

## Orienting Students to Blended Learning



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*Building community requires open communication and information exchange at several levels and should begin on or before the first formal day of class. It begins with introductory activities that help students get to know each other, the instructor, and the course structure and expectations.*

### Rationale

For many students, blended learning will be a new experience and thus it is important to provide them with a proper orientation to your course. Students who understand what the instructor plans for the course and why, will be in a much better position to engage positively in the learning activities and to achieve the course learning outcomes. On or before the first day of class, your students should learn who you are, what the course is about, how you have designed the course, why you have designed it in a blended format, and what will be expected of them. There are three items, in particular, that you should address:

### 1. Description and rationale for strategies employed

A blended learning approach is often selected because it is effective in supporting inquiry, reflection and deep learning. Let students know if you are using a problem or case-based approach and explain that you expect them to engage in asking and answering authentic questions through an inquiry approach. Share with them what some of the literature says about the effectiveness of blended learning.

There are longitudinal research studies from the University of Central Florida (Dziuban & Moskel, 2005) that demonstrate blended (or mixed-mode) courses have a higher student success rate than either face-to-face or fully online courses and that 86% of students were satisfied or very satisfied with their blended courses as opposed to only 4% who were unsatisfied or very unsatisfied.

In addition, share comments from students who have previously experienced this or other blended courses. For instance, students at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2002) state that blended courses provide them with increased flexibility and convenience with regards to time and location for learning. Some teachers also provide students with an overview to deep versus surface approaches to learning (Ramsden, 2003) or the Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). They then discuss with students how a deep approach to learning and/or each of the Seven Principles has been incorporated into the design of the blended course.

### 2. Course schedule/ structure & expectations

Clearly articulate the course schedule in terms of face-to-face (F2F) and time-out-class (TOC) learning activities, expectations and student responsibilities. For example, when and for what objectives will the class meet in whole-group, face-to-face situations? When and for what reasons will small groups meet? What will be done individually? When and how will technology tools be used? What are the assignments and how will they be assessed?

### 3. Support and resources

Explain to students what specific resources and software applications will be required, and how they can access support. For instance, if you are using Blackboard or Elluminate Live! direct students to the appropriate resources and support (i.e., the e-Learning Web page at the University of Calgary - <http://elearn.ucalgary.ca/>) where they can download instructional manuals as well as view tutorials. For other software applications, refer your students to the Information Technologies web site (i.e., the Student Training site at the University of Calgary - <http://www.ucalgary.ca/it/training/students.html>). In addition, the library will have many support options ranging from face-to-face sessions with librarians to online tutorials and instruction (i.e., The Library Connection at the University of Calgary - <http://library.ucalgary.ca/services/libraryconnection/>). You may also want to point students to an online resource such as the Workshop on the Information Search Process for Research (WISPR) to help provide an inquiry framework for completing a major course assignment or project (<http://library.ucalgary.ca/wispr/>).

## Give Me an Example

Prior to the first day of class, send an email to students indicating that you will be using Blackboard to support the course and that they are required to log onto the site and complete an introductory survey (perhaps focused on assessing the prior knowledge or experience students have with the course content and/or discovering why students are taking the class and what they hope to achieve through the experience). Create a discussion forum in which you ask the students to introduce themselves to the rest of the class, providing information such as where they are from and where they see themselves headed after graduation. In addition, within the student Homepage section of Blackboard, you might ask students to post a short biography and a digital image of themselves. Ice-breaker activities and opening discussions can then be designed for the first face-to-face session, which capitalize on the information collected and shared within the course Blackboard site.

## Another Example

Begin with a series of introductory activities during the first face-to-face class session. Hand out copies of your course outline and review the key points within a brief PowerPoint presentation. Give students ten to fifteen minutes to individually read the course outline and underline, highlight or make notes about any questions, issues or concerns they have. Next, ask students to form small groups to discuss their questions and try to help each other resolve them. Indicate that you will address questions that remain after they have first attempted to answer them within their small groups. Be sure to allow an appropriate amount of time for students to complete this process. Then ask students how many had questions that were satisfactorily answered in the small group. Remind them that fellow students can often help them see things in a new light and point out that they should frequently discuss questions with other students. Suggest that they exchange, names, phone numbers and emails with several other students and then use these peers as a first line of support (i.e., share class notes, study for tests, review draft assignments, etc.).

This entire exercise could also be completed within a Blackboard site, prior to or during the first week of the course. Post your course outline, create and post a narrated PowerPoint presentation with Breeze that summarizes the highlights of your outline, and set up small group discussion forums to facilitate student discussion and resolution of course related questions, issues or concerns. Questions still remaining can be answered by the teacher during a face-to-face class session or within the main discussion area of your course Blackboard.

## More Ideas

1. Consider composing a letter or creating a Breeze presentation, which welcomes students, briefly describes your teaching philosophy and suggests the role you envision for students in this course. This can be emailed to students prior to the first class with your course outline attached.
2. On the first day of class, engage your students in an exercise where they each reflect back on an event that was a very powerful learning experience for them – it might or might not have been school related. Have the students first, individually record their reflections and then form small groups to share their learning experiences and discuss why they were powerful. Debrief as a whole class about what makes learning experiences powerful and relate the discussion to the blended teaching and learning approaches that you have envisioned for your course.
3. Ask students to take a learning styles inventory (a number of them can be found on the Internet) and to reflect on their individual results. “What specific learning strategies and study behaviors will help me succeed in this course?” Individual written reflections can be turned in or posted to a discussion forum or shared in small groups.
4. Invite a couple of students from a previous class to attend a FTF session or join an online discussion to talk about the nature of the course as they experienced it. They can share study approaches they found helpful and generally give suggestions about how to take best advantage of the learning environment to be successful in the course.

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## Where Can I Go for More Information?

### 1. Assumptions About Learning

In my Working with Joan folder, I provide my students with a list of assumptions I make about learning. This helps them understand my philosophy and how the class has been constructed. Posted on Merlot by Dr. Joan McMahon, Towson University

<http://www.towson.edu/~mcmahon/generic/workingwithjoan/assumptions.html>

### 2. Asynchronous Learning Networks (ALN) Principles for Blended Environments

An excerpt from the Endeavor, Enterprise and Constellation (EEC) Team's challenge response in the Sloan-C Online Research Workshop, Spring 2004

<http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/view/v3n4/eecreport.htm>

### 3. Student Reactions: from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Hybrid Course Project

The most common and consistent reactions reported by students enrolled in hybrid (blended learning) courses at the University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee. From the Learning Technology Center, 2002.

<http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/LTC/student-reactions.html>

### 4. Blended Learning and Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges

Charles Dziuban and Patsy Moskel, University of Central Florida. Detailed results from UCF's ongoing longitudinal Distributed Learning Impact Evaluation as presented at Baruch College, New York, NY., 2005.

<http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~rite/Presentations/Chuck%20Dziuban-Baruch%20College.ppt#9>

### 5. Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education

A resource page offering a variety of materials regarding Chickering and Gamson's (1987) Seven Principles, provided by the TLT Group

<http://www.tltgroup.org/Seven/Home.htm>