



Learning Commons

Communities of Inquiry 

Blended Learning in a Research University

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Today's Challenge

Changing student demographics, lifelong learning, and technological innovation are transforming higher education. These changes are creating an increasing demand for knowledgeable, critical and creative thinkers that, in turn, necessitate a quality, innovative and inquiry-based approach to teaching, learning, and curriculum development that includes the integration of appropriate learning technologies.

At the University of Calgary, we are also faced with space constraints, increasing student enrolments, budget restraints, and pressure to integrate new information and communication technology. We are also being asked to re-think our teaching strategies from the traditional content dissemination format to a question-driven search for understanding, referred to as inquiry-based learning. Inquiry is most naturally associated with and effective within low student-teacher ratios – in noticeable conflict with the University of Calgary's increasing student population. How will we confront these challenges?

To achieve a learning-centred university through the development of inquiry-based learning initiatives – in a time of contraction and scarce financial resources – is a challenge that requires visionary and bold action. This challenge is indeed enormous.



Entrenched in Traditions

Before the printing press emerged books were scarce and prohibitively expensive. Lecturing to the masses was an effective and efficient way of disseminating knowledge. Today information (both digital and print-based) has never been more accessible to the masses. Yet the lecture method has not only persisted in modern day universities, it has become entrenched as part of a university tradition.

The use of the lecture method tends to limit learning by removing students from the social activities inherent to meaningful experiences. As humans, we naturally work in learning and knowledge-building communities, where constructing knowledge is a socio-linguistic process. These communities go beyond disseminating inert content – becoming both the nexus of inquiry and the means to critical and creative learning outcomes. A primary obligation of a research university should be to engage students in active, intentional, and collaborative knowledge-building communities – or communities of inquiry.

Raising Our Sights

The first of the four core principles in Raising Our Sights (University of Calgary's Academic Plan) is to create a learning-centred university. One of the five action initiatives to achieve this core principle states that we need to manage undergraduate enrolment to ensure that high-caliber students are highly satisfied with the quality of their experience in a leading environment committed to research, scholarship and creative activities. To this end, the Academic Plan further suggests that we improve the quality and diversity of the undergraduate student population and the educational experiences delivered at the University of Calgary, as well as align our resources with the initiatives to implement undergraduate curriculum redesign and develop inquiry-based learning. This requires re-thinking our current teaching, learning and curricular practices.

We hardly need to be reminded that universities are the most notorious resisters to change. While we accept the claim that many, if not most, universities are resisters to change, some universities are carefully rethinking their undergraduate teaching practices. In particular, some universities have turned their attention to the traditional three hours of lecture a week and have begun exploring the meaningful integration of information and communication technologies. The results of these early explorations reveal that universities can successfully address many of the challenges and criticisms we face with teaching practices – in particular those of large undergraduate courses – through the intelligent and thoughtful integration of Internet information and communication technologies. This integration of face-to-face and web-based learning is most commonly referred to as blended learning.

Old Wine, New Bottles

Much of the success of initial explorations with blended learning is due to the fact that it is an approach that preserves and enhances the traditional values and ethos of a research university. This approach uses traditional strengths of a research university to enhance the students' educational experience – with a focus on using technology as a tool with which to think and learn.

Blended learning is not a substitute for face-to-face learning. When thoughtfully designed, blended learning approaches offer opportunities to enhance the campus experience and extend learning through the innovative use of Internet information and communication technology. Meaningful learning events that are active, intentional, authentic and collaborative are fundamental to facilitating effective blended learning, and can capitalize upon the unique properties of Internet technology. For example, text-based Internet asynchronous communication media encourages reflection and connectivity, and provides unique opportunities for collaborative learning and critical discourse.

Thus, there is a multiplier effect in combining the strengths of face-to-face and Internet-based learning. Reflective asynchronous text-based discussions and inquiry-based learning approaches complement spontaneous verbal classroom discourse and lectures very well. In this way, blended learning combines the strengths of each delivery mode to provide a unique quality enhanced educational experience. As such, blended learning approaches provide a realistic means for universities to fully realize the dialectical values they profess. Indeed, blended learning approaches may well be the most effective means of fully implementing the Undergraduate Curriculum Redesign features and realizing the core competencies, where the goal is to “realign undergraduate curricula to serve learner needs for the knowledge era.” Blended learning also offers a means to realize inquiry-based learning by extending opportunities for exploration and critical discourse.

Our Challenge

To date the University of Calgary has aggressively undertaken the challenge of implementing inquiry-based learning approaches through a commitment to curricular redesign, resulting in more effective instructional practices that focus on becoming a learning-centred institution. The challenge is to continue to increase our learning effectiveness, and to do so cost effectively. One option is through the use of blended learning approaches.

