Gearing Up for Hybrid Teaching and Learning: Ch-Ch-Ch-Ch-Changes!

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Augsburg College’s strategic decision to move all of its adult learner program offerings (undergraduate and graduate) to a blended/hybrid model of teaching and learning, finalized in 2012, was the result of many years of study and dialogue. Before this decision, the use of blended and online learning was highly inconsistent and, thereby, difficult to manage by curriculum committees and others. In 2011 the college engaged a higher education market research firm to assist in clarifying where it stood in its use of technology for teaching and learning, how best to move forward, and how to claim a consistent identity in this arena. It became clear that the best modality to do so was through deployment of hybrid/blended (online and face-to-face) teaching and learning. This strategy could bring together the college’s reputation for high-quality, intensive, face-to-face connections with students with consistently high-quality, interactive online teaching and learning techniques. In 2012 faculty members approved a proposal to formally establish hybrid teaching and learning as its approach to adult education—and perhaps more important, to become consistent in its approach to teaching and learning practices with adult learners. By the beginning of 2014, Augsburg had successfully transitioned more than four hundred graduate and undergraduate courses involving more than three hundred faculty members to a hybrid format.

Research has shown that a successful deployment of blended or hybrid learning requires a combination of institutional elements, such as infrastructure, leadership at the highest levels of the institution, faculty pedagogical professional development, and technical support capacity (Garrison and Kanuka 2004; Niemiec and Otte 2009; Piper 2010; Wallace and Young 2010; Martin 2003). This paper examines one of those elements—the technical and pedagogical design considerations at the heart of the teaching and learning practices that Augsburg College used to implement this major hybrid initiative. As measured by Graham, Woodfield, and Harrison’s (2013) institutional adoption framework, Augsburg demonstrates maturity (Stage 3) in providing a variety of integrated technical and pedagogical supports for the hybrid teaching and learning initiative; the framework uses the category “support” to refer to the “issues relating to the manner in which an institution facilitates the implementation and maintenance of its blended learning design, incorporating technical support, pedagogical support, and faculty incentives” (Graham, Woodfield, and Harrison 2013, 7). Inspiration for the development of tools that moved the college and its faculty forward in the work was provided by Garrison and Vaughan’s blended learning framework (2008). The evolution of professional development is progressing consistent with the more recent work of Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes, and Garrison (2013). It is hoped that this paper will contribute to the growing knowledge base on hybrid/blended learning in higher education and to share Augsburg College’s learning so that other institutions contemplating such an implementation may build on it.

The Hybrid Concept

Initially, the college utilized the term hybrid to refer only to the scheduling behind the model of blended instruction adopted (that classes would meet face-to-face and online), while the term blended was used in reference to the pedagogical considerations. However, as the college worked to become clearer in its use of definitions and to more fully communicate the intent of the design, the decision was made to use the term hybrid to refer to the entire program structure. It was felt that this term signified the importance placed on instructor presence in the online sessions as well as in the face-to-face classroom—both necessary not only to satisfy credit hour requirements but to maintain the continuity between face-to-face and online.
At Augsburg College, the term hybrid conveys the idea of not just a combination of two more traditional ways of teaching and learning, but a new way of teaching and learning, such as the teaching and learning model that results when Internet technology and face-to-face teaching are intentionally blended. Garrison and Kanuka (2004, 97) explain that asynchronous Internet communication technology has the “ability to facilitate a simultaneously independent and collaborative learning experience. That is, learners can be independent of space and time—yet together.” The aspect of current technological capabilities that is often overlooked or taken for granted is the fact that communication online can be and usually is text-based, although video is quickly catching up. Writing has been an essential aspect of education at all levels for centuries, but for too long the enormous power of the word processor has been left out of too many classrooms at all levels. When the power of a word processor and the advantages it provides for teaching and learning are intentionally integrated with all of the time-proven techniques teachers use in a face-to-face classroom, the possibilities of both the online as well as the face-to-face increase. The full realization of the potential described here does not occur automatically just by creating a new class meeting schedule coupled with online sessions on a learning management system, even with a clearly expressed policy that requires the courses to employ hybrid teaching and learning. The transformation process is different for individual faculty members, and it requires technical support and pedagogical support that continues to meet the needs of faculty members and students as they evolve in their teaching and learning skills.

At Augsburg College, the technology infrastructure is robust, and instructional technology experts (known as Liaisons for Computing, or LFCs) are assigned to specific departments. The LFCs, who assist faculty and staff members with everything from e-mail to designing instruction, have become trusted partners of the faculty due to their relational, consultative approach. Just as these computing liaisons are assigned by department so, too, are library resource staff professionals. These staff members specialize in select academic areas, attend most departmentally focused hybrid teaching and learning workshops, and often co-present information on accessibility and use of embedded videos and links to source materials. Both of these professional groups and their extended staff counterparts are also deployed to support students from a distance and at flexible times.

In addition to the LFCs, the Hybrid Teaching and Learning Team includes a team leader well versed in learning management systems and in methods for achieving quality in hybrid learning environments. This team also includes the director of the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), an eLearning Specialist with more than fifteen years of teaching experience in higher education, the lead of the computing liaisons, and three to four faculty members (known as CTL consultants). The Hybrid Teaching and Learning Team reviews course sites, conducts workshops, and often works one-on-one with faculty members in course development activities. The CTL consultants of the Hybrid Teaching and Learning Team are faculty members who are already well versed in and excited about hybrid/online pedagogy. They model the academic expertise necessary for successful hybrid teaching and foster in other faculty members the courage to try innovative practices. This expertise and support bolster faculty members who still have doubts about this new way of doing things. The communication between the CTL consultants, computing and library liaisons, individual faculty members, department chairs, and the college administration is crucial to the adoption and implementation framework (strategy, structure, and support). As the college moved further in discussions about rolling out its hybrid strategy, all stakeholders engaged in deeper conversations, not only about quality, but also about a variety of teaching considerations within disciplines and the identification and resolution of needs particular to the considerations in light of both current and desired future programming.

The plan created by the Hybrid Teaching and Learning Team for the faculty professional development to successfully launch the initiative included requiring faculty members to demonstrate facility with the learning management system and to attend one-on-one or group workshops in hybrid teaching and learning before being approved to teach hybrid courses. For the first semester of the hybrid implementation, a standard learning management system course layout was used. In the second semester, faculty members were encouraged to use a collapsed-topics format to reduce the page scroll on the front page of their courses. This evolution/transition is an example of the innovations in technology being added to the professional development support continuum for faculty members as they continue to develop their confidence and skills.

Where multiple sections of a course are taught, many departments and programs have utilized a course lead approach to developing the online learning portions of their courses. Course leads have received small stipends for developing the initial course site and for training any adjunct faculty members about the layout of the site. Members of the CTL consultants group are minimally compensated with stipends. Part-time adjunct faculty members also receive small stipends for attending the professional development
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To assess the evolution of Augsburg College’s hybrid teaching and learning implementation within each of Graham, Woodfield, and Harrison’s (2013) adoption and implementation framework has provided a means of new teaching skills and compensation for faculty members will be considered to support this professional development.

Building learning environments in higher education that are collaborative constructivist in nature requires attention not only to pedagogical/andragogical theory, but also to the tools that ensure that the practice fulfills the theoretical aspirations. Central to this model is the efficacy that a combined and intentionally overlapping system for technical/pedagogical support can provide once the basic technological infrastructure is in place. Augsburg College has utilized Garrison and Vaughan’s (2008) community of inquiry (CoI) pedagogical framework to define the collaborative constructivist learning environment. In this environment discourse is encouraged, content is carefully selected, and attention is paid to setting a climate of collaboration. To achieve this, Garrison and Vaughan (2008, 9) note that faculty members must integrate the social, teaching, and cognitive presence, and then, all aspects of the presence need to be embedded in the design and organization of the course, the facilitation of discourse, and in the direct instruction activities.

To assure that the various elements of presence called for by Garrison and Vaughan are actually present in the courses, Augsburg College has created and deployed the use of a hybrid course template. The template includes elements considered best practice components for most hybrid courses, such as a welcome banner and a Latest News and Announcements posting, which allows instructors a convenient way to develop social presence in their courses. The introductory section of the template, or Week Zero section, includes six pages of information useful in any course: (1) “Getting Started” in [x Course]; (2) course procedures; (3) a course syllabus; (4) a course schedule; (5) technology support and accessibility; and (6) a technology guide. In addition, two discussion forums are included in the introductory section, a Question and Answer Forum and an Introduction Forum. The template is added to the shell of each course that is listed as “Hybrid” in the registrar’s course listing. An initial learning management system workshop, the Lab for Hybrid Design, uses the template as an organizer for coaching faculty who are new to the learning management system and/or hybrid teaching and learning. The template provides a consistent visual and navigational experience for students, provides a teaching and learning design format that is consistent for faculty members, and attends to the three “presences” advocated by Garrison and Vaughan.

The consistent course design also has the advantage of making professional development more consistent for the support staff members leading it (Garrison and Vaughan 2008, 24).

As Fink (2003) and others have noted, the key to good course design, in any delivery mode, is determining the particular activities students need to do in order to best achieve the desired learning. The hybrid template format provides the opportunity and the responsibility to decide what works best in the face-to-face on-campus session and what will work best in the online session in order to establish a community of inquiry. Faculty members are encouraged to use the template design but are free to modify the design to fit their teaching objectives. Many faculty members have reported that having the components of the template already laid out for them made the transition to the hybrid format easier to envision. This left the faculty with more time to focus on their re-visioning of the design of the course, which was one of the major new skills required of first-time hybrid instructors. Having the ability to make choices about what types of activities to use for students to better understand content is requiring faculty members to take a more thoughtful approach to how course material is presented. Faculty members have reported that it may be more work but worth it because of the increased student engagement with learning.

The hybrid format has also enabled the college to capitalize on the natural synergy between writing and online work by collaborating with the Writing Across the Curriculum initiative, which is a previously established and ongoing general education focus. The assessment and feedback tools of the learning management system (Moodle)—marking guides, rubrics, forum ratings, the workshop activity module, and system text templates—make up the basic framework for responding to student writing. The further utilization of these enhanced writing and editing tools are expected to be central to ongoing faculty professional development.

Conclusion
Graham, Woodfield, and Harrison’s (2013) adoption and implementation framework has provided a means to assess the evolution of Augsburg College’s hybrid teaching and learning implementation within each of...
the three categories of strategy, structure, and support. Mature implementations will not only have ample technological and pedagogical support but will attend to the melding of the two. Augsburg College’s use of Garrison and Vaughan’s (2008) CoI framework, embedded computing liaisons and library resources, the presence of a Hybrid Teaching and Learning Team, and the development of appropriate tools in the learning management system demonstrate not only the desirability of such a practice but point out how, in careful combination, these components pave the way toward teaching and learning efficacy. At the same time, it is clear that further work is needed in the areas of assessment and evaluation of student satisfaction, student learning, faculty proficiency and satisfaction, and overall outcomes. The learning management system will provide some of the data with its built-in analytics capacity, but the college will need to determine which data to analyze—institutionally, by department or program, at the course level, and at the classroom level. In addition, the larger institutional assessment of the use of the hybrid program format for teaching and learning will be important. A sustainable future for the hybrid teaching and learning model will likely require a repeated renewal of commitment, courageous collaboration among all components of the institution, and leadership at all levels of the technical, academic, and support systems of these institutions.

REFERENCES


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