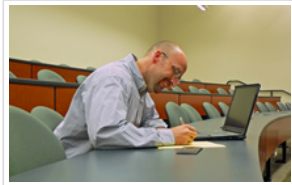


Hybrid online classes: What we've learned

By Len Lubinsky and David Greenberg

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[1]
Two educators share their perspectives on hybrid online courses.

In 2001, Massachusetts changed its regulations to allow non-universities to offer teacher and administrator programs to qualify for a state teacher's or administrator's license. The Collaborative for Educational Services (CES) began its licensing program in 2003, creating programs in the licensing areas of special education, English as a Second Language, reading, math, sciences, school administration, history, and English. We offer these programs throughout the Commonwealth.

Our challenge as a non-university teacher licensure program is in reaching the relatively small number of prospective teachers who want to enroll in such a program. We are less expensive than comparable college and university programs, and if we want to remain inexpensive, we have to find ways to combine classes across multiple locations. We tried interactive video conferencing (IVC) with some success. This had its problems, however, including technical configurations beyond our control, difficulty retaining technical support, and meeting minimal attendance targets stand out.

Three years ago, in an attempt to reach our students throughout the state more effectively, we tried a hybrid online model blending face-to-face instruction with an online component developed using the Moodle Learning Management System (LMS [2]). Gradually, over the course of the last few years, we "translated" all our courses from a typical classroom format to a hybrid online format so that we were able to offer each class in both formats.

To retain the personal and community aspects of our courses, we set a minimum of three face-to-face sessions for each course, typically requiring people from all over our relatively small state to drive to centrally-located Worcester for their three face-to-face classes. The first, middle, and last sessions of each course usually met face-to-face.

Observations

We learned a lot about how to make a hybrid online (HO) course work. We made some interesting discoveries and developed some best practices that we want to share. With regard to our discoveries:

We found that people were eager to enroll in our HO courses. The HO sections were usually filled before our traditional format sections. We attribute this to several factors: (a) the oft-cited benefit of the flexibility offered by an online course that is available 24/7; (b) savings of time and money by limiting the amount of required driving to class; and (c) a preference for online instruction that we see primarily among our younger teachers.

Instructor after instructor tells us that the quality of written work in HO classes exceeds (sometimes considerably) the quality of written work in traditional classes. We attribute this to the fact that forum posts are read and responded to not only by the instructor, but also by peers. There are studies that support the notion that students do, in fact, put more energy into work that will be shared with their peers. Even the conventional papers seem to be better written—perhaps because a standard of good writing has been set by the peer-read forums.

We found that people usually rated our HO courses just a touch less successful than our traditional offerings. Our program is unusual in that we offer both traditional classes as well as HO classes. Students taking an HO section have often had the opportunity to experience a traditional class in our program with an excellent instructor. The comparison to the HO experience is inevitable. We often receive comments asking that there be more face-to-face sessions. We all know that strong teachers make a community of their classrooms. There is a relationship, even a bond, among students and between students and teacher in a great class. Creating that bond with an HO class is a challenge that we strive to meet.

Best practices

Some of the "best practices" that we consider to be most promising are described below.

Pre-enrollment resources: Prior to enrollment in an HO course, we offer a number of resources to our students to prepare them for online study. We have a test page that will determine if their computer has the necessary software to access our electronic resources, we have a printed Introduction to Moodle for Students manual, we have an introductory video, and we have a self-paced Moodle course that introduces students to our Moodle environment.

Design specifications: One of the traditional challenges with an online environment is the tendency for students to have problems with traversing the interface, figuring out how to find resources, and determining what and when assignments are due. To address these issues, we developed a set of design specifications so that all of our courses have the same 'look and feel'. Each Moodle section, which usually represents one week of classwork, consists of similar elements: Learning Objectives, Class Notes, Resources, and Assignments. Learning Objectives frame the discussion for the week and students have found them to be quite useful. In lieu of an in-class lecture, we have adopted a 'Class Notes' document. In a page or two of text, instructors introduce the content for the current week and pose some thought-provoking questions that will be addressed by the resources for that week (written, aural, visual) and the forum discussion. We encourage instructors to offer this document in a variety of formats, including as a podcast or videocast. Resources are both physical and electronic, and can consist of readings from a text, readings from online journals, podcasts, or video clips. Wherever possible, we post resources as PDF files to facilitate access on all operating systems. Assignments consist primarily of a forum activity and papers that are handed in electronically. All activities are provided with due dates and accompanying rubrics wherever possible.

Facilitator training: While our instructors are all seasoned classroom teachers, classroom skills are not automatically transferred to the online environment. For that reason, we developed our own facilitator training course. Our only completely online course, we require instructors with no online teaching experience to enroll in this course prior to teaching an HO class. In this class we both introduce the important attributes of an online instructor and model what it looks like. We encourage students to explore using multimedia resources and help them make podcast and videocasts. Instructors often cite this experience as giving them the necessary skills to succeed in the HO environment.

Profile tip: Moodle allows a picture to be uploaded to an individual's profile and we encourage instructors to have their students upload their pictures. Surprisingly, perhaps, this makes a big difference. The pictures are reinforced by the fact that our students do actually meet each other in person at the face-to-face meetings.

Pre- and post-course surveys: We use a pre-course survey to gather information that will help the instructor by providing background information on each student. We ask, for example, if students have ever taken an online class before, if they are familiar with Moodle, if they have the technology resources to participate in webinars, and we ask about their technical proficiency in general. In the post-course survey we solicit, through a number of questions, data that tells us to what degree the course was successful.

The CyberCafe: We encourage instructors to extend an invitation to their students to 'get their feet wet' and familiarize themselves with the forum tool by

submitting an informal post to a special forum that we use for all non-academic content communications. Questions about the course, technical issues, how to get rid of voles in the garden, and more, are all welcome topics in the CyberCafe.

Online "office hours": Using the text Chat activity in Moodle, we have experimented with having instructors offer to be online for an hour on a weekday night to address non-academic content concerns. We have found that this works pretty well with a small group, but it is very hard to follow the multiple threads that inevitably arise when many students are typing at once.

Group functionality: We can replicate small group work using the Moodle Groups functionality. An instructor will often create a full-class forum one week and a smaller group forum the next week and then alternate back and forth. Groups often work on a collaborative project and, although we do not have the resources to support a multitude of technical tools, we do offer to set up a text Chat or a group wiki in Moodle. We tell students about Skype, GoogleDocs, and screen-sharing technologies such as join.me. Presentation of group projects is usually done at face-to-face sessions, although we are now exploring the use of webinar software such as WebEx for this purpose.

Individualized work with instructors: Supporting our instructors is critical if we are to have successful HO courses. In addition to our Online Instructional Strategies course, we offer one-on-one training and 24/7 just-in-time support to our instructors. Working together in person, or remotely, our technical staff helps instructors deal with any situation that might arise.

Editing tools: Although we do the initial creation and setup of the course structure, we strongly believe that instructors should know how to edit their courses using the basic Moodle editing tools and train them to do that. Instructors know how to add resources and assignments and this allows them to respond quickly as they adapt to ongoing formative assessments.

Conclusion

We have welcomed the move to HO classes. In this day and age, it seemed inevitable.

The majority of our instructors are becoming strong HO instructors, because we take the time to introduce HO instruction individually. We offer an array of training tools for instructors, including:

- A traditionally written introduction to Moodle;

- A video presentation about using Moodle;

- Introduction to Moodle, a self-paced Moodle class; and,

- Introduction to Online Strategies, a four-week training offered prior to each semester to introduce facilitation skills and to help instructors—new and old—practice learning and teaching online.

We like the transition we have made. The instructors who have stayed with us to learn how to teach online have enjoyed the challenge and continue to hone their online skills. They will add, however, that the HO teaching is at least as much work as teaching a traditional course. Most say that it is more work.

We believe we are improving our ability to teach our students about teaching—the stronger writing is an indication of our students' engagement with the content. We continue to strive to find ways to build communities in our HO sections in the same way the very best classrooms build communities of people working together to understand new ideas. And we continue to be excited about the challenge of finding new ways to reach our students. We are now both a virtual and a brick-and-mortar institution. We are preparing our students to teach in both—an approach that reflects the world in which they will teach.

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Article printed from eSchoolNews.com: <http://www.eschoolnews.com>

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[2] LMS: http://www.eschoolnews.com/?p=65012/?utm_source=website&utm_medium=shorturl&utm_campaign=Learning_management_systems_060111-090111

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