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By: Mary Bart in Distance Learning Administration, Online Education

Blended learning, which combines face-to-face and online learning activities into a single course, has experienced tremendous growth during the past few years. A blended learning course (also called a hybrid course) can satisfy students’ need for flexibility, as well as alleviate overcrowded classrooms. However, the biggest benefit to a well-designed blended course could be a much improved teaching and learning experience.

It’s for this reason that blended learning, grounded in sound pedagogical theory, is creating converts among faculty and administrators alike. One such convert is Ike Shibley, associate professor of chemistry at Penn State University-Berks, who says the students in his blended courses are not only more engaged when they come to class, but are performing better on their final exams than his previous, traditional classes.

In the recent online seminar, 10 Ways to Improve Blended Learning Course Design, Shibley provided a blueprint to help faculty transform their face-to-face courses into hybrid courses, as well some of the communication tools he finds effective. Shibley’s strategies for creating a blended course are:

1. **Start with Learning Goals**: Your first thought should not be “what portions of my course can I move online?” But rather, “What do I want my students to learn, and how will I know they’ve learned it?”

2. **Create Ways for Students to Learn Before Class**: Assign work that addresses the lower levels of Bloom’s taxonomy prior to class so students have some exposure to the topic.

3. **Create Ways for Students to Learn In Class**: When you’re face-to-face, build on the knowledge gained through pre-class assignments with more active learning exercises in class.

4. **Create Ways for Students to Learn After Class**: Activities include short writing assignments, homework problems, and online quizzes – anything that encourages meaningful interaction with the material.

5. **Use Multiple Forms of Communication**: Students need to feel connected to their instructor and fellow students. Create ways to blend online and in-class communication.

6. **Encourage Collaboration**: Students can get frustrated by collaboration projects, but the more your assignments encourage effective collaboration, the more cohesive your course will feel.

7. **Utilize Online Resources**: Given students’ comfort level with online tools, and the proliferation of relevant online resources, it’s wise to embrace everything from research databases to You Tube videos.

8. **Utilize Both Low and High Stakes Grading**: All courses benefit from multiple assessment measures, but blended learning courses offer the widest array of choices.

9. **Seek Assistance from Professionals**: Creating your first blended learning course can feel
overwhelming at times, but you don’t have to go it alone. Ask for help from your school’s web and IT professionals, instructional designers, faculty developers, librarians and colleagues.

10. Stay Organized: A blended learning course has a lot of different parts, and it’s easy for students to get confused about what’s expected of them without proper communication and complete transparency.

While Shibley cautions that creating a blended learning course does take a fair amount of time upfront, and it may not be appropriate for all courses or all instructors, it’s proven extremely effective for him and his students.

“When you see how well blended learning fits with established pedagogical paradigms, creating a synergistic blend of what works best in face-to-face and online, the question becomes why wouldn’t you want to at least try it,” says Shibley.

Tags: active learning, assessing online learning, blended learning, hybrid courses, learning experience, online learning, teaching blended learning courses