Part One

COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY FRAMEWORK

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we document the growing interest in blended learning and describe the essence of this emerging approach to course design. We also make the case for a framework that has practical value in guiding blended learning design and describe the challenges in understanding and implementing this potentially significant change in higher education. We encourage educators in higher education to reexamine current practices and to actively engage students in their learning to achieve the higher-order learning outcomes that are so needed in higher education (Boyer Commission, 2001). New ways of thinking about course design are required to reconcile traditional values and practices with evolving expectations and technological possibilities.

Interest in Blended Learning

Curtis Bonk and his colleagues have documented the strong and growing interest in blended learning (Bonk & Graham, 2006). They concluded in a recent survey of higher education that respondents clearly expected a dramatic rise in their use of blended learning approaches in the coming years (Bonk, Kim & Zeng, 2006, p. 553). In another survey, Arabasz and Baker (2003) revealed that 80 percent of all higher education institutions offer blended learning courses.

Underlying these data is the increasing awareness that blended learning approaches and designs can significantly enhance the learning experience. Albrecht (2006) reports high

student satisfaction with blended learning, and others have reported faculty satisfaction (Vaughan & Garrison, 2006a). This is confirmed by Marquis (2004) in a survey that found that 94 percent of lecturers believed that blended learning "is more effective than classroom-based teaching alone." This is also consistent with a study by Bourne and Seaman (2005), who found that the primary interest in blended learning is to benefit the educational process. They report that blended learning is perceived to be a means to combine the best of face-to-face and online learning.

The need to provide more engaged learning experiences is at the core of the interest in blended learning. Many faculty have begun to question passive teaching and learning approaches such as the lecture. The lecture is a method of disseminating information that emerged before the advent of the printing press. The lecture is not particularly effective in engaging learners in critically filtering and making sense of the glut of information that we now face. Complex topics require more in-depth engagement for students to construct meaning than what is possible in a typical lecture. In this regard, Palloff and Pratt (2005) argue that interactive and collaborative learning experiences are more congruent with achieving higher-order learning outcomes.

Concurrent with the recognition of the importance of interactive and engaged learning experiences is the growing understanding of the potential of the Internet and communications technology to connect learners. The interest in blended learning can also be attributed to the advances and proliferation of communications technology in most segments of society—advances that have not seen the same degree of uptake in the higher education classroom. Although this is changing, there is still a lack of understanding of how best to use technology to advance the goals of higher education in terms of engaging students in critical thinking and discourse.

We argue that the time has come to reject the dualistic thinking that seems to demand choosing between conventional face-to-face and online learning, a dualism that is no longer

tenable, theoretically or practically. There is a better approach. With the increasing awareness and adoption of the Internet and communications technology to connect learners, a more sensible way forward would be to better understand the potential of these technologies and how they might be integrated with the best of the face-to-face learning environment.

We explore in this book a new educational paradigm that integrates the strengths of face-to-face and online learning. Blended learning—a design approach whereby both face-to-face and online learning are made better by the presence of the other—offers the possibility of recapturing the traditional values of higher education while meeting the demands and needs of the twenty-first century.

Blended Learning Described

Recognizing true blended learning is not obvious. Blended learning is the thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences. The basic principle is that face-to-face oral communication and online written communication are optimally integrated such that the strengths of each are blended into a unique learning experience congruent with the context and intended educational purpose. Although the concept of blended learning may be intuitively apparent and simple, the practical application is more complex. Blended learning is not an addition that simply builds another expensive educational layer. It represents a restructuring of class contact hours with the goal to enhance engagement and to extend access to Internet-based learning opportunities. Most important, blended learning is a fundamental redesign that transforms the structure of, and approach to, teaching and learning. The key assumptions of a blended learning design are

- Thoughtfully integrating face-to-face and online learning
- Fundamentally rethinking the course design to optimize student engagement
- Restructuring and replacing traditional class contact hours

Blended learning emerges from an understanding of the relative strengths of face-to-face and online learning. This opens a wide range of possibilities for redesign that goes beyond enhancing the traditional classroom lecture. Attaining the threshold of blended learning means replacing aspects of face-to-face learning with appropriate online learning experiences, such as labs, simulations, tutorials, and assessment. Blended learning represents a new approach and mix of classroom and online activities consistent with the goals of specific courses or programs.

Blended learning must be approached with the awareness of the broad range of flexible design possibilities and the challenge of doing things differently. It must be based upon a sound understanding of higher-order learning environments, communication characteristics, requirements of various disciplines, and resources. Blended learning redesign is a catalyst; it means to fundamentally reconceptualize and restructure the teaching and learning transaction. Its basic assumption is to open the educational mind to a full range of possibilities. Blended learning brings into consideration a range of options that require revisiting how students learn in deep and meaningful ways.

Blended learning is no more about reshaping and enhancing the traditional classroom than it is about making e-learning more acceptable. In both contexts one is left with essentially either face-to-face or online learning. Blended learning combines the properties and possibilities of both to go beyond the capabilities of each separately. It recognizes the strengths of integrating verbal and text-based communication and creates a unique fusion of synchronous and asynchronous, direct and mediated modes of communication in that the proportion of face-to-face and online learning activities may vary considerably.

Blended learning necessitates that educators question what is important and consider how much time should be spent in the classroom. We approach the possibilities of blended learning only when we step back and allow our minds to escape the paradigmatic

trap of either the traditional lecture or Web-based learning. Blended learning is an approach to educational redesign that can enhance and extend learning and offer designs that efficiently manage large classes. It represents a distinct design methodology that transcends the conventional classroom paradigm. The proportion of face-to-face and online learning activities may vary considerably, but blended learning is distinguishable by way of the integration of face-to-face and online learning that is multiplicative, not additive.

Change

Higher education must start delivering on its promise of providing learning experiences that engage and address the needs of society in the twenty-first century. As Swail (2002) states, the "rules are changing, and there is increased pressure on institutions of higher education to evolve, adapt, or desist" (p. 16). To paraphrase Peter Drucker (1999), we must ask ourselves: would we, knowing what we now know, design learning experiences as we do with 200 and 300 students in a lecture hall? With what we know about the potential of blended learning, the need to create communities of inquiry, and the vast array of accessible and affordable communications technology, the answer has to be that there must be a better way.

Levy (2005) has stated that the field of e-learning "is marked by a juxtaposition of new technology and old pedagogy." Higher education is only just beginning to grasp the significance and educational potential of asynchronous communication networks. The mistake of most traditional campus-based institutions was to see the potential of online learning in terms of access and serving more students instead of serving current students better. However, serving students *better* from a learning perspective would necessitate the adoption of a new pedagogy. For the traditional campus-based higher education institution, the breakthrough came when online learning was no longer regarded as a

substitute but as an integral and valued component to address the need for a new pedagogy. This was the watershed moment for higher education.

The transformation of teaching and learning in higher education is inevitable with the use of Web-based communications technology (Newman, Couturier & Scurry, 2004). Fundamental redesign based on blended approaches to teaching and learning represent the means to address the challenges associated with providing a quality learning experience. Although the catalyst for change in teaching and learning has been technology, it is the need to enhance quality standards that is drawing attention to the potential of blended approaches. Technology is an enabling tool. Because blended learning is an approach and design that merges the best of traditional and Web-based learning experiences to create and sustain vital communities of inquiry, many higher education institutions are quietly positioning themselves to harness its transformational potential.

The Framework

Blended learning is at the center of an evolutionary transformation of teaching and learning in higher education. However, transformational growth can only be sustained with a clear understanding of the nature of the educational process and intended learning outcomes. In higher education there is an expressed focus on opportunities for learners to construct meaning and confirm understanding through discourse. At the core of this process is a community of inquiry that supports connection and collaboration among learners and creates a learning environment that integrates social, cognitive, and teaching elements in a way that will precipitate and sustain critical reflection and discourse. Blended learning opens the possibility of creating and sustaining a community of inquiry beyond the classroom.

We approach the understanding of blended learning designs through the framework of a community of inquiry. The community of inquiry (CoI) framework was created by Garrison and his colleagues (2000) to guide the research and practice of online learning. The CoI framework was generated from the literature and experiences of the authors grounded in the larger field of education. In particular, the framework was grounded in a critical, collaborative learning community consistent with the ideals of higher education. The generic nature of the framework and its resonance with both face-to-face and online education make it a useful guide to understand and design blended learning environments.

Arbaugh (2006) states that the CoI framework has shown considerable promise and has been widely cited in the literature. One reason for this is that it is a comprehensive yet parsimonious and intuitively understandable framework. Another reason is that it builds upon two ideas that are essential to higher education—*community* and *inquiry*. Community, on the one hand, recognizes the social nature of education and the role that interaction, collaboration, and discourse play in constructing knowledge. Inquiry, on the other hand, reflects the process of constructing meaning through personal responsibility and choice. A community of inquiry is a cohesive and interactive community of learners whose purpose is to critically analyze, construct, and confirm worthwhile knowledge. The three key elements for a viable community of inquiry are social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence. A community of inquiry appropriately integrates these elements and provides a means to guide the design of deep and meaningful educational experiences.

We use the CoI framework to shape this book. The first part of the book focuses on understanding this perspective and describing how it can influence practice and professional development. The design scenarios, guidelines, strategies, and tools discussed in the second part of this book all emerge from the CoI

framework. The next chapter describes the CoI framework in greater detail.

Conclusion

There has been little fundamental change with regard to how we approach teaching and learning in higher education, yet there is increasing dissatisfaction among faculty, students, and society with the quality of the learning experience. Although technological advancements in society have been unrelenting (the Internet, pocket-sized computers, wireless web, cell phones, and satellite radio, television, games, and simulations), technological innovation in higher education has been largely restricted to administration and research. The significant technological innovations in teaching and learning have been confined to addressing issues of access and convenience. However, addressing the relevance and quality of the learning experience demands that higher education take a fresh look at how it approaches teaching and learning and utilizes technology.

For all of these reasons, as well as because of the successes of individual blended learning designs, there is a convergence of interest (intuitive appeal), need (educational demands) and opportunity (potential of communications technology) with regard to blended learning. The reality of engaging students across time and place makes possible the educational ideal of an engaged community of inquiry. Blended learning designs remove the constraints to create and sustain communities of inquiry in higher education.

The concept of a community of inquiry that frames this book provides a much needed roadmap for blended learning approaches and designs. The CoI framework provides the order and rationality to understand the nature, purpose, and principles of blended learning. It provides the context for the practical examples and the selection of strategies and tools presented in this book. It also generates the rationale for the templates and rubrics found in the Appendix.

Blended learning is not new. What is new is the recognition of its potential to help fundamentally redesign the learning experience in ways that can enhance the traditional values of higher education. Blended learning can address the ideals and core values of higher education in terms of creating and sustaining communities of inquiry. The challenge higher education faces is how to merge the distinct approaches and properties of face-to-face and online learning. This challenge is the focus of the remaining chapters of this book.