Abstract

Many universities are offering courses using an array of instructional and delivery methods that include traditional classroom, fully online, blended or hybrid courses, and webinar-style courses, among others, to meet the varying demands and needs of students. However, most universities provide faculty development to improve teaching in the traditional classroom or in the online classroom. There is a need for faculty development to improve and enhance the teaching of blended courses. This paper will discuss one university’s approach to adding faculty development designed to prepare faculty to design and teach effective blended courses. The university developed a multi-step process designed to 1) Introduce faculty to the terminology used in blended instruction (for example synchronous and asynchronous instruction); 2) Provide a structure for creating a syllabus for a blended course; and 3) Understand and create effective instructional activities for use in a blended course.

Keywords: Asynchronous instruction, Blended instruction, Faculty development, Pedagogy

Literature Review

When one thinks about higher education in the past it conjures a vision of large classrooms, rows of desks, and a professor lecturing. This is what some think of as face-to-face instruction. With the advent of computers and the Internet in education, there is a movement toward online education. Currently many colleges and universities have moved to a blended model of course design and instruction that involves a face-to-face component (synchronous) as well as an online component (asynchronous). A synchronous component requires that both the instructor and the students work through instruction at the same time while the asynchronous component allows the instructor and students to work through the course on their own time.

Blended is one of the fastest growing course delivery systems on campuses, with 79% of colleges and universities offering blended courses (McGee, Reis, 2012) and 81% of college presidents expect blended learning to have a high impact on how they adapt to meet student needs (Selingo, 2015).
McGee and Reis (2012, p. 9) stated that “blended course design involves instructor and learners working together in mixed delivery modes (…) to accomplish learning outcomes that are pedagogically supported through assignments, activities and assessments”. The Saint Leo University (Parrish, 2014) faculty training course states that “blended courses provide students and instructors with the best of both worlds: the real-time interaction of synchronous instruction and the flexibility of asynchronous instruction. As a matter of fact, Saint Leo defines a blended course as one that, “combines synchronous instruction and asynchronous instruction” (Saint Leo University, 2013, p. 1). Educause (2012) defines a blended course as one that is held partially online and partially in a face to face format. This format allows for less seat time for the students. Colleges and universities in the United States are required to meet the United States Department of Education’s definition of a credit hour. It is defined as “not less than one hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours out of class student work each week for approximately fifteen weeks for one semester” (SACSCOC, 2012, p. 1). For a three credit hour course, there is a requirement of 45 hours of instruction and 90 hours of out of class work. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) does allow institutions flexibility in meeting the federal definition of a credit hour. While the majority of institutions provide professional development for faculty teaching face to face courses, it is surprising to find that far fewer institutions offer/require professional development for faculty teaching blended courses. Ciabocchi and Ginsburg (2012) conducted a survey of over 100 institutions, both public and private, to determine the extent of faculty development for designing and teaching blended courses. Results of the survey found that, “only 25% of the institutions required faculty development for blended instruction” (Ciabocchi, Ginsburg, 2012, par. 7). The faculty development that was offered tended to be done internally with only 15% of the universities surveyed offering a certification to the faculty completing the training (Ciabocchi, Ginsburg, 2012). College presidents echoed the concern that faculty do not get sufficient support in developing blended courses in a Chronicle of Higher Education survey (Selingo, 2014).

Training in course design, implementation, and experience in taking blended/online courses are a necessary component of faculty development. There are several institutions with model initiatives in faculty development of blended courses. Initiatives such as Educause: ELI Blended Learning Workshop (Diaz, Strickland, 2009), The Blended Online Learning Workshop 2013 (Center for Instructional Innovation, Teaching, Learning & Technology, Extended Education, Western Washington University, 2013) and the Blended Toolkit (University of Central Florida & American Association of State Colleges and Universities, n.d.) are examples of effective faculty development for blended courses. These workshops have several common themes. Although there are differences in the number of modules and the delivery systems, there is general agreement on the content needed for faculty professional development for blended courses. An initial experience should introduce the faculty member to blended learning and the platform for delivery of the online component. The next component involves the planning and design of the course. This may include developing/adapting the syllabus to the blended format. The next component is developing content, activities, assignments, and assessments. A quality assurance component and an implementation plan are included. Best practice would dictate that the training be delivered in the blended format to give the faculty a model to follow.
It could also be done asynchronously to allow for flexibility. Chickering and Gamson (1986) published a seminal piece on effective teaching practices. This had a great impact on online teaching. Chickering and Ehrmann (1996) took the practices identified in the earlier work and related them to teaching with technology. There is general agreement as to what constitutes effective asynchronous teaching practices. It begins with the course design. The course should have clear learning objectives. The course content should encourage interaction (active learning) such as web quests, Internet searches, simulations, reading and reflections, and videos. The use of discussion threads should encourage higher levels of thinking, critical analysis, and reflection. Discussion threads and learning activities should foster interaction between the following groups: instructor to student, student to student and student to content. Assessments are designed to assess learning outcomes. Feedback to students should be timely, specific, and communicate high expectations (Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, Duffy, 2001; Chickering, Gamson, 1986; Chickering, Ehrmann, 1996).

Challenges to Creating Quality Blended Courses

Saint Leo University is committed to creating quality courses, but faced challenges in ensuring consistently high-quality course design for several reasons. These included a lack of consistency across sections in how much time was spent synchronously or asynchronously, a lack of professional instructional designers to develop standard blended courses, a lack of knowledge on the part of instructors about what is required for blended instruction, and a lack of understanding on the part of instructors about how to create online instructional activities. Each of these challenges will be addressed briefly, as they relate to creating a professional development process for blended courses.

Blended courses are taught in eight-week terms at the institution. Based on this schedule, each three credit hour course meets for five hours per week. When creating a blended course, the amount of the meeting time spent synchronously ranged from two - four hours, with the remaining hours of instruction being provided online. The first step to developing a consistent process was to standardize blended courses so that they all meet synchronously for 2.5 hours and asynchronously for 2.5 hours per week.

The university employs a team of instructional and graphic designers to work with faculty in developing standard courses for fully online delivery. This approach has led to high-quality online courses because the content is established in advanced and instructors are able to focus on delivering, rather than creating, courses. However, the instructional design team was working at capacity and could not expand to meet the needs of developing the online portion of blended courses. Therefore, a process was needed to assist faculty in developing online content.

As university administration began communicating with instructors about blended courses, it became clear that not all instructors understood the difference between synchronous instruction, asynchronous instruction, and out-of-class work. These three distinctions are critical to developing blended courses that will ensure sufficient instructional and homework time for students to master the learning outcomes associated with the course. The institution needed a mechanism to help instructors understand the components required of blended instruction and
to understand the federal laws underlying these requirements. Even when instructors did understand the requirements for instructional time in blended courses, they were not comfortable in creating online learning activities. Instructors are content area experts and most have not studied teaching strategies, let alone teaching strategies for the online environment. The institution needed to provide instructors with ideas for how to create online content and a set of easy-to-use tools to use when developing the content.

**Methodology of the Course**

After analyzing the challenges, the institution decided to develop an online orientation course that would be required for all instructors desiring to teach blended courses. The course was developed by the first author and is facilitated by the university's virtual Center for Academic Excellence. It was designed specifically to address the challenges outlined above. The course was developed in the university's Learning Management System (LMS) and uses the same format and strategies that are taught in the orientation. This was done so that instructors see the strategies applied in a practical model.

The Blended Faculty Orientation (BFO) is comprised of three modules. The first module addresses definitions and federal requirements for defining the academic credit hour. The second addresses how to determine which content should be presented synchronously and which should be presented asynchronously and provides both pedagogical and technical information on how to create asynchronous instructional activities. The third module focuses on how to create a cycle of instruction, allowing a smooth flow between synchronous and asynchronous instruction. The rest of this section will provide detail on these three modules.

**Module One**

The first module focuses on knowledge and comprehension of the terms used in blended instruction and on federal regulatory information from the United States Department of Education. The learning outcomes for the first module are:

- Define key terms related to blended instruction
- Demonstrate an understanding of [the university's] definitions of and expectations for blended courses

These learning outcomes are measured with a multiple-choice quiz.

The module is created and uploaded using a word processing program, so that instructors can see how to create professional appearing materials without the input of an instructional designer. The university uses a standard approach in fully online courses that incorporates three components: preparation, interaction, and evaluation (For more information see Nastanski, Colaric, 2008). Instructors of blended courses are encouraged to follow this same model so that students have a consistent approach to online instruction and to help the instructors develop a cohesive lesson in the online environment. Synchronous instruction can be delivered real-time face-to-face in a traditional classroom, by video conferencing or via webinar format. As
would be expected, synchronous instruction requires the instructor and students to participate in “class” at the same time. Asynchronous instruction is provided within the LMS and allows the instructor and students to participate in “class” at different times. The modules in the BFO focus on delivering instruction in the asynchronous, online environment.

**MODULE TWO**

The second module requires participants to begin creating a plan for delivering a blended course and to develop two learning activities that could be used in their blended course. The module learning objectives are:

- Determine which asynchronous instructional approaches are best for your class
- Create two instructional activities for a blended course you will teach

To achieve these goals the module includes information on how to turn the limited information in the course syllabus into a detailed plan for presenting lessons in the synchronous and asynchronous classrooms. Participants are required to create a Course Blueprint and submit it for grading in the BFO. This Blueprint is a template (See Appendix A) that helps instructors think about which content to present synchronously and which content to present asynchronously. The module encourages participants to think about how the pieces of the course come together to maximize student learning by stating:

As you look at the content pieces for synchronous instruction, you will want to determine how students should prepare for those activities and then determine what asynchronous activities should be completed prior to engaging in the synchronous class. This is the start of your personalized blueprint!

Once you determine the online activities needed to prepare for synchronous instruction, you will want to plan for your synchronous meeting. You will plan for guided instruction, in-class activities and discussions, and other instructional pieces. As you create your blueprint, you want to think about making connections forward. This will help students see the value of the asynchronous activities (Parrish, 2014, Module 2).

Participants are given examples of course Blueprints to use as models in developing their own Blueprints. The Blueprint needs to include estimated times for how long a student will need to complete each instructional component. This helps instructors understand how much content is needed to meet the regulations surrounding the credit hour.

Once participants create a blueprint, they are ready to begin creating online instructional activities. The BFO is designed to provide several activities that can be created by instructors without advanced technology equipment or knowledge. All participants are required to create a PowerPoint with narration and to submit it for grading. This approach allows instructors to create mini-lectures that can be posted online and that become the basis of synchronous and asynchronous discussions and activities. The creation of PowerPoint with narration is facilitated
by including step-by-step instructions and YouTube videos that demonstrate the process in detail. Other instructional activities that are covered in the module include developing conflicting system (Paul, Elder, 2007) discussion questions; incorporating web quests, web searches, and research; Writing Across the Curriculum activities; critical thinking and decision-making activities; and quizzes and exams. For each instructional strategy, participants are given web resources, directions, and/or examples.

After spending time with each of the instructional approaches, participants are required to develop a substantive instructional activity to be graded. This activity must require students to interact with the content and to receive structured support from the instructor. The key is to develop an activity that is more than a homework assignment.

**MODULE THREE**

The third module focuses on bringing the asynchronous and synchronous components of the course together into a cohesive learning experience. The learning outcomes are:

- Develop an instructional loop between the synchronous and asynchronous portions of blended courses
- Link synchronous and asynchronous instruction to out-of-class work
- Review the Blueprint created in Module Two

These objectives are assessed via a discussion posting. To prepare for the post, participants spend time reviewing the Blueprint they created in Module Two. They are asked to think about how synchronous and asynchronous activities are related to one another and to consider what out-of-class work is needed to prepare for these activities. Out-of-class activities include reading, studying, writing papers, and other traditional “homework” used in college classes. These are added to the Blueprint. Then, participants write a narrative explaining how the synchronous, asynchronous, and out-of-class activities create a cycle of instruction for their students. The goal is to create a Blueprint that will hold students accountable for completing all activities and that will make it clear to students how the pieces of the class are connected. The narrative and the revised Blueprint are posted on a discussion thread and become resources for other participants.

**RESULTS**

In the first ten months of implementation, approximately 100 faculty members have completed the BFO. These faculty members teach a predominantly adult population who take courses in eight-week terms. The instructors vary from new to the institution to having several years of experience.

In order to determine the effectiveness of the training, instructor minutes in the online portion of the course were tracked. Daley (2002) supports the idea that increased instructor presence in an online course will increase student engagement in the course. Data from the five eight-week terms prior to the implementation to the required training and data from the five eight-week
terms after the implementation of the required training were compared. Overall, instructor time spent in the online portion of blended courses rose from a mean of 4.48 hours per week prior to training to a mean of 10.1 hours per week after the training. Prior to training, 57 percent of instructors spent more than 2.5 hours per week in the online portion of blended courses, compared with 65 percent of instructors spending this amount of time after training. Two and a half hours is the number of hours identified by the institution as the expected time dedicated to online instruction each week.

In addition, paired t-tests were conducted to compare instructor levels of engagement prior to and after completing the BFO, for those who taught in both conditions. A total of 236 instructors taught blended courses prior to and after completing the BFO. The results showed a mean increase of 309.26 minutes over the eight-week course (38.65 minutes per week) with $p=0.008$.

**Conclusion**

The BFO has improved the engagement of instructors in blended courses and the institution will continue to offer it. However, the data indicate that several steps should be addressed in the future. The first is that more blended training is needed. While the increase in percentage of instructors meeting the minimum expectation is important, the institution needs to have all courses meeting the time requirements. The initial training has been effective, but ongoing and advanced training opportunities should be developed to ensure the levels of increased engagement do not wane.

In addition, there is a need to work individually with any instructors who have not increased engagement in the course. These instructors may need additional training or may not be suited to blended instruction. Each course will be reviewed by university administration to determine which approach is most suited for that individual instructor. If improvement is not seen, instructors should lose their certification to teach blended courses.

The BFO was designed to align with the need identified in the literature and with the needs assessment completed by the institution and, overall, the Blended Faculty Orientation has been successful.
APPENDIX A: BLUEPRINT TEMPLATE

Course: [ Title1 ]
Module: [ Number ]

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Saint Leo University (2013), *Academic Affairs Update Policies 116: Blended Course Standards*, Saint Leo, FL, USA

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https://blended.online.ucf.edu/faculty-development