



# Converting To A Blended Distance Learning Format

Best Practices Guide

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## Converting to a Blended Distance Learning Format

The ultimate goal of any designed instructional course is to create a learning environment where the intended learner would have the best chance of achieving the desired learning outcomes of that course. Thus, when converting face-to-face training sessions to a blending course, you must consider the differences in the two learning environments before planning for converting that course. For example, as you convert face-to-face training into a blended training the instruction typically changes from teacher-centered to student-centered (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). Therefore, I must provide you with a quick overview of what blending learning is since there are major differences between the two formats of instruction.

Blended Learning is a format of learning that utilizes both face-to-face and online instruction. During a blended course, a “substantial proportion of the content is delivered online, typically using online discussions” (Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007, p.5), web 2.0 tools, course management systems, and other online instructional delivery technologies. Bourne (2010) asserted "online course activity replaces at least 30% of the required face-to-face meetings" in a blended learning environment. Thus, not all the design theories used in a traditional face-to-face classroom will translate into a blended learning environment. The National Standards for Quality Online Courses also provided a list of guidelines (Figure 1) for those designers who are trying to define the many other different dimensions of a blended learning environment that must be considered when converting instruction from a face-to-face classroom (iNACOL,2011).

This facilitator’s guide will focus on how to convert portions of the original face-to-face components of a class into content that can be delivered effectively online, to ensure that all learners receive equivalent learning experiences (Simonson et al., 2012). Hence, by

## THE DEFINING DIMENSIONS OF BLENDED LEARNING MODELS

|   |   | LEVEL OF BLENDED LEARNING                                |   |  |  |                   |
|---|---|--|---|--|--|-------------------|
|   |   | Less Online Instruction                                  | More Online Instruction   | Single Course  | Entire Curriculum  |                   |
| Characteristics Driving the Changing Roles of Educators | Characteristics of Instructional Models | INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIAL LEVEL                             | Learning Object   | Unit/Lesson  | Single Course  | Entire Curriculum |
|   |   | INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCES                                  | Course <b>minimally uses digital content</b> , resources, and tools to supplement instruction                                       | Digital content, resources, and tools <b>expand and enhance</b> the curriculum and content   | Use of digital resources and tools <b>are integral to</b> content, curriculum and instruction  |                   |
|   |   | ASSESSMENT   | Whole-class assessments, used primarily in the classroom, during the school day as the primary means of feedback                    | A combination of traditional and online assessments are used inside and outside the classroom  | Greater amount of digital, real-time data and feedback allow for individualized instruction  |                   |
|   |   | COMMUNICATION<br>(Student / Teacher & Student / Student) | Occurs primarily synchronously and in the physical classroom  | Is a mixture of synchronous & asynchronous and may be in the physical classroom or online  | Occurs primarily asynchronously and online or from a distance  |                   |
|   | Student-Centered Instruction            | ATTENDANCE REQUIREMENTS                                  | Students are required to attend a physical classroom 5 days a week  | Students attend a physical classroom less than 5 days a week and work online at other times  | Students have flexible physical classroom and/or location attendance requirements.   |                   |
|   |   | STUDENT LEARNER'S ROLE                                   | Student is primarily the recipient of teacher provided instruction. Teacher sets day-to-day pace.                                   |  | Student takes active role in learning with reliance on digital content, resources and tools. Student has more control of own pace.                                       |                   |
|   |   | INDIVIDUALIZATION OF INSTRUCTION                         | All students expected to complete same instructional pathway  | Students engage with digital content to customize their instructional pathway  | Students engage with digital content and have multiple pathways that are competency-based and not tied to a fixed school calendar.                                       |                   |
|   |   | INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT MODELS                             | "Direct student learning" through traditional teacher roles and staffing models   | "Facilitate student learning" through a team approach with a significant reliance on technology-based tools and content                                | "Coordinate student learning" through the expanded use of technology-based tools and content, as well as the effective use of outside experts and/or community resources |                   |
|   | School Considerations                   | INSTRUCTION SCHEDULE AND LOCATION                        | Fixed daily schedule, instruction primarily in physical classroom   | Mixed schedule of online and physical instruction  | Highly flexible schedule, with instruction is possible 24x7. Learning centers support instruction.   |                   |
|   |   | ACCESS TO ACADEMIC STUDENT SUPPORT                       | Support is school-based, and provided primarily by the teacher during the class period.   | Support structures (e.g. online tutoring, home mentors, and technical support services) in place 24x7, in addition to teacher support.                 |  |                   |
|   |   | TECHNOLOGICAL INFRASTRUCTURE                             | School or classroom based with students using shared classroom computer resources. Access to infrastructure ends with class period. | Available across school campus with students checking out computers from a lab or bringing their own. Access to infrastructure is during school hours. | Available on and off campus with students using their own device. Access to infrastructure is 24x7.  |                   |

Figure 1: Defining Dimensions of Blended Learning Models. From National Standards for Quality Online Courses Version 2, October 2011. All rights reserved. [www.inacol.org](http://www.inacol.org) © International Association for K-12 Online Learning

providing you with a guide of pre-planning strategies, ways to enhance the distance-learning environment, role of the facilitator during a blending course, and steps a facilitator should take to

encourage online communication during that course. Your blending learning course will provide all learners with learning experiences of “equivalent value even though these experiences might be quite different” (Simonson et al., 2012, p.53) from the learners traditional face-to-face learning experiences.

## **Preplanning Strategies**

To ensure that the newly blended course is going to be successful, you must preplan. The preplanning stage might be the most vital part during the conversion process. Therefore, it is important to first, take some time to think through the instructional material involved in the traditional course, and consider what constraints that might be involved in converting those same instructional objectives into a blended environment. Once you have thought through that process if you feel that a blended course "can accommodate the constraints of those traditional classroom objectives" (Laureate Education Inc., n.d.a.) you can then proceed to figuring out how to configure that course into the blended format.

During the preplanning stage, it is important to remind yourself that the instructional tools used in the traditional classroom will more than likely need to be retooled to fit the new distance environment (Simonson et al., 2012, p.153). Thus, it is important to consider which content can be presented in the online part of the course, and what types of instructional technologies can deliver the retooled content. Ultimately, you determine the technological medium that will be used by considering if that technology will help lead the learner to the intended learning outcomes. Chickering and Ehrmann (1996) provide you with seven principles that will help guide you to choosing technology that will support the previous assertion. Those principles state that the technology should:

1. Encourage contact between students and faculty.
2. Develop reciprocity and cooperation among students.
3. Use active learning techniques.
4. Give prompt feedback.
5. Emphasize high expectations.
6. Respect diverse talents and ways of learning (as cited in Beldarrain, 2006, p.144).

During preplanning, you also must remember that the technological medium is not the only thing that will determine if the learner has a successful learning experience. Instead, Simonson et al. (2012) said that the learner satisfaction will be "determined by the attention they receive from the teacher and from the system they work in to meet their needs" (p.176). Therefore, it is also essential from you consider more than just the instructional content, but also "examine issues associated with the separation of the instructor and some or all of the students" (Simonson et al.,2012) that will occur during the online sections of the blended course. Essentially, during the preplanning stage make sure you are planning for a blended course that consist of a "collection of learning experiences that will be most suitable for each student or group of students" (Schlosser & Simonson, 2009, as cited in Simonson et al., 2012).

## **Enhancing your distance learning environment**

As stated earlier, it is important to take a student-centered approach to designing instructional task for blended learning environments. Student-centered activities and assignments work well in a blended learning environment because it requires the learner to become “engaged in their own learning process” (Simonson et al., 2012, p.195). Therefore, it important to not only create interactive assignments for the face-to-face component of the course, but to make sure that

the "activities encourage interactivity at all sites" (Simonson et al., 2012, p.153). You can do this by incorporating interactive online Web 2.0 tools like wikis, blogs, simulators, or social media sites to encourage the learners to participate in the online learning experiences. Simonson et al. (2012) asserted that these types of "online resources promote active learning, collaboration, mastery of the material, and student control over the learning process" (p.196), all of which will enhance your distance learning environment.

Since blended course have a face-to-face synchronous component of the course where learners meet at the same time. Integrating asynchronous activities into the online components of the course could help enhance the learning environment, by delivering instruction to the students in a different format. Asynchronous activities such as discussion boards provide the learner with the interactivity needed in a blending environment, but also requires the learner to reflect before communicating during the discussions (Simonson et al., 2012). Hence, discussion boards encourage the learner to provide thoughtful contributions to the class, thereby creating a learning community during the online component of the course (Seckel, 2007). These thoughtful contributions during ongoing discussions by peers often help the class gain a deeper understanding of the course material (Seckel, 2007). When using the discussion post as part of the online component of a blended course, providing relevant questions in the form of a real-world situation will further enhance the distance-learning environment.

There are many other ways to enhance the learning in the blended environment. To help guide you to enhancing your blended distance-learning environment, I have provided you with a checklist and guidelines in the appendix that you should consider while you design your course. The checklist was designed by the National Center on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and



contains a worksheet listing successful design principles and checkpoints that need to be considered when enhancing your blended learning environment (CAST, 2011).

## **Facilitators Role**

Before explaining the role of a facilitator in a blended format classroom, let's look at the definition of a facilitator. *Merriam Webster* online dictionary defines a facilitator as, "one that helps to bring about an outcome (as learning, productivity, or communication) by providing indirect or unobtrusive assistance, guidance, or supervision" (Facilitator, n.d.). Thus, in this section of the facilitator guide we will look at the role of the facilitator in indirectly guiding the learner to the intended learning outcomes and the steps the facilitator needs to take to encourage communication within the blended learning community.

## ***Guiding the Learner***

In order for the facilitator to guide the learners to the blended course intended learning outcomes, the facilitator must understand the concept of distributed learning. Distributed learning is a student-centered model where the "face-to-face instruction incorporates some form of technology-based learning experiences, either inside or outside the class" (Simonson et al., 2012, p.197). Distributed Learning is an important concept for the facilitator to understand, because they will have to learn how to decide when "online activity may be more a productive learning experience" (Simonson et al., 2012, p.197) than that of a face-to-face activity. The decision to make an instructional activity online should be based strictly off if the online learning experience will provide the learner with a deeper understanding of the instructional objective. For example, offering an introduction of new course material in the online setting of the course before the learner face-to-face interactions, could allow the facilitator to provide higher cognitive activities

when the learner meets in person (El Mansour & Mupinga, 2007). Although, you do want to make sure that delivering the content in this particular order would meet the needs of your of learners. Millerto (2007), Smaldino, Lowther, and Russell (2011) all asserted that facilitators that choose instructional activities based off the characteristics of the learner and that incorporates interactivity have proven to be the most successful (as cited in Simonson et al., 2012, p.203) in guiding learners to the intended learning objectives. Therefore, the facilitators' emphasis should switch from the content itself to making sure that the activities they chose are making the content come to life (Laureate Education Inc., n.d.b.).

That brings us to another point that facilitator needs to consider when guiding the learner through a blended course, and that is, how to manage the distance-learning course. Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, and Zvacek (2012) suggested that instructors of blended courses should provide concise expectations for what is expected of the learner during the course. Since blended course also consist of some face-to-face components and online components it is important to provide the learning with the time and place that those face-to-face interactions will occur, and what is expected of them during the online interactions. Kilic-Cakmak, Karatas and Ocak (2009) explained how students in a blended learning environment “need a clear understanding of their own responsibilities” (as cited in Simonson et al., 2012, p.199). Thus, the facilitator must define and communicate their participation expectations for all activities that take place during the course.

In summary, the facilitator goal in a blended learning environment is to allow the learner to take ownership over his or her own learning experiences. Sorensen and Baylen (2004) provided the following “good instructional principles that a facilitator can follow to in order to provide the

students with a quality-learning environment" (as cited by Simonson et al., 2012, p.198) that can help lead them to this sense of ownership:

- Communication with Students
- Collaboration among students
- Active Learning Experiences
- Prompt feedback
- High expectations
- Respecting diversity(as cited by Simonson et al., 2012, p.198)

If the facilitator of a blended learning environment considers these principles throughout the whole course, they will guide the learners to the intended learning outcomes.

### ***Encouraging Online Communication***

Another role of the facilitator in a blended learning environment is finding ways to decrease the transactional distance of the course, through encouraging ongoing communication throughout all components of the course. The first step a facilitator must take in order to encourage the learners to communicate during the course is to make a conscious effort to get to know the learners. Similar to traditional learning environment, it is important to try and build a relationship with the learner, in order to build trust and learn how they interact. One way of ensuring you are getting to know the learner is staying in constant contact with the learners, including in the online component of the course (Laureate Education Inc., n.d.b). You can do that by sending out weekly announcements about the week activities through an online course management system, or even by sending personal emails to the students providing thoughtful feedback.

Another way to build the trust and to encourage the learners to communicate is by “addressing each other by name in order to build a sense of presence and social community” (Seckel, 2007, p.24). Creating this trusting learning community in a blended environment can be an impactful way of getting all learners to participate in discussions and study groups, because they feel as if they are contributing to the class. Seckel (2007) also suggested that "in addition to addressing others by name, learners should get to know one another and feel connected with one another through the use of off-topic discussions about their experiences and interest" (p.24). Therefore, the facilitator may want to design some icebreakers for both the face-to-face and online components of a blending learning course. The facilitator can create discussion boards within the course management system that is strictly for the students to provide background information about themselves and what they enjoy doing.

In conclusion, Simonson et al. (2012) explains that is essential for the facilitator to communicate about his or her role as the facilitator of the course. Thus, before the blended course begins it may be in the best interest of the facilitator to share some of the information provided in this section with the learners, to ensure the learners fully understand their role during the course. The facilitator's overall role in a blended format course is to "keep the learners involved in their own learning, not just keeping them busy" (Simonson et al., 2012, p.201). Therefore, if the facilitator provides instruction, manages the course, and encourages communication in an engaging way, the blended format course will be successful.

## **Conclusion**

When converting a traditional course into a blended format course it important not to try and just dump all the instructional activities form the traditional course into the blended course.

You need to consider the differences and the benefits of the blended environment, and create a course built around the strengths that a blended format course offers. Therefore, you must preplan different ways to retool your original instructional resources into strictly student-centered activities. You must also consider creative ways to enhance the distance-learning environment, in order to provide the learner with the equivalent learning experiences of a traditional course. Lastly, you must ensure that the facilitator knows and can define that role in the blended learning environment. The information in this facilitator's guideline is just a guide to helping you being to convert your classroom in a blended learning environment. I encourage you to think creatively about some of the things you learned from this guide and build on them as you create your new blended formatted course.

## Appendix

### UDL Guidelines – Educator Worksheet - v. 2

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>I. <u>Provide Multiple Means of Representation:</u></b>                               | Your notes |
| 1. <u>Provide options for perception</u>   |            |
| 1.1 <u>Offer ways of customizing the display of information</u>                          |            |
| 1.2 <u>Offer alternatives for auditory information</u>                                   |            |
| 1.3 <u>Offer alternatives for visual information</u>                                     |            |
| 2. <u>Provide options for language, mathematical expressions, and symbols</u>            |            |
| 2.1 <u>Clarify vocabulary and symbols</u>  |            |
| 2.2 <u>Clarify syntax and structure</u>  |            |
| 2.3 <u>Support decoding of text, mathematical notation, and symbols</u>                  |            |
| 2.4 <u>Promote understanding across language</u>   |            |
| 2.5 <u>Illustrate through multiple media</u>   |            |
| 3. <u>Provide options for comprehension</u>  |            |
| 3.1 <u>Activate or supply background knowledge</u>                                       |            |
| 3.2 <u>Highlight patterns, critical features, big ideas, and relationships</u>           |            |
| 3.3 <u>Guide information processing, visualization, and manipulation</u>                 |            |
| 3.4 <u>Maximize transfer and generalization</u>  |            |
| <b>II. <u>Provide Multiple Means for Action and Expression:</u></b>                      | Your notes |
| 4. <u>Provide options for physical action</u>  |            |
| 4.1 <u>Vary the methods for response and navigation</u>                                  |            |
| 4.2 <u>Optimize access to tools and assistive technologies</u>                           |            |
| 5. <u>Provide options for expression and communication</u>                               |            |
| 5.1 <u>Use multiple media for communication</u>  |            |
| 5.2 <u>Use multiple tools for construction and composition</u>                           |            |
| 5.3 <u>Build fluencies with graduated levels of support for practice and performance</u> |            |
| 6. <u>Provide options for executive functions</u>  |            |
| 6.1 <u>Guide appropriate goal setting</u>  |            |
| 6.2 <u>Support planning and strategy development</u>                                     |            |
| 6.3 <u>Facilitate managing information and resources</u>                                 |            |
| 6.4 <u>Enhance capacity for monitoring progress</u>                                      |            |
| <b>III. <u>Provide Multiple Means for Engagement:</u></b>                                | Your notes |
| 7. <u>Provide options for recruiting interest</u>  |            |
| 7.1 <u>Optimize individual choice and autonomy</u>                                       |            |
| 7.2 <u>Optimize relevance, value, and authenticity</u>                                   |            |
| 7.3 <u>Minimize threats and distractions</u>   |            |
| 8. <u>Provide options for sustaining effort and persistence</u>                          |            |
| 8.1 <u>Heighten salience of goals and objectives</u>                                     |            |
| 8.2 <u>Vary demands and resources to optimize challenge</u>                              |            |
| 8.3 <u>Foster collaboration and community</u>  |            |
| 8.4 <u>Increase mastery-oriented feedback</u>  |            |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>9.</b> <a href="#">Provide options for self-regulation</a>                        |  |
| <b>9.1</b> <a href="#">Promote expectations and beliefs that optimize motivation</a> |  |
| <b>9.2</b> <a href="#">Facilitate personal coping skills and strategies</a>          |  |
| <b>9.3</b> <a href="#">Develop self-assessment and reflection</a>                    |  |

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