syllabus, links to assigned readings, day-to-day schedules, links to outside articles of interest, observations about class discussions. Update it regularly.

* Create a continuum. My class blog is where I post updates between classes. Many professors say they do that by e-mail, which is fine. But when I tell the students to check the blog daily (including weekends) for updates, I’m doing more than just giving them the latest—I’m creating a cyber meeting place. My goal is to make the class experience part of a continuum, instead of a couple of blocks of 50 or 90 minutes twice a week. The blog subtly makes the class a part of their daily life, unlike the passive e-mail experience. It’s also more work: Blog maintenance requires active participation by professors. In most cases, I find that students buy into this cyber-meeting-place concept fairly quickly.

* Require class participation. I build on the concept of the cyber meeting place by posting discussion items on the class blog. Online participation in the blog’s comments board is required and part of the overall discussion grade, which makes up 15 to 20 percent of a student’s final course grade. I’ve had considerable success, especially when I post juicy topics. I definitely see participation from those who might not otherwise participate in a “live” discussion. Again, active participation is required of us as professors, since we need to be reading what students are saying as well as posting comments of our own.

* Help students become more comfortable with class discussions. It’s true that many students sit like statues in classrooms, declining to take part in discussions no matter the level of prompting. To be fair, we should remember that as faculty members, we come into the classroom prepped and with lecture notes in hand—yet we expect students to come up with coherent arguments on the spot. Even if they’ve done the readings, that can be tough.

A blog-discussion format that precedes a live class discussion can be helpful in that it gives students a warm-up, of sorts. If my students have been posting about an issue on the blog-comments board for a couple of days, and I come into class and start asking questions, they’re primed and ready to go with the discussion. They work off of what they have said to one another online, and we get to further the conversation even more, because in most cases the basics have already been covered. My more-reticent students are much less hesitant, and when certain students still hang back, I can point to them and say, “What about the point you made on the comments board about such-and-such? …” and prompt them with their earlier posted remarks.
That, to me, is the true definition of a **hybrid course**: Online presentation, conversations in cyber meeting halls—they all work to help students speak up in the classroom, which in turn enhances the overall mission of teaching. But the real key is active participation by the professor. Yes, it takes time and effort to maintain a blog and have conversations with students online, but the payoff is worth it: We end up with student-citizens who are able to actually communicate in a face-to-face environment.