Developing Online/Hybrid Learning Models for Higher Education Programs

William Young, Linda Allen, and Kimberly Warfield
Jacksonville State University

Abstract

Colleges and universities are looking for creative ways to increase student enrollment while providing flexible course offerings and maintaining adequate fiscal stewardship. This review of selected literature advocates for the use of online instruction in higher education in order to address, with instructional fidelity, the learning preferences and needs of the modern era student. A decade ago, student enrollment for online learning was estimated to be around 1.9 million students (Allen & Seaman, 2004). Today, online course enrollment estimations are much closer to 5.3 million (Fleming, 2014). The authors' perspective for meeting this demand is for higher education programs to embrace this evolution in instructional delivery.

Keywords: online, hybrid, higher education, instructional program, pedagogy

It is becoming readily apparent that with the cost of higher education increasing beyond what the average American can afford to pay or is willing to go in debt over, there is a growing recognition that online education is triggering a decisive change in the business model of colleges and universities (Butler, 2012). More and more, colleges and universities are looking for ways to increase enrollment, maximize their ability to provide flexible course offerings, and maintain adequate fiscal stewardship of public tax dollars and private donations. Many are finding that online and hybrid models of instruction fit the business model needed to sustain financial growth and viability. In the last decade, it was estimated that online learning would shift from 1.9 million students enrolled to around 3.9 million in 2014 (Allen & Seaman, 2004). However, the actual numbers rose higher than expected with enrollment in online courses – whole programs or stand-alone courses – much closer to 5.3 million (Fleming, 2014). Still, some stakeholders within the field worry that a certain level of academic rigor and fidelity is being sacrificed in order to achieve these ends. Even so, compelling arguments have been made that, for some students, "the online experience with social and extracurricular features of college may even be superior" (McKeown, 2012, p. 1).

Because of the proliferation of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), higher education institutions have their choice as to what digital tools and virtual platforms they wish to engage with in order to best provide instruction for their students. All of these choices have enabled the rapid expansion of online and hybrid models of instruction that stretches traditional concepts of learning pedagogy. As this growth continues, instructors must continue to develop effective teaching strategies in order to remain relevant within the field. So then critical points to consider remain: what professional investment will be required of professors for their students, and for their chosen profession? When developing such a program, what strategies, practices, and routines are necessary for instructors to employ for effective and relevant instruction? What are the ramifications to a college or university's bottom line when considering web-based instructional models and is it worth a redesign of entire academic programs? Will this transformation hinder or critically damage the academic vision and mission of the institution? These questions are fundamental to determining the worth of such a shift in higher education and it is these authors' perspective that such a shift is not only worthy, but also vital to developing the types of learning experiences that are authentic and translatable in the 21st century.

Fiscal Stewardship and the Higher Education Model

No one who has studied fiscal management of post-secondary institutions over the last half-century would consider it a stretch to say that the cost of attending college within the United States has drastically increased. In fact, since 1970, the long-term trend of tuition and fees for students in college has risen at a rate six percent faster than the standard rate of inflation (Schoen, 2015). As recently as just the last ten years, tuition and fees at American higher education institutions "have outpaced inflation and increased 28 percent" (Batkins, Miller & Gitis, 2014, Summary points, para. 1). Perspective students who are looking for creative solutions to their desire to receive an academic degree are continually seeking after alternatives. This ability to offer course content at a lower cost is becoming increasingly difficult with the continued rise of administrative costs among all levels of higher education. According to Batkins et al. (2014):

> General administrative staff, which includes business and financial operations at postsecondary institutions, grew 31.5 percent during the last decade (from 148,190 in

2003 to 195,000 in 2012), with a 10 percent gain from 2009 to 2012, despite the Great Recession…. [I]n 2003 post-secondary institutions (including trade schools, junior colleges, and universities) paid approximately $7.1 billion for administrative staff expenses. By 2012, that figure jumped to $11.5 billion. In other words, institutions added $4.4 billion in costs for administrative staff alone. ("Regulation Increase Tuition", para.1)

Bolger and Hobart (2014) found 92% of respondents agreed that college is too expensive (Summary points, para. 1). Just as disconcerting for these same institutions is the determination by the majority of those surveyed (52%) that a four-year college degree is not worth the average $26,000 of debt accrued upon graduation. Another study conducted by Bob Morse (2010) surveyed current college students to determine what factors influenced their decision to attend the institutions where they were presently enrolled. Student responses were ranked by order of importance and two of the top four reasons for attending their specific location had to do with "financial assistance offered" (44.7%) and "the cost of attending this college" (41.6%) (Morse, 2010, para. 5).

None of these statistics bode well for academic models presently in existence in higher education today. Still, even if these institutions can't fully "reduce" the cost of tuition and fees, online and hybrid models of learning offer unique and marketable areas of "savings" that traditional program models simply can't do. McKeown (2012) offered real, tangible ways in which online and hybrid programs can set themselves apart financially and appeal to potential students whose time and money are overriding factors in determining where they attend school. Online education is an increasingly attractive option for students "because it allows them to pursue their studies at a time and place convenient to them" (McKeown, 2012, p. 6). In this same vein, if less debt is incurred because of "lower tuition, lower living expenses, and/or the ability to work part-time or full- time while in college—the increased earning potential accompanying the degree may appear to be more immediate and thus more attractive" (McKeown, 2012, p. 6).

There are avenues of great potential in changing these statistical trends if colleges and universities are willing to begin shifting their mindset outside of the traditional models of learning. Respondents to Bolger and Hobart (2014) "strongly favor" online courses as viable alternatives to the traditional college classroom ("Key Findings Survey", para. 5). Still, it is not a foregone conclusion that the more fiscally sound academic route is that of online learning. There are those that push back on this idea and worry that too many assumptions regarding the cost and savings from the move to online learning could have secondary and tertiary detrimental effects. Some like, Christensen and Horn (2011) predicted that online education will be a dramatically disruptive force and that 15 years from now, provisions for cheap high-quality education, will drive half the universities in the country out of business. Wang and Torrisi-Steele (2015) outlined a number of unaccounted for costs associated with online instruction often assumed out of the cost of implementation, and incorrectly so. "While an instructor in a traditionally taught course can easily drop new material into the syllabus or even an individual class, modifying an online course usually requires reshooting video, editing existing content, modifying software, and so on" (Wang & Torrisi-Steele, 2015, p. 143). The issue, quite frankly, is that a simple addition or deletion of course content could, and often-times does, require multiple entities to make these changes and those things take time, and as a result, money. " Our point is that while online courses offer the potential for constant modification and updates, realizing this potential may in fact be expensive, leading to less-frequent updates than for traditionally taught subjects" (Wang & Torrisi-Steele, 2015, p. 143).

If developed properly and implemented in such a way that all of the strengths of online learning are utilized, with accommodations made to adequately address its weaknesses, a compelling case can be made that a shift into the world of online education is not only fiscally prudent, but academically sound. Although the financial considerations are not without its detractors, there is a critical mass of research that, at minimum, supports the idea that online and hybrid models of learning should be viewed as a worthy alternative to the traditional model of implementing content at the university level. So where to start? Programs cannot simply decide to move to online or hybrid models of learning for cost alone. Therefore, programs must look at how they can do both: implement cost-effective online/hybrid learning models while preserving the academic integrity of their programs and institutions. In order to do this in a way that is process-driven and flexible, programs must start where all classroom learning begins; with the teacher.

Shifting the Role of Instructor

Inherent in any understanding of the instruction provided within a classroom is recognizing the important role of the instructor. Redmond (2011) stated:

> The transition to online teaching and learning from a traditional face-to-face approach challenges the expectations and roles of both instructors and learners. For some instructors, when they change the place of teaching, they feel that their identities are under threat. (p. 1051)

For this reason, it is critical that instructors begin to see how their role will transition as the instructional environment changes. This process requires instructors to identify certain assumptions and challenge them, which is not something that will happen immediately. It takes a lot of self-reflection and critique on the part of the instructor. This process takes time, but it is necessary for a transformation to take place so that online teaching moves towards the use of new strategies and roles for the instructor. Instructors must become facilitators and design activities and adopt strategies where learners are more actively engaged, self-regulated, and collaborative (Clemmons, Nolen, & Hayn, 2014).

Essential with any shift regarding instructional implementation is training, both on the practical pedagogical level, as well as the theoretical level. The majority of instructors in higher education do not come from backgrounds rooted in teacher-education programs where pedagogical concepts are readily instilled and developed within them. Because of this, understanding how to develop and transform existing course design when transitioning from a traditional face-to-face model to a blended or entirely online teaching model requires training (Bonk & Dennen, 2003). As identified by Yang and Cornelious (2005), the major challenge for new instructors of online/hybrid instruction is the ability to redesign instruction using a more constructivist approach. This adjustment requires training in teaching pedagogy; not simply knowledge of the content. Some academics may perceive that designing for online learning and teaching is more time-consuming than face-to-face courses and they are often put off by the increased workload after years of working within a face-to-face model. Even so, training on course development and implementation is necessary to ensure transitional success.

Without essential training in online course and program development for instructors, many traditional professors struggle and can frequently fail, especially when their initial tendency is disapproval. Instructional implementation of online coursework has a much different feel than traditional classrooms, even when the instructional concepts aren't vastly different. Still, traditional models of instruction simply do not effectively reach students with the online/hybrid

model and that transition for instructors is difficult at times to see. Redmond (2011) stated, "The replication of traditional methods does not capitalize on the dynamic nature of the technologically enhanced teaching and learning environment" (p. 1051). The instructional approach must become one where students are "co-constructing knowledge through interactions" as opposed to having an instructor who is "simply disseminating information" (Vaughan, 2010, p. 61). In essence, instructors must receive training that teaches them how to get out of their own way and become less of a singular classroom presence that disseminates information, but rather nourishes and develops their ability to facilitate learning.

The less-is-more approach to university instruction flies in the face of traditional practice; however, in order to fully utilize the advantages that online instruction has to offer regarding content integration, student assimilation, and information retention, instructors must be willing to do more than simply attend additional training. Wang and Torrisi-Steele (2015) also discussed the deep-seeded changes that must take place within instructors in order for their shift in instructional strategy to take place. They stated that:

Similar to cultural norms, teaching activities are driven by philosophies, theories, accepted truths, or conventional wisdom. Changing an approach to teaching, whether face-to-face or online, thus parallels changing cultural norms and may involve transformative or emancipatory learning on the part of the educator. (p.19)

Therefore, changing teaching practice is much more than retraining; it's about changing ideologies, which is a much deeper shift. Transformational teaching is impacted by "objectives and attitudes of university staff, including their beliefs and possible resistance[s]" (Clemmons, Nolen, & Hayn, 2014, p. 37). This is not to say that "teaching presence" should be reduced; on the contrary, a teacher's connection with their students in an online/hybrid model is vital to the individual success of each student, as well as the overall success of the course. Based on the study provided by McPherson and Bacow (2015), the ability to communicate this idea will assist program chairs with easing the worry many faculty members have expressed since their major concern has been developing "…[student] relationships, and fear that [instructors] would isolate themselves from students by embedding their course in a digital environment…" (p. 147). Students have addressed similar concerns and have expressed that "[they] also enjoy face-to-face interaction with their professors, at least at places where such interaction is common and expected" (p. 147).

What must change is the instructional implementation for the instructor of the course. This is highlighted by Breton et al. (2005) where it was observed that the Internet allowed for the types of interactions that were rarely found in traditional classroom settings, including small classrooms. The online classroom allowed "students to answer back to a text rather than a teacher, and thus encourage[d] students not to be excessively respectful of authority" (p. 103). Even though the initial concerns dealt with rude, antisocial, and even disruptive behavior with such parameters, the instructors of the course found that when they adjusted their roles within the course to that of facilitators, the students were "generally respectful of the perspectives of others, but not unwilling to engage fully and thoughtfully, and often provocatively, in intellectual discussion" (p. 106). For these reasons, the researchers concluded that, compared to the traditional face-to-face model, the hybrid model with instructional roles adjusted provided obvious benefits. Breton et al. (2005) also stated that "collaborative Web-based learning may be more likely to result in the pluralist, diversified kind of course we aimed for" (p. 107).

Acceptance for and an understanding of this changing role are critical to the success of the online/hybrid transition for both the instructor and the student. Unfortunately, too many higher

education professionals feel this transition is not only unnecessary, but that it ultimately dilutes the academic experience for their students. According to the Twenty-First Century Campus Report 2.0 (2010) that was commissioned by CDW Government, LLC, 88% of higher education faculty viewed technology as an essential *tool* for the collegiate classroom, but only 35% think online learning is an "important element" of higher education (p. 9). Unfortunately, several years of development and implementation has done nothing to change the perceptions of college and university professors since this last study was performed. According to Allen and Seaman (2015), their survey data indicated that the proportion of chief academic leaders reporting online learning as critical to their long-term strategy reached a new high of 70.8% while "only 27.8% of academic leaders say their faculty accepts the value and legitimacy of online learning" (p. 21).

A combination of shifting roles, adequate training, and adjusted perceptions all factor into how higher education programs model and implement redesigned or entirely new online programs of study. To dismiss any of these factors as trite or insignificant can go a long way in hampering the smooth transition instructors need to make in order for online/hybrid models to be successful in engaging and preparing students.

Modifications to Pedagogy

There are numerous things about an online or hybrid instructional model that should differ from the traditional face-to-face model. Unfortunately, too many online models simply replicate traditional modes of instruction. Wang & Torrisi-Steele (2015) maintained:

> Online teaching practices are largely embedded in traditional content delivery models with technology being used for purposes such as administrative efficiency or convenient access to lecture slides rather than for purposes of developing innovative teaching strategies to facilitate deeper learning. (p. 18)

Before an instructor can begin to shift instruction within the online environment, they must be cognizant of and willing to address certain preconceived notions regarding online instruction that they themselves may have as the process begins.

Many instructors, who are highly experienced in face-to-face teaching, when first introduced to online teaching specifically, often worry that students will expect them to be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week (Pajo & Wallace, 2001). Time availability in a traditional classroom setting is quite structured, with class times and office hours plainly delineated through scheduling. With online courses, however, those lines become much more blurred and many instructors are skeptical and resistant to including online elements in their face-to-face course(s) (Falk & Drayton, 2009). In order to combat this issue from the start, it is critical that instructors of online courses feel empowered to set boundaries within their modes of communication in order to separate personal time with professional time. By doing this, instructors can begin to feel they still maintain investment in course structure.

The concept of course ownership is the next big hurdle for programs to manage with their instructors so that new online and blended course transitions maintain rich and effective dialogue while holding to high instructional standards. No longer can "ownership" rule the day in course implementation; rather, collaboration among all invested parties within the course must be cultivated in order to learn from and with each other. As such, the instructor becomes much more of a facilitator, locking all of the disparate pieces together to achieve an interconnected learning experience. Based on the experiences of previous research (Volery & Lord, 2000; Redmond, 2011), this change from the "intellect-on-stage" to more of a "learning catalyst"

doesn't necessarily indicate a change in the instructor's underlying teaching philosophy, but rather an ability to rethink what effective online learning can look like when it has undergone academic scrutiny.

Online and hybrid models of learning also have to be intentional when it comes to developing community. On a traditional college campus, simple social interactions such as joining a fraternity or sorority, attending athletic events as a member of the collective student body, and living in close proximity with other students in a homogenous environment naturally develops the sense of community that takes place within the face-to-face classroom (McKeown, 2012). Online and hybrid models are quite different. The sense of disconnect from other members within the course can be quite real and a collaborative facilitator must work intentionally to address this disconnect consistently in order to create a thriving learning community that promotes engaged thought and interaction among its members. So then can online and hybrid programs of learning replicate these experiences in such a way that they mirror these concepts of community that form in traditional classroom settings? Research performed by the U.S. Department of Education seems to suggest they can (Radford, 2011).

Although "community" might not be formed based on similar social experiences, community within the online and hybrid model can be formed when students with similar learning desires and social demographics are found. The U.S. Department of Education produced a report analyzing online undergraduate courses, programs, and students addressing this very issue. Radford (2011) reported that online students are more likely to be older. Many older students need flexibility so that they can juggle home and work demands. He also reported that about 15 percent of students under the age of 24 were also taking one or more online courses. As shown from this study, many students have something to build on in developing community from the start: age and previous life experiences. Further research has also suggested that other socially similar desires bond online students as well (McKeown, 2012). "Students who choose to pursue their college degree online often do so because it allows them to live wherever they want. This flexibility can translate into a significant financial benefit, since they can live in a lower-cost setting than is available on campus" (McKeown, 2012, p. 8). Similarly, many students have connected bonds in the form of career advancement and financial considerations. Traditionally, online courses have been filled with students who are "…seeking to enter or advance in a specific profession that requires the degree… [or] individuals for whom a traditional campus experience was not a real option" (p. 6). The nuanced skill for the online facilitator is creating activities and projects that draw these experiences out of each student in order to develop those social bonds among fellow classmates.

The online learning community needs to be a "virtual space where people come together with others to converse, exchange information or other resources, learn, play, or just be with each other" (Kraut & Resnick, 2011, intro.). The role and methodology of the learning community is something that has evolved greatly over the last several years for online and hybrid courses and can trace its expansion in direct proportion to the wide selection of sophisticated digital tools that have the capability to facilitate collaborative learning experiences (McConnell, 2006). Still, digital tools alone cannot bridge the gap from student to student. Adjusting teaching practice is much more critical to the development of effective pedagogy within the online/hybrid classroom. The crux of the issue is to understand that while effective digital tools are vital, changing teaching practice is much more complex; the complexity existing mainly because knowledge about teaching is largely communicative or emancipatory in nature (Habermas, 1971). Ideological change demands a paradigm shift and may be considered as emancipatory learning

(Habermas, 1971). Meaningful interactions that form the bonds within any classroom must be facilitated by collaborative instructors who understand, support, and promote self-directed skill development within and among the collective course membership (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011). It is essential that multi-layered activities with opportunities for engagement, collaboration, and relationship-building are considered essential elements in the online environment and are included in every course.

Classroom design and structure that enhances the interaction and collaboration among community members goes a long way in determining investment in the course and its content (Allen, Kiser, & Montgomery, 2013). Because any online course, if not properly developed, can give off a sense of isolation for its students, an effective online course, "…is all about creating opportunities for learning to take place. By providing collaborative activities, an online course has the potential to break the bonds of isolation that surround many online courses" (Allen et al., 2013, p. 1). Instructors must work to create an environment that supports student collaboration necessary to shape learner experiences within the virtual environment, including vital class discussions between themselves as well as their professors. The quest for information from each other is the very early formation of the collaborative model that is essential with online and hybrid instruction. Collaboration within the online course, when properly developed, begins to form an online learning community where each member of the course is able to elicit engaged responses from other members based on the sense of empowerment achieved when everyone has been provided a platform from which to contribute. West and West (2009) concluded, "They [students] want learning experiences that are social and will connect them with their peers" (p. 2). These types of developments within an online or hybrid model do not just happen; they are thought out, planned, implemented, adjusted, and constantly rebranded in order to meet the changing needs of the students enrolled, as well as utilizing all of the assets of the academic medium.

Conclusions

It is quite apparent that the proliferation of the internet, as well as the supporting digital tools that are ubiquitous in today's culture, are leading a paradigm shift in the higher education. Colleges and universities can no longer be selective in how they serve their students as the level of competition for increasing enrollment numbers at every area of post-secondary education continues to escalate. Online and hybrid models of instruction offer colleges and universities flexible, cost-effective, and academically rich alternatives to traditional instructional models that are becoming more rigid with each new technological advancement. Still, programs, departments, and schools that consider change simply for the financial benefits neglect the most valuable and obligatory role of the institution: instructional fidelity. Academic ramifications for such a transition in instructional delivery must be well thought out and careful consideration must be given to the intentional development of program-specific courses that meet the professional and academic needs of the student, while continuing to address weaknesses in the social aspect of schooling that is critical to the integrity of the collaborative learning community. Academic institutions must also ensure that adequate planning and professional development is provided for all course instructors adjusting to this new mode of instructional delivery. Defining instructor roles and adjusting instructional focus in order to adequately utilize the technology available to them takes patience, preparation, and education; none of which are quick or easy habits to transform.

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