

Report on the Blended Learning Pilot Initiative

The Department of English

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Summary

Based on our experience with the Blended Learning Pilot initiative, the English department plans to expand the number of courses offered in a blended format to approximately 10% of the total sections of composition that we offer annually. In addition, Creative Writing faculty have expressed interest in adding a blended to element to some of their courses.

Background: Blended Course Pilot

In the spring of 2015, the English department received funds to pilot the implementation of a blended instructional format in seven composition courses. Since CCNY has no official description of a hybrid or blended course, we used the definition provided by the Online Learning Consortium. They define as blended any course in which 30%-70% of the instruction is delivered online. The hybrid format replaces some in-class meetings with online delivery. This is distinct from a fully online course, which replaces all in-class meetings with online delivery. In practice, 25%-40% of the courses at CCNY were delivered online. Since the classrooms at City are not double-booked (that is, a course with a hybrid element retains full rights to the classroom throughout the semester) instructors have complete control over when to schedule in-class meetings, and that schedule can be changed at any time.

Grant recipients were provided with a laptop computer and a stipend of \$1,000 to develop a hybrid course and to attend a training seminar. The participants were David Puretz (ENG 210), Karin Olander (ENG 210 and FIQWS), Robert Balun (FIQWS) and Ewa Barnes (ENG 110). Tom Peele (ENG 110) also participated in the pilot, but didn't receive a stipend.

While this cohort is too small to provide any meaningful statistical analysis regarding comparative pass rates or grades, the participants in the pilot project are enthusiastic about continuing the project. As Robert Balun notes, "the asynchronous nature of a hybrid course allows for students to produce a significant amount of writing while simultaneously finding and developing their individual voice and writing process, allowing students to work at their own pace and compelling them to continue thinking about our readings and their writing outside of an hour and fifteen minute window."

In other words, the blended format extends the range of the classroom. It allows for more writing in more contexts.

Proposal: Going Forward

At the English Department meeting of March 3, 2016, the faculty discussed to value of expanding on this initiative. We plan to offer approximately 10% of the total number of sections of composition each year for the next two years in a hybrid format. This number breaks down as follows:

Course	Total Number of Sections per Academic Year	Number of Hybrid Sections
English 110	25	2-3
FIQWS Composition	50	4-5
English 210	90	9-10
Total	165	15-18

Instructor Preparation

Instructors will be required to complete the CUNY Program for Online/Hybrid Instruction, a two-week, fully online faculty development seminar that teaches instructors how to develop course sites and migrate assignments from a face-to-face to an online format. Participants receive a stipend of \$500. The program administrator has agreed to reserve places for our instructors.

We will also accept credentials from other online and hybrid training programs or evidence of faculty achievement as demonstrated by already developed course materials. Our ability to expand the program is contingent upon our ability to attract qualified instructors.

Program Assessment

After a two-year period, we will have sufficient data to evaluate the merits of the hybrid format based on grades and completion rates.

Instructor Surveys from the Pilot Project

In the following section, we have compiled comments from a survey of instructors who participated in the pilot project.

Concerns about the Hybrid Course Format

In some cases, students were unaware of the hybrid format before they registered for the class, which caused a great deal of frustration and confusion. Although we had added the information about the hybrid element to the registration page, we were unaware that students who registered for FIQWS, because of their registration process, would not be made aware of this information. Of the three sections of FIQWS composition, only one instructor experienced this situation. Nevertheless, this is a serious problem that can be solved by better communication with academic advisors. Ana Vasovic, the Director of General Education, has assured us that we will be able to get this information to advisors and students in time for Fall 2016 registration.

Advantages to a Hybrid Course Format: Pedagogy

More Writing

Many of the activities listed below would normally take place in conversation. While the online component does not fully replace the in-class component, it does significantly enhance and extend it. All of this additional work is done in writing, so students do significantly more writing in a hybrid course than in a face-to-face class.

Peer-to-Peer and Instructor Response to First Drafts

The online format greatly enhanced peer-to-peer responses to first drafts. The in-class version of peer review tends to get bogged down in the logistics of having to bring multiple print copies of essays to class. In addition, for some reason (we speculate that it's a result of the relatively anonymous condition of online communication as opposed to face-to-face communication) students were more likely to provide substantive feedback to their peers. That the peer reviews were viewed by the instructor (which doesn't usually happen in in-class peer reviews) might also have had an impact.

Scaffolding of Writing Assignments

Instructors asked student to post parts of essays (summaries and annotated bibliographies, quote integration, and introductions, for example) for peer-to-peer and faculty response. Some instructors used the online platform for invention activities, and students were asked to post outlines, reflections, and upload research sources. The process that instructors ask students to go through is much more visible and assessable.

Discussion of Reading Assignments (peer-to-peer and faculty-to-peer)

This activity engages every student, but is especially useful for students who are quiet in class. Students are also able to engage with each other to a much greater extent than during in-class discussions, which are often dominated by more outspoken students.

Advantages to a Hybrid Course Format: Course Management

Low-Stakes Testing of Reading Assignments

While online tests must be open book, instructors controlled the length of the test availability to make test preparation highly advisable.

Low-Stakes Tests on Course Policies, Including Academic Honesty

Students can be required to complete low-stakes tests that compel them to read the course policies. Less in-class time is wasted going over material that is readily available online.

Mid-Term Evaluations and Other Surveys

The Course Management System (CMS) makes it easy to develop and distribute surveys.

Community Building

Through online discussion, students learned that they were not alone with their anxieties about writing. Almost everyone feels the same way.

Better Communication

Instructors used the Announcement tool to keep in touch with students, and topic and composition instructors in FIQWS courses were easily able to stay in touch with each other and students.

Convenience for Instructors and Students

A well-designed course site contains all of the materials that students will need for the semester. Students are also able to complete assignments at times that are convenient to them and to submit their work in a secure online environment.

Increased Awareness of Grades and Attendance

Instructors who use the grade book feature keep students aware of their grades as soon as they are posted. The CMS's storage is FERPA compliant.

Hybrid Classes Promote Digital Literacy

Students had to learn very quickly how to navigate and make the best use of the Blackboard CMS. This knowledge will be useful to them as they move forward in their academic careers. In addition, since the CMS draws on the digital literacy practices of social media sites, students have more potential to make connections between the writing they do in and out of class.