Recommendations for Making the Most of Your Blended Course

by Larry Ragan

Over the past several years, faculty members at Penn State have been developing and teaching blended format courses in various colleges and departments. Below is a list of recommendations based on their experiences, using data collected from interviews and conversations with many of those faculty.

- At a minimum, blended instructors should allow six months lead time for course development; one year is preferred. Several instructors voiced an opinion that the need for integration and organization necessitates a full course redesign; creating a blended course is not as simple as placing presentation slides or notes online.
- Mastering the technology necessary to administer the course can be a challenge, and instructors should set aside time to learn the requisite tools.
- Hold an initial face-to-face kick-off meeting. This first meeting can serve many roles, including a general orientation to the format of the course, a review of technology requirements, and an opportunity for the students to socialize and get to know their peers and their instructor.
- Make students aware of what a blended course entails. For many students, the blended format is a novelty.
- Provide information on time management skills. Because of the self-pacing elements of a blended course, students may benefit from improving their skills in managing their work and schedules.
- Be sure that the face-to-face class meetings are integrated into the course, and hold value to the educational experience that connects with the online coursework. Students may become frustrated if they feel that the face-to-face sessions are simply thrown into the course, with no thought given to the role that the classroom time plays within the course.

SPOTLIGHT ON: Professor Victor Oguejiofor Okafor

It’s no surprise that more and more instructors we work with are revamping their traditional courses into an online or blended format; over 4.6 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2008 term, according to Sloan Consortium’s seventh annual report, “Learning on Demand. Online Education in the United States, 2009.” This represents a 17 percent growth rate from the previous year, “...with the most recent data demonstrating no signs of slowing.”

We wanted to hear more about this trend from the instructor’s point of view. Below, Eastern Michigan University’s African American Studies department head, Dr. Victor Oguejiofor Okafor, answers our questions regarding the challenges and advantages of running online and blended courses:

Teaching Since: 1999
Courses Taught:
- AAS 101 Introduction to African American Studies (wholly online)
- AAS 102 Introduction to African Civilization (web enhanced)
- AAS 232 Politics in the African American Experience (web enhanced)
- AAS 313 Contemporary Africa: The Struggle Prospects for Development (wholly online)
- AAS 505 the African Political Economy (wholly online)

Q: How did you prepare for the course?
A: Prior to designing AAS 313 as an online course, I had developed and taught it as a day-time traditional course offering. Converting it to an online course took several steps, one of which was the transformation of the traditional classroom syllabus into an interactive electronic document incorporating various learning tools of a typical online offering.

Q: How different was the preparation from that of a traditional class?
A: There were several differences. One, I converted my traditional classroom lecture notes into electronic Power Point slides. In addition to designating reading assignments from required books, for the online course, I also researched, identified and set up links to web-based supplemental materials, including what I labeled as “educational websites.” Furthermore, the online students of the course write more than their traditional class counterparts. The online students engage in class discussions of materials differently – through both synchronous and asynchronous learning tools.

Q: What was the first blended or online class that you taught?
A: The first online course that I designed and taught was AAS 313 Contemporary Africa: The Struggle & Prospects for Development (03 hrs). I designed and launched this course in 1999 as part of the first set of online courses to be offered at Eastern Michigan University.

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