



Thinking About Blended and Online Learning

What is it?

According to the Sloan Consortium, "Online courses are those in which at least 80 percent of the course content is delivered online and there are typically no face-to-face meetings." Blended or hybrid courses are taught using a combination of face to face and online instruction.

Why is it important?

As institutions of higher education begin to broaden their existing programs and introduce new ones, online learning provides opportunities to reach a wider audience of potential students. In addition, it also offers faculty the opportunity to engage and interact with students in an entirely new way.

Pros...

- Increased student learning. In hybrid courses, instructors report that they feel more connected with their students and are able to get to know them better since they communicate both online and face-to-face.
- Students who rarely take part in class discussions are more likely to participate online.
- Instructors report that students wrote better papers, performed better on exams, produced higher quality projects, and were capable of more meaningful discussions on course material when reflecting online.
- Students may develop higher-order skills of critical thinking, problem-solving, and the ability to apply theoretical models to real-world data.

Cons...

- Online education may not work well for those students who require more interaction with a "live" instructor. Students who are organized, self-motivated, and possess a high degree of time management skills are generally more successful in an online course.
- Instructors and students without technology experience will not be able to participate an online course successfully.
- Building a sense of community can be difficult in an online course. Students who are used to meeting face to face may find it difficult to learn how to interact with their classmates and instructors at a distance.

How to Get Started...

Start small. One easy way to transition to an online format is to introduce online components into your current face-to-face courses. Here are a few ideas:

- Try incorporating more student centered approaches to learning such as group projects and self assessment.
- Familiarize yourself with synchronous (live, real time) and asynchronous (not live) communications tools. If you are traveling to a conference during the semester, conduct a synchronous session using web conferencing software.
- Supplement class lectures using multimedia resources to offer a variety of different delivery formats for students.
- Try conducting your office hours online using the chat feature built into Blackboard.
- Use the Discussion Board to get students to reflect on readings either before or after class.

Web sites to visit...

For more pros and cons of online teaching, see the Illinois Online Network's Strengths and Weaknesses of Online Learning tutorial located at <http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/resources/tutorials/overview/strengthAndWeak.asp>.

Univeristy of Wisconsin Madison has a tremendous amount of resources available on the web for teaching online. Visit http://www4.uwm.edu/learningobjects/lo_teach_learn.cfm for more information.

Simmons College offers additional strategies for transitioning a face-to-face course to a blended format. Visit <http://at.simmons.edu/blendedlearning/pages/learnhow/index.php> for more information.

Educause has created a tool to assist instructors in developing blended courses. See the Educause Learning Intiative Discovery Tool: Blended Learning Workshop Guide at <http://www.educause.edu/blendedlearning>.