Online Education

A Better Blend

The hybrid approach to learning has benefited both from the trials of early pioneers and the technological advances of recent years.

- By Jennifer Demski
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In May 2009, the US Department of Education released a meta-analysis of effectiveness studies of online, face-to-face, and blended learning models. The analysis found that online learning produced better student outcomes than face-to-face classes, and that blended learning offered an even “larger advantage” over face-to-face.

Technology leaders at the University of Central Florida were not surprised.

“The blended learning environment is one of the richest pedagogical environments you can create,” says Joel Hartman, vice provost for information technologies and resources at UCF. “It’s almost anything you can do online, plus almost anything you can do in the classroom, put together in such a way that you can structure very rich learning environments around any type of content.”

UCF is one of the pioneers of blended learning, launching its first hybrid course 13 years ago. Since then, the award-winning UCF team has produced over a thousand fully online courses and over a thousand blended learning courses. More impressive, perhaps, is the faculty support that is embedded within the blended learning program: UCF has probably gone further than any other university in helping train its faculty on how to design and deliver blended learning classes.

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Staff members at UCF are so expert in blended learning that they have served as advisers to other schools that have taken up the hybrid torch in subsequent years. “They’re very much leading the pack,” says Susan Gautsch, director of e-learning for the Graziadio School of Business and Management at Pepperdine University in southern California.

Graziadio is a relative newcomer to the world of blended learning, piloting its first hybrid class in 2007—10 years after UCF’s blended launch. Yet that intervening decade has brought technological advances that have enabled Graziadio to be its own kind of pioneer. While many universities, including UCF, use their course management system (CMS) as the technological backbone for blended course delivery, Graziadio has stepped outside the CMS box to create an on-the-fly blended learning system that can respond swiftly to the needs of its professional student base and the mercurial and social nature of the internet.

These two schools are part of an increasing trend in higher ed toward creating optimized hybrid learning environments. As a 2007 Sloan Consortium report on blended learning contends, “It is becoming clear that blended learning is generally not part of an institutional transition strategy from face-to-face to fully online courses, but rather a discrete option which institutions choose on its own merits.”

CT looks here at the contributions that the UCF and Pepperdine programs have made to the canon of blended learning—contributions that showcase the merits of this growing practice.

**Not Just for Distance Learning**

The University of Central Florida began its online learning initiative in 1996 as a way to attract distance learning students. After analyzing the data from the first year, administrators were surprised to find that 75 percent of their online students were actually on campus, enrolled in full-time programs.

Hartman recalls canvassing the on-campus students about why they enrolled in “what we thought was a distance learning course.” Reasons ranged from curiosity, to interest in the technology, to convenience. “That led to conversations, which led to the creation of what today would be called the blended learning format,” he says.

The UCF blended prototype, offered in 1997, was a three-hour class, meeting one day a week, with the rest of the class taking place online. The first course offerings provided quick lessons to UCF staff on what constitutes a successful blended course, which Hartman insists is all “about effective practice, not technology, per se.” (See “What Blended Learning Looks Like,” below.)

One of the most critical elements of effective practice that UCF identified early on was strong faculty support and training. Tom Cavanagh, assistant vice president and director of UCF’s Center for Distributed Learning, explains that “there’s a risk, or at least a tendency, for [a school] just starting out to give the faculty a blank Blackboard shelf, and then tell them, ‘Go make a blended course,’ without really understanding that to create a blended course you must redesign that course from the ground up, and give the faculty the tools and support they need to be successful, whether [that support involves] the instructional design or some of the technology infrastructure behind it.”

**Significant Faculty Development**
Over the years, faculty support for blended learning courses has become a significant enterprise at UCF: The school employs 60 full-time and 15 part-time staff members, including video producers, graphic artists, programmers, assessment specialists, instructional designers, and instructional design support staff.

Blended course development is managed at the institutional level, with the Center for Distributed Learning—the central agent for all online learning at UCF—offering guidelines to colleges and academic departments for selecting courses to be adapted. Prime candidates are bottleneck courses or courses where efficiencies could be achieved in classroom space utilization.

Once a college dean or department chair identifies a course to be adapted, he or she recommends a faculty member to lead it. From there, the faculty member goes through an intensive development program.

The university offers two faculty development experiences. The flagship course is an eight-week, hands-on primer on best practices and technology associated with building blended courses. Notes Cavanagh, “It’s taught in a blended format, so the faculty members have the experience of being a student in a blended course as they work on the development of their own course.”

What Blended Learning Looks Like

University of Central Florida Vice Provost Joel Hartman says a blended learning class “is not a website crammed with all the content of a course you’d get face-to-face. Nor is it a live lecture conducted online. Rather it’s a combination of content and learning experiences—which can be individualized or team-based—focused on a social constructivist form of learning.”

At UCF, students work in a social environment that involves “all levels of interaction: student-to-student, student-to-faculty, student-to-content, and interaction with outside resources found on the internet,” Hartman says. “This is not a course where you tune in and see a lecture, either in real time or asynchronous time. It’s more a matter of learning experiences around the learning objectives of the course.”

Blended and online courses at UCF are currently accessed through Blackboard Vista, and students are exposed to a variety of resources depending on the design of a specific course. “A given course could include learning modules that have been developed at UCF or provided by textbook publishers,” Hartman explains. “It could include online resources of various kinds associated with the content. It could include a traditional or an electronic textbook, websites, real-time or asynchronous chat.”

Hartman is quick to point out that even though technology is central to blended learning, “It isn’t the technology that makes a difference.” What brings about the improved learner outcomes reported by the US Department of Education—and that UCF educators have experienced themselves—is “the way that you teach,” Hartman says. “And the way you teach can be influenced, supplemented, and enhanced by the use of technology, but even more by the effective practices that the technology enables.”

Faculty must meet with their instructional designer once a week and complete the online portion of the program. “By the time the course is over, they’ve prepared and developed a portion of their
eventual course,” Cavanagh says.

The second faculty development experience is a self-paced, 35-hour online program designed to prepare faculty to deliver an online or blended course that has been previously developed by another faculty member.

As of May 2010, over 800 faculty members had completed the flagship course and 176 had completed the 35-hour program. Teaching in both the blended and online environments has become part of the faculty culture, Hartman reports.

According to student feedback, blended courses are the most popular classes offered at UCF; currently, over half of UCF’s 53,000 students take at least one blended or fully online course each year.

“Having done two thousand courses over the last several years,” Hartman says, “we have an extraordinary body of experience and practice: feedback from students and faculty; examining what’s going on at other institutions; institutional data up to and including grades; the trends of student and faculty participation in this environment. We have a very rich set of information we can use to guide, nurture, and enhance the blended learning environment.”

Out-of-the-Box Design

That “extraordinary body of experience and practice” Hartman refers to was one reason administrators at Pepperdine’s Graziadio School of Business and Management turned to UCF for guidance when they launched their blended learning program in 2007.

You can see UCF’s influence in the design of Graziadio’s Blended Learning Faculty Fellows program, in which faculty members from different departments are chosen to participate in an intensive professional development program. Fellows receive up to $3,000 in staff development funds, undergo intensive training (again, in a blended format), and are required to teach at least one blended course over the academic year.

But in the decade between UCF’s and Pepperdine’s launches, the technological tools available for online learning underwent a veritable sea change—and the folks at Pepperdine jumped on the advances. While UCF’s online environment is built around Blackboard, Pepperdine decided that the best, albeit bold, course was to build the technological framework themselves.

Personal Learning Environments

One reason Graziadio decided not to build its program around a traditional CMS was to ensure that its MBA students—many of whom are full-time professionals—would use technology they regularly encounter in the business setting. Explains E-Learning Director Susan Gautsch: “Nowhere else in their lives are they going to use Blackboard or Sakai, [which] are pretty much relegated to education. What they really want to use is Skype. They want to have conference calls and application sharing. They want to have narrated presentations. They want to simultaneously edit and track versions of a shared document.”

The Graziadio staffers realized that what they wanted for their students was, in fact, a personal learning environment or PLE, which is an individualized educational platform using web 2.0 tools. So the school built its own PLE and called it the Graziadio Learning Environment and Network, or
Dimensions of the Blend

Blended learning is not just a matter of combining online and face-to-face components. According to Harvey Singh in the journal Educational Technology, hybrid courses have many different dimensions, including the blending of:

- Offline and online learning
- Self-paced and live, collaborative learning
- Structured and unstructured learning
- Custom and off-the-shelf content
- Learning, practice, and performance support

For more information, see the November/December 2003 issue of Educational Technology, Volume 43, Number 6, Pages 51-54.

GLEAN launched in January 2010 and is designed to continually incorporate personalized and up-to-date online tools while at the same time maintaining a consistent look and feel. “We know that the tools that are available are going to be changing. You can’t get away from change,” Gautsch says. “The advantage of the personal learning environment is that it’s learner-centered, and it’s typically made up of powerful web 2.0 tools that are pretty inexpensive.”

There is a difficult side to this kind of flexible personal environment, however. “It’s hard to manage an ever-changing landscape at an institutional level,” Gautsch admits. “With GLEAN, we can at least make it look like we have consistency with single sign-on, while providing an overarching framework for our ever-changing yet personalized Graziadio learning environment.”

GLEAN was built in Google Sites using embedded Google gadgets, widgets, and iFrames, enabling the site to serve as a gateway for any and all web 2.0 tools a student will need to access for blended or online learning courses.

“GLEAN is the framework,” Gautsch explains. “How you get to GLEAN will always be consistent—we’re not sending the students to 80 different URLs to get their 80 different tools. ‘Go to GLEAN.’ That’s all we have to say.”

Social Learning Networks

From the outset, the Graziadio team also believed that social networking was a critical piece of the blended learning model. “Everyone says that they want to break down silos [in learning], but when it comes down to it, it’s a nerve-wracking thing to do,” says Gautsch. “We didn’t [invent] social networking. However, we see the power of it.”

Graziadio piloted three social networking tools during the 2009-2010 academic year, and decided on Yammer, a tool that allows organizations to create private, personalized, and searchable social networks. “We’re working with the basic premise that learning is a social enterprise,” Gautsch says. “Anyone who knows how to use Facebook will know how to use Yammer.” Unlike their decision to use other standard web 2.0 tools, Graziadio staffers chose Yammer because, says Gautsch, “it has a
lot more capabilities than Facebook could ever dream of”—particularly critical privacy features.

Gautsch taught two of the blended classes that piloted Yammer, and found that it had a noticeable effect on in-class discussions. “I started using the social network for warm-ups by posting open-ended questions intended to get people to really think about the case study,” Gautsch says. “In these warm-up discussions, people were more active in Yammer than they’d normally be on Blackboard or a discussion board, because they didn’t have to click so many links to follow the discussion. And then, when it was time to discuss the topic in class, they were talking so much more than I’d ever heard them.” This was especially true, she adds, of the international students, who are sometimes left out due to language barriers.

Gautsch finds that these Yammer warm-ups also help her assess students’ understanding. “By the time I come to class, I know what their disagreements and misconceptions are. I know what they’re having a problem with, and I know which aspects of the case they’re most interested in. It enables me as a professor to be much more responsive.”

Embedding Feedback

As the school builds and revises the GLEAN environment and its blended programs, Graziadio is using a number of measures to evaluate both the effects of specific tools and the overall impact of its blended courses. Within certain individual tools, such as Elluminate, the school has embedded quick surveys that appear when a student logs out of his or her session. Faculty members are polled on satisfaction and ideas for improvement. The school also has created student evaluation forms specifically for blended courses. “We included the golden question, ‘If given the chance to take another blended course, would you?’” Gautsch says. “Overall, we’re getting mostly positive results, peppered with some not-so-pleasant responses, but that’s very useful data, too.”

Gautsch reports that as of spring 2010, approximately 15 percent of Graziadio courses were offered in a blended format. However, as a result of this past year’s Faculty Fellows program, the school now has both the number and diversity of faculty available for the development of a blended learning bachelor’s program, which is scheduled to be launched in fall 2010. This new program and the current economic situation “are steering us toward a tipping point,” Gautsch says. “The cultural acceptance and appreciation for online learning are shifting pretty dramatically now.”

Resources


The GLEAN environment at Pepperdine University Graziadio School of Business and Management:  [sites.google.com/a/pepperdine.edu/aboutglean](http://sites.google.com/a/pepperdine.edu/aboutglean)

University of Central Florida’s Distributed Learning program:  [dl.ucf.edu](http://dl.ucf.edu)
Yammer: yammer.com

About the Author

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Please see the supplement to this article in the next page below.
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