

“New Horizons” Presentation

UVA BIS Program Blended Learning Project: Highlights & Challenges
May, 2007

Time and Date: Tuesday May 22nd 1:45 to 2:30 pm

Title: UVA BIS Program Blended Learning Project: Highlights & Challenges

Description:

The goal of the Blended Learning Project is to develop an intuitive framework for integrating e-learning elements into BIS courses that enhance the overall learning experience for students and faculty. This session will **1)** explore the highlights and challenges that we experienced during the project's first year and **2)** conclude with suggestions for instructors who may be interested in beginning to include online collaborative elements to their courses.

Context

Many of you are probably unfamiliar with BIS, much less our exploits into the world of blended learning, so let me begin by setting the context.

BIS – the Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies program – is the University’s part time adult degree program. It began in **1999** and we now have over 200 students in the program with over 125 BIS graduates. BIS courses are offered in the **evenings**, on **weekends** and in **other formats** that accommodate the needs of adults with **families**, **full time jobs** and other life commitments; i.e., students with real and very full lives. In this sense, as well as many others, BIS is unique at UVA.

In 2004 the program entered into a partnership with the Tidewater Community College system. We now have about 60 “Tidewater Wahoos,” the first of whom was graduated with a BIS degree this past Sunday. We’re currently investigating other such partnerships.

In short, our program caters to a geographically dispersed market that expects and demands a high quality UVA learning experience in a non-traditional format. Our **challenge** has been to find ways to **maintain and improve the quality of the program as its size and the logistical complexity** increases. Enter the BIS Blended Learning Project.

Introduction to the Experiment

The Blended Learning Project is designed, of necessity, to meet this challenge on several different fronts. It requires developing **expertise in e-learning technologies** and instructional design. It means **rethinking existing courses** and **creating new ones**. It means **inventorying our students' technical proficiency** and building a system to provide technical support. It means **repurposing information**. It means **training students and, even more daunting, training faculty** steeped in the ways of the chalk- and white-board rather than the e- and Blackboard. It means, in short, changing the way we think about teaching and, much more importantly, **learning**. It means **changing our culture**.

Fortunately we've had strong support and leadership from our SCPS Dean (Sondra Stallard) and the BIS Program Director (Donna Plasket). We've also had the invaluable assistance and guidance of our SCSPS Director of Instructional Design, Stephanie Scheer.

So what are we doing? Let me begin with a definition. By a **blended course** or a **blended learning course** I simply mean a course that incorporates, in **any** way, e-learning or "distance learning" technology into a traditional face to face classroom setting. These courses are sometimes referred to in the literature as "hybrid courses." According to this definition, reminiscent of Moliere's prosaic doctor, many of us **have been blending for years** and we don't even know it.

What I'd like to do today is briefly describe our approach to blended learning by walking you through **one** module of **one** of our experimental courses. This course was actually offered as a full **distance learning** course – with **no** face to face meetings at all – rather than a blended learning course, but it was designed to illustrate the **seven pedagogical principles** on which the Blended Learning Project rests. In many ways it's the “poster child” for our BIS Blended Learning Project.

After this walk-through, I'll reflect even more briefly on some of the challenges we have encountered in **moving from On-Grounds to on-line**. We'll then have time for questions.

Overview

The course we'll look at – WDWBTTWD, a course in critical thinking - was our first full BIS experiment in distance learning. It was and continues to be an ongoing work in progress that has substantially benefited from student feedback and suggestion.

Blackboard was our primary e-learning technology. It was both a **communication technology** and a **community building tool**. Blackboard was the “**electronic glue**” that held us together. We also used a web-based synchronous meeting tool, Elluminate Live!, to follow up on key Blackboard findings, review provocative material and answer student questions. We held a two-hour Elluminate Live! meeting at the end of each class week.

This version of WDWBTTWD was offered during the spring semester of 2007. It ran for a total of 14 sessions, including an initial week-long

Orientation session. There were 12 students enrolled in the course, 7 from Charlottesville and 5 from the Tidewater area.

I first began working on the distance learning version of WDWBTTWD in **early February 2006** with the help of our SCPS Director of Instructional Design, Stephanie Conley. She assisted with the overall **course design, rethinking** (“repurposing”) course content for **the e-learning environment** and **execution of a full pilot** (“beta test”) prior to the beginning its initial offering in the summer of 2006.

This was a course that I had taught four or five times previously for BIS. Its roots go all the way back to **1978** when I first taught a distant ancestor of the course as “Forms of Reasoning” in the College. All of the basic course elements – notes, structure, examples, discussion topics – were therefore in finished, if somewhat scattered, form. Despite this, it took about **4 months** of work to develop a solid *starting point* for this distance learning experiment.

The moral here is that it’s critical not to underestimate the **time**, the **effort**, the **expertise** and the **expense** required to do this sort of thing right – to deliver a distance or blended learning experience that is, in every way, worthy of UVA degree credit, that enhances rather than degrades the learning experience. This was not UVA light – it required, both for the instructor and the students – a very heavy intellectual commitment. Was it worth it?

I started teaching at the University 30 years ago. While I'm quite comfortable with technology, I went into this experiment a skeptic. I did not believe that the level of **energy and intimacy** achievable in the classroom could be duplicated in this virtual environment. My previous experience with **video** teleconferencing supported this hypothesis. ***I was wrong***. I now believe that e-learning technologies can be used to create a ***deeper and richer learning experience for both the student and the instructor***, whether or not the students are geographically dispersed.

I believe that these technologies are valuable and productive learning tools in **any** educational setting and, as I've suggested above, we're aggressively **and deliberately** working to find better ways to blend them into our BIS courses.

The Approach

WDWBTTWD rests on **seven** major **pedagogical components**. In a moment we'll look at the session on "Spinning the Truth" as an example of the last six. In that session we examine and test Noam Chomsky's "institutional analysis" of the structure and impact of the mass media the United States. But the first pedagogical component is more generic:

1. On-line Community

- a. We **deliberately** created a collaborative learning environment in which everyone played an important role as both *teacher and learner*
- b. A collaboratively developed "**Charter**" established ground rules for participating in the course that *fostered trust, commitment and disclosure*
- c. Adherence to this charter resulted in *deep and dynamic on-line discussions* that stayed within appropriate bounds despite the volatile nature of some of our topics. It also resulted in a level of *personal engagement, disclosure and transformation* that I rarely see in the traditional classroom.

2. Content

- a. Narrated PowerPoint overviews of each session. **Introduction / Roadmap**
- b. Printed texts (available online through an Amazon list)
- c. Articles in PDF format
- d. Lecture notes and PowerPoint slides
- e. Audio clips and NPR audio archives (**Chomsky**)

- f. Video clips (numerous) using **RealPlayer streaming** technology
(**Workshop – Manufacturing Consent / Shut Up and Sing**)
- g. Films (*Memento*, *The Insider*) viewed offline as assignments
- h. Web sites

3. Group and Partner Discussion

- a. Students were assigned to various groups and partners throughout semester. Each had its own private **Groups** area in Blackboard
- b. Students were required to engage in group or partner **Weekly Discussions** on a specified topic. This provided an opportunity to discuss the readings for the week in a small informal setting
- c. Most groups and partnerships used their **Group discussion board** to conduct their conversations. Some used Blackboard's "**collaboration**" (i.e., instant messaging) technology. One group, on their own initiative, chose to use **Illuminate Live!** for their meetings.
- d. Groups also used several **wiki's** – collaborative web pages – to develop and present two group projects. (See Group A)

4. Open (Class) Discussion

- a. Students were required to participate in at least one full-class online discussion each week. Specific instructions outlined the discussion **topics, number and length of posts** and the manner and timing of the postings (e.g., how many replies to previous posts and when)

- b. Open Discussion served as a **review of the previous week's material**. The discussion allowed students time to review and reflect on the material as well as their colleagues' comments. This resulted in far more **thoughtful** exchanges than are usually possible in the normal classroom.
- c. At the end of each class week students participated in a **two-hour Elluminate Live! discussion** that built on on-line open and group discussions. Several of these sessions were facilitated by the groups rather than the instructor. These sessions were archived, when I remembered, for review by students at their convenience. (**Elluminate Live! archive example**)

5. Workshops

- a. Workshops focused on specific skills such as writing with clarity and directness, logical coherence of paragraphs, evaluating the structure and quality of arguments and use and misuse of source material.
- b. Several **workshops** asked students to apply these skills to their own or their colleague's written work.

6. Journaling

- a. Students were required to maintain an ongoing Journal. Journal prompts asked them to reflect on ways in which the material explored in the course related to their lives
- b. A number of students opted to do electronic Journaling for which we used the Blackboard Journal building block.

7. Ongoing feedback and course assessment

- a. Feedback was solicited at the end of each Elluminate Live! session each week via a “**B’s & C’s**” activity using the electronic white board (see the final Blackboard banner)
- b. A Blackboard “**Course Feedback**” menu option encouraged immediate feedback
- c. A student facilitated mid-semester review provided a variety of ideas for changing and improving the course
- d. An **extensive online assessment** was conducted at the end of the semester with 100% response rate

Moving Forward: Challenges

As instructors we naturally tend to rely on the tools with which we're most comfortable. Handouts, overheads, black or whiteboards and simple conversation (in the Socratic style or otherwise) are the oxygen we breathe. When we think teaching, we think classrooms, lectures, and group discussions. These discussions may be focused on texts, video clips or student papers, but they occur **between students and faculty in a particular room at a specific time**. They last for a **predetermined period** after which everyone adjourns and returns to his or her real life. The thread of the course, if not the conversation, is picked up again, if we're lucky, at the same time next week.

There's no question this model works. We teach; students learn. But this isn't the end of the story. I've tried to suggest in my remarks above one possible **alternative continuation** of this open narrative.

E-learning tools allow us **to breach the constraints** imposed by the familiar standard model. By removing **geographical constraints**, these tools allow students and faculty to **learn from each other even when we're not in the same place**. By removing **the temporal constraint** of a three-hour class (with, e.g., a forty-five minute discussion slot), these tools allow us to carefully and thoughtfully **reflect on our colleagues' observations before responding**. In removing these constraints, they can **push the learning experience beyond the classroom into our lives**. A course can become an **ongoing conversation** rather than a **series of discrete episodes**.

But using these tools requires thinking about learning is a different way. It requires, as I suggested above, a **change in culture**. The primary challenges we face are threefold: “the Three T’s:”

Time – which translates, in our culture, to money

Effectively using e-learning technology requires **extensively rethinking** old courses or developing new ones. It takes time, energy and resources to do this. It also requires **venturing into unknown** and sometimes daunting technological waters.

Technology

While Blackboard (or any of its equivalents) are relatively stable, it still requires understanding and preparation on the part of both students and faculty. Other e-learning technologies such as Elluminate Live! (or its “webinar” cousins), narrated storyboards, podcasts, audio messaging, and even streamed video and audio clips require even more **expertise**. The challenge is to motivate our faculty to experiment with them. The barrier here is, of course, our instinctual fear of the unknown which is particularly acute in us academics. “Teaching Smart People to Learn,” as Chris Argyris has argued in a wonderful article of the same name, can be an overwhelming and self-defeating task. It’s a task we’re addressing through several different varieties of ...

Training -

In addition to a monthly blended learning newsletter and Blackboard 101 for instructors we’ve implemented a two-week blended learning “boot camp” for our instructors. This class is itself a blended course that uses the

technology it promotes. It's optional but, at every level, instructors are being urged to consider and evaluate the benefits of incorporating e-learning elements. We've also developed an extensive catalog of blended learning activities that have been successful in the past and encourage our instructors to build on what their colleagues have done. But, in the end, the most persuasive arguments come from our own students who have found that the blended experience adds important new dimensions to their learning – both in the classroom on-Grounds, and outside of it on-line.

Conclusion

For more information, including a web-cast version of this presentation, please feel free to visit our website, www.bisblended.info. This website includes training information, our project schedule and copies of our appropriately named project newsletter, “The Blender,” **the last issue of which** presents blended learning from the student's perspective.

I'd be happy to take any questions you might have.