Bridging the Gap: Blended Courses in the Business Discipline

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The purpose of this paper is to provide the reader with successful teaching models in hybrid courses utilized by faculty members at a community college. Utilizing the current literature, the paper outlines some of the challenges and successes that two faculty members have encountered while teaching partially online (blended) courses in the Business Department at Queensborough Community College. It highlights the current literature and provides constructive examples of how these findings can be addressed.

According to the American Association of Community Colleges, there are over 6.8 million students enrolled in full and part-time community colleges throughout the United States. (American Association of Community Colleges, Fast Facts, 2013.) Moreover, the number of students enrolling in blended or partially online courses has increased in recent years. Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) presently has approximately 25,000 students enrolled in its School of Continuing Education. (Hechinger, 2013). According to Hechinger, SNHU expected its revenue to reach $200 million in the current academic year. The expansion of online education is evident as more schools seek to increase the number of online course

offerings. However, it is important to keep in mind that the needs of the student and the role of the faculty member should not change.

The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools accredits Queensborough Community College. In addition, the Accreditation Council for Business Schools & Programs (ACBSP) accredits the Business Department at Queensborough. Both entities require the college and its academic departments to access learning outcomes for each course and program on a continual basis. One of the outcomes of our last Middle States Self-Study at Queensborough Community College has been the introduction of programs to support faculty and students involved in blended or partially online courses. The implementation of partially online courses began in the Business Department at Queensborough Community College approximately four years ago. However, this was not the first offering of online courses in the department. Fully online courses had been offered in previous years to students enrolled in the business curriculum.

The college began a deliberate process of providing faculty with the opportunity to participate in an e-Learning institute. The institute supplies the faculty member with the necessary training and peer mentorship to successfully develop and teach a partially online course. The program has been a success and has led to the increase of both fully and partially online course offerings. It has operated on the premise that a teacher must learn how to develop and offer a course in the online environment. Teaching a course is a process that must be learned. (Ball and Forzani, 2009.) The institute provides an atmosphere that allows the faculty member to develop a skillset to successfully teach an online course.

The purpose of this paper is to share some of the challenges and successes that two faculty members have encountered while teaching partially online (blended) courses in the Business Department at Queensborough Community College.

Professor Leslie Francis developed and teaches a partially online introductory Business Law course. Professor Christine Mooney developed and teaches a partially online introductory Principles of Finance course. Both Professor Francis and Professor Mooney are attorneys licensed to practice law in the State of New York. As full-time faculty members of the Business Department, both have chosen to explore offering (blended) partially online courses. The course content ranges from Business Law to Principles of Finance. There are distinct similarities in the evolution of each course and its implementation.

Faculty Development

The e-Learning institute at Queensborogh has been successful in providing faculty with the opportunity to reflect, develop and successfully implement their courses. Prior studies indicate that training allows faculty to reflect and transform their online and traditional classroom teaching experiences. (King 2002). An academic institution that provides faculty training and support will be successful in their online course offerings. Developing and acquiring a new skillset can assist faculty in being successful in the online classroom. (King 2002). By participating in the e-Learning institute, each faculty member was able to reexamine his or her traditional and online teaching methods. Faculty members were also able to question and examine both the course materials and teaching techniques that they had previously used.

Course Platform

Online courses at Queensborough are maintained through the Blackboard learning management system. This platform provides a variety of useful tools to help the faculty and

students. Several instructors also offer partially online courses through an Epsilen learning management system. This platform is different from Blackboard but also provides another tool for course development. Professor Francis and Professor Mooney use Blackboard because it provides more flexibility for student usage.

Course Communication

Partially online courses are regularly scheduled for one in-person class meeting per week. The class typically meets for one hour and fifteen minutes. The first in-person class meeting is vital to contact and personal introductions with the faculty member and students.   Students are also contacted through the course's Blackboard website. Each instructor uses the announcement function to communicate with students. This feature allows you to post the announcement on the course site and have it sent to individual student email accounts. Instructors use this tool throughout the course of the semester to communicate with students about attendance, exams and course materials. However, both instructors have experienced issues with student email addresses. Unfortunately, the email address in the system does not always properly match the student contact information. This frustrates both faculty and students. Therefore, the importance of course meetings is stressed to ensure meaningful two-way communication between student and professor. The authors of this article agree that the in-person course meeting time is vital to student success and retention.

Course Design

Business Law is a course that covers a wide spectrum of legal content, including the history of the U.S. legal system, constitutional law, criminal law, contracts, e-commerce, and basic business organizations. Throughout the course, lessons on business ethics highlight the importance of always conducting oneself with integrity.

The Business Law course is designed around four separate units or modules. Each module corresponds to one of four parts of the textbook and contains material associated with those content areas, including video presentations, articles and PowerPoint lectures. There are four writing assignments per module.

The first task in each module is a formal assignment where students are required to respond to a question posed by the professor. It is graded online by the instructor. In the second task, students engage in an online discussion using Blackboard. This discussion is based on a specific legal topic covered in the module. Students' postings on the Discussion Board are graded as low stakes writing assignments. Each student must post a response that is critiqued and graded in the professor's reply. Blogs are also used for student reflection on the following six questions: 1) What factors enabled you to perform as well as you did? 2) What actions did you take? What choices did you make, and what resources did you use while completing the module's assignments? 3) What have you learned from completing this module? 4) How does this module differ from what you expected to learn? 5) How is what you learned in this module relevant to your education, your life, or your future? 6) What did you like or not like about this module?

Having students reflect on the curriculum is meant to deepen the students' understanding of the course content by allowing them to think and write about their learning strategy and how a particular module impacts their life. Beck noted that the usage of a discussion board forum in a blended law course provides for greater student success and engagement. (Beck 2010). In his article, he discusses the implementation of a ''Muddiest Point'' (Mosteller 1989). The "muddiest point" requires students to post an item from the reading assignment that was challenging. It provides the students and instructor an opportunity to begin the course discussion

reviewing difficult materials. Beck's course required the submission of the "Muddiest Point," by Wednesday. This provided a two day window between when the postings were completed and the in-person course meeting took place. These submissions then served as the basis for class discussion during the in person meeting time. (Beck, 2010). We have both observed that a Discussion Board posting that asks for questions or suggestions for the upcoming course meeting enhances student engagement and participation. The adaptation of the "Muddiest Point" concept has increased student involvement in course reading assignments.

The fourth written component is a section entitled Legal Eagle. Students are asked in the Legal Eagle assignment to provide Internet links to information that would be useful to future students taking the course. By requiring students to contribute to the future development of the modules, Professor Francis believes that students gain a greater understanding of the course material as they think critically about how to make the course better for their peers. An additional resource in each module is a video presentation, which further enhances the students' understanding of the course materials. Both professors utilize the pedagogical approach of a flipped classroom. (Strauss,2012.). This approach requires students to view videos prior to attending class. The videos introduce the subject matter and allow the instructors the opportunity to spend more classroom time addressing questions. In addition, the video presentations are typically used as the basis for either the formal assignment or the online discussion, to augment a particular aspect of the material covered in the module. The videos make the course material more relevant to the students because they provide real life examples of how the law can impact their lives either directly or indirectly.

There is one particular video on white-collar crime that features an attorney who was convicted and sent to jail for defrauding a bank in a real estate transaction. Students hear how

this man's life was destroyed as a consequence of greed, shortsightedness, and a lack of ethics. The lesson is much more meaningful than just reading about it or hearing a lecture on the topic. This is just one of the videos that always fosters an in depth dialogue during the discussion board assignment and typically promotes true critical thinking among the students.

The introductory Principles of Finance course taught by Professor Mooney is also divided into four separate modules. Each module is designed to provide the student with materials to assist them in completing reading assignments. Each week a chapter is assigned from the course textbook. The instructor then provides the students with a corresponding video link from current topics. For example, the first course module instructs the students on The Federal Reserve System. The instructor assigns an interview from the television show 60 Minutes to highlight the current day topic of the Federal Reserve. The purpose of the video assignment is to give students the opportunity to learn about relevant and timely materials. In addition, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York Education Department has launched a new learning tool, which is also utilized in the course. The Federal Reserve provides videos on monetary policy that correspond to various chapters in the finance textbook. These videos are then assigned as part of the online course materials.

The use of these videos provides a much-needed degree of relevance to the current world for the students. These videos allow students to place the course materials in context and relate the material beyond the textbook. The videos also serve as a starting point for class discussions at the start of each class. These discussions raise the interest of the students and increase class participation. Both authors of this article have observed that the implementation of these resources significantly enhances student engagement and learning.

Professor Mooney has also introduced the use of optional synchronous or real-time online chats. These chats are held one evening a week. The chat is an opportunity for students and faculty members to chat about the current assignment and any other relevant questions. The chat room function provides another opportunity for students to dialog with the faculty member beyond the traditional classroom setting. It also is a forum where students who do not feel comfortable speaking in class will ask questions. The difficulty of using the chat function is establishing a convenient time for faculty and students to meet. In addition, the chat is utilized in the Collaborate function of Blackboard. Therefore, if students do not have the proper software, it can present many problems. Lastly, many students take evening classes and are unable to log in to the evening chat sessions. However, those students who are unable to log in are able to view a recorded transcript of the actual chat.

This course also uses the discussion board forum in Blackboard. Each week the instructor posts a discussion question. Students are asked to respond to the question and begin a threaded discussion about the course materials. The theme of each week's question relates to the assigned chapter in the text. Student responses on the discussion board are required and count for 10% of the total student grade in aggregate. The discussion board forums give students the opportunity to engage one another in collaborative dialogue that leads to a deeper understanding of the curriculum.

In Person Class Meeting Time

The Business Law class meets once a week and Professor Francis uses the first fifteen minutes of the class to answer questions students may have about the reading assignment. Professor Francis then reviews the learning objectives for the assigned textbook

chapter, and he divides his class into groups for a discussion. Professor Francis rotates among the groups to keep the discussions relevant and lively and to answer questions when necessary.

The remaining time is devoted to a brief lecture that summarizes the topics addressed in the reading assignment. Student participation is elicited through the use of a series of "what if" questions. These questions pose various scenarios and students are required to apply the relevant law to various fact patterns or scenarios. As the students address each scenario, the fact pattern is changed slightly to raise different legal issues to be addressed by the class. Professor Francis makes the fact patterns humorous to heighten student engagement while meaningfully addressing the learning objectives for the chapter. The class concludes with an overview of the next week's assignment, an outline of the due dates for upcoming assignments and a reminder of the timeframe within which to take the module exam.

The Principles of Finance course is designed in such a way that nearly the entire on-campus meeting is dedicated to a review session. The session begins with an agenda placed on the board. This agenda outlines topics for each class meeting. Students spend the first ten minutes by pairing up with a classmate to discuss their weekly assignment. Each pair is responsible for providing the class with a learning "cookie" for the week. The cookies, as the instructor calls them, are used as an oral tool to encourage students to discuss and reflect on the reading and video assignment. The cookies are reported back and used to frame the review for the course meeting. The next portion of the course meeting time is a lecture. The lecture provides a comprehensive overview of the most important points in the reading assignment. At several points throughout the lecture the instructor asks a question to encourage student engagement in the lesson. As the class period draws to a close, there is a review of the agenda

and a discussion of the assignments for the coming week. This cycle of reminders ensures that all students are ready for previous and upcoming assignments.

Student Retention & Participation

Both Prof. Francis and Mooney believe that the success of a community college student is partially determined by the course design. (Jaggars, 2011). Jaggars states that an online course can be isolating and offers a lack of structure for a community college student. Both faculty members believe that the hybrid course is the most structured approach to address this shortcoming and that it is of vital importance to support the students to the greatest degree possible. Professor Francis and Mooney agree with the literature that says students in online classes need to be self-regulated learners. We have concluded that success in an online environment requires a student to be self-motivated, possess good time management skills and be mature enough to handle the inherent challenges of an online class and the distinct workload it requires. Students who possess the requisite self-regulation skill sets find success in an online environment and, as a consequence, the student retention ratio between Professor Francis' traditional Business Law classes and the partially online class is appreciably higher for the partially online class. Further, lack of self-regulation—students missing assignments—is a key factor in why course completion rates are higher in Professor Francis' traditional on-campus Business Law classes than in his partially online classes.

The online course provides a clear outline of deadlines in both the course management system and during the course meetings. Since the boundaries of a partially online class are more pronounced than a traditional face-to-face class, it is easier for students to keep themselves on track with regard to completing course work on time. Additionally, they receive constant

communication about due dates, pertinent announcements and feedback on assignments from their instructor through the Blackboard platform and the student email system.

There is a precise schedule of due dates for all work to be completed in each module which is outlined in the course syllabus and given to students on the first day of class. Professor Francis stresses the absolute necessity for the timely submission of work in accordance with the schedule. Any work submitted late receives an automatic point deduction. Professor Mooney believes that the highly structured environment of the partially online class keeps students motivated to perform and leads to a higher retention rate in the hybrid course than in the traditional courses.

Of course, there are always students who find the stresses associated with this type of class to be too much to handle, primarily because they do not possess the skills required to obtain success in a partially online environment. (Jaggars, 2011). Through early assessment of the student's performance, Professor Francis and Mooney schedule meetings with those students who are at risk of failing the course to discuss what is causing them to struggle. Depending on the cause identified, the student can be referred to a variety of academic and non-academic support services at the college.

Professor Mooney has found that course retention for her partially online classes are significantly higher than in a fully online course that she teaches each semester. This is due to the scheduled in-person meetings. The in-person meeting time provides a basis for the students to be accountable for the course materials. This is different than an online course where there are no scheduled in-person meeting times. Student retention in Professor Francis class is based on several factors. Beginning with the first class meeting, a schedule is handed out to the students.

It provides a week-by-week breakdown of the assignments and their due dates. It also includes a column for the students to maintain a self-check that they have completed the work.

Each week, Professor Francis posts an announcement on Blackboard that is emailed to all course participants. This email is another reminder to students to complete their weekly assignments. Unfortunately, there are several students each semester that do not fully participate in the course requirements. These students are contacted through the college's early warning system. The system allows both faculty members to reach out to the student and encourages the student to seek assistance through one of the various academic support services available on campus.

An active commitment to the class is vital to success in the partially online course. Therefore, both instructors stress the importance of timely class attendance and completing all assignments on time. It is often difficult for a student who misses a class meeting or an assignment to grasp and understand the course materials.

Course Exams

Professor Mooney concludes each module with an online exam that students can take up to four separate times in a two-week period. The exams are used primarily as another teaching tool. For Professor Francis, the exams are not used for assessment and therefore make up a smaller percentage of a student's overall grade. The exams are 50 multiple-choice questions, and students are given one hour to complete the exam. At the end of the one-hour period, the exam ends. The primary assessment tools in Professor Francis' class are the four low stakes writing assignments contained in the four modules. In a class of twenty-five students, grading these written assignments is indeed a chore, but Professor Francis believes that they provide a better barometer of student progress and are well worth the effort on his part.

Professor Mooney also allows her students to take their exams online. The students are given a one-week period to take the exam. The exams are comprised of multiple-choice, true false and short answer essay questions. The exams are not timed and encourage students to review all course materials prior to taking the exam. The final exam is given in the on-campus classroom during the final exam period.

Academic Support Services

There are a variety of programs at Queensborough Community College designed to prepare students for the rigors on online learning and support them in this endeavor. The college has implemented an online eReadiness Learning program. This program provides students with an online tutorial for all facets of an online course. The program is divided into four separate modules. Each module provides a tutorial for students about the use of the Blackboard learning system and other campus services. It also stresses the importance of the college's academic integrity policy. Students who successfully complete the program receive a certificate for their participation in the course. The completion of this program is mandatory for students in both courses. This reduces the likelihood of students saying that they do not understand the technology for the course site.

Student Feedback

In addition to the Legal Eagle assignment in Professor Francis' class, students are given time at the end of the semester to perform an in-class free-write exercise to provide suggestions for making the course better. By the comments Professor Francis has received, students seem to enjoy the face-to-face class time and have suggested two class meetings per week instead of one. A two a week face-to-face class schedule was attempted but it did not lead to any improvement

in the class in any determinative manner. It did not increase retention, exam performance or student response time to assignments.

Another consistent suggestion that Professor Francis has considered is more than one extra credit opportunity for students. The students are given one extra credit assignment that involves watching a movie with a legal theme and writing a five-page paper based on questions posed by Professor Francis. Some of the movies that Professor Francis has assigned have been: "12 Angry Men," "Gideon's Trumpet," "The Verdict," and "Witness for the Prosecution." Professor Francis offered two extra credit assignments last semester with increased student participation. It enhanced their overall learning experience.

Each semester, Professor Mooney gives her students the opportunity to evaluate and make suggestions for the improvement of the course. These suggestions are used to revise the course with the goal of enhancing student learning. For example, last semester students suggested that the transcript of the weekly optional chats be posted in the course documents section of the site. Some students had difficulty locating the transcript of the chat. The posting of the transcript in the course documents section of the site provide easier access for student to review the documents. Other student feedback has included the formation of individual student study groups within the course site. The implementation of the student groups came at the recommendation of the individual students who expressed a desire to have a virtual study space.

Recommendations

Ensuring student success is vital to the success of online course offerings. This success can only be achieved through the engagement and feedback of students. A faculty member who wishes to teach online should participate in a training program, as different skills are needed. A

training program will enhance the skillset of the faculty member. In addition, this type of training will provide the faculty member with an opportunity to reflect on their teaching modality. (King 2002). The use of daily reminders to students through announcement and emails are critical. A faculty member who teaches a blended course at a community college needs to be mindful of the challenges typically faced by students. Students enrolled in online courses at community colleges typically face socioeconomic and technology constraints. (Jaggars, 2011).   Therefore, it is incumbent upon an institution offering online courses to provide proper student training and support to ensure success. Both Professor Francis and Professor Mooney believe in the continued need for reflection and assessment by the faculty member and the institution.

Conclusion

We believe that regular communication and outreach will lead to a more successful faculty and student partnership in blended courses. The on-campus class meeting time is vital to ensure a connection between the students and the faculty member. However, the ability to focus on alternative modality for the development of course materials has provided a richer learning experience in both courses for the students.

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