Hybrid Learning

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The Perils and Promise of Blending Online and Face-to-Face Instruction in Higher Education

JASON ALLEN SNART

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This book is dedicated to my family, above all to my wife, Alison, and to our daughter, Jenna Arlen Snart, whose birth, on December 30, 2008, punctuated my research and writing with a profound exclamation point!

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Pedagogically, education by correspondence is almost terra incognita.

—John Noffsinger, *Correspondence Schools* (1926)

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Introduction

In his 1926 book on the then-burgeoning business of correspondence schools, John Noffsinger relegated their educational status to terra incognita. The processes and outcomes associated with teaching and learning by correspondence could not be adequately monitored, measured, regulated, or evaluated relative to traditional, classroom learning. Distance education by correspondence, all the vogue in Noffsinger's day, would eventually become what we know today as online learning.

A variation on the idea of learning at a distance is now emerging across the higher education landscape. It brings together elements of the traditional classroom environment and elements of modern online delivery. Hybrid, or blended, learning represents for many a potential best-of-both-worlds educational model, one that might draw on the most effective aspects of face-to-face (f2f) and online instruction. But, like the correspondence education of yesteryear, hybrid learning risks becoming terra incognita in the landscape of higher education without informed decision making early on.

Many economic, technological, and demographic factors are converging today to encourage institutional efforts—sometimes aggressive efforts—to develop blended learning options for students as quickly and as broadly as possible. The promise of blending face-to-face and online instruction in a delivery mode that will grow enrollments and fatten coffers, all while alleviating problems of limited classroom space and

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overstretched campus resources, may seem just too good to pass up for some schools. But thoughtless urgency and uninformed decision making will push hybrid learning into perilously uncharted territory, where it will be susceptible to the worst fates of online and correspondence education—just another element of managed education adhering more to the logic of business than to the common sense of sound pedagogy.

The hazards in the future of hybrid learning are especially worrisome if all of the constituencies with a stake in effective teaching and learning—faculty, administrators, support staff, parents, and students—are not prepared for informed discussion and action. What do we need to know, do, and discuss in order to ensure that hybrid learning develops into the successful educational model that so many involved in higher education are persuaded it can be?

This book explores hybrid teaching and learning in the broad cultural and historical terms we need to understand if we are to avoid its becoming a new terra incognita. But this book is equally concerned with the specifics of how blended teaching and learning are actually taking place. What do hybrid classes look like, and are there any similarities among them? Must they be high-tech, or low-tech, to produce successful learning results? What has motivated students to take hybrid classes and faculty to design and teach them? And what effect does the institutional rhetoric that surrounds hybrids have on the daily activities of those taking and teaching the courses?

Beyond classroom specifics, we need to see hybrid teaching and learning against a number of other broad backgrounds. What is the history of this delivery mode? Does blended learning have educational precedent in learning modes other than strictly online delivery?

And how is technology being used—and why is it being used—by so many people today outside the classroom? What implications do popular Web and Internet-based applications have for blended learning in higher education?

Finally, what assumptions and beliefs prevail among educators, administrators, and students about hybrid teaching and learning? Are these assumptions well -founded, or might they be leading us into parts unknown and treacherous?

METHOD

This book is meant to be descriptive and suggestive, rather than prescriptive. It does not aim to tell teaching professionals what they must do to ensure success in specific college classes. Teaching faculty ought to be the final arbiters when it comes to individual syllabus design and

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pedagogy, though such individual choices are inevitably most productive when they arise from ongoing dialogue with colleagues.

Blended or hybrid learning presents an opportunity for faculty to re-imagine and retool their curricular design and teaching strategies. Blended classes do not necessarily require anything high-tech, but the opportunity to incorporate interesting and exciting digital technologies into courses should be given careful consideration.

Ultimately, individual faculty will make decisions about how to construct their hybrid classes and what digital tool(s) they will want to learn about and use. But making blended learning effective—allowing it to live up to its potential—will also take institutional vision. The responsibility for achieving educational success, however that might be defined, through blended learning should not be laid at the feet of any single constituency within higher education. It must be shared by faculty, administration, and student support personnel alike.

The "At a Glance" profiles provided in the appendix to this work outline core concerns that all stakeholders should be aware of when it comes to blended learning as an institutional prerogative. However, these profiles, like the rest of the book itself, are offered as suggestively forward-looking, not statically prescriptive. We look at how hybrid courses are currently being designed and taught both within a single institution and across a number of different schools. We evaluate some promising possibilities for applying online applications to hybrid course design and delivery with a view to improving the overall learning experience—both for the educator and for the student. We focus on the crucial question of how hybrid courses can be most thoughtfully and effectively designed to meet 21st-century learning goals in the context of emerging workplace realities, which stress to a greater and greater degree collaborative content creation and communal knowledge building and sharing.

Although the hybrid model is gaining wider visibility in higher education specifically as a combination of online and face-to-face learning, blended teaching in its broadest sense is not by any means new. For years, individual teachers have been combining face-to-face classroom activities with out-of-class learning of various kinds. This has often been happening with no broader institutional context, or support, in place. For example, institutional mechanisms may not be in place to alert students before arriving to class on the first day that they have signed up for a hybrid class. IT support or guidance specific to blended learning may not be in place. Organized faculty development opportunities may be limited or nonexistent. And there may be little in the way of contractually agreed upon or institutionally negotiated policies for such basic matters as how office hours must be accounted

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for when a faculty member's teaching load includes hybrid courses. Yet many individual faculty members have, for years, been successfully reconfiguring class time by combining face-to-face with online or out-of-class learning.

And this reminds us that hybrid learning derives from a varied set of ancestors; it is not just a new twist on online learning. Equally a progenitor of the hybrid model is the long tradition in higher education of field and experiential studies. In an English composition class that is offered as part of an experiential program, for example, students might meet as a group for a few face-to-face classroom sessions. The rest of the class time occurs face-to-face, but not in the traditional classroom space. A field and experiential class might travel as a group to a particular destination, treating the world as a classroom. Basic course goals are folded into what can often be intensive learning experiences. Beyond meeting basic course objectives, students grow emotionally as they bond with their instructor and with classmates, and they mature through the self-knowledge that often comes with experiential learning of this kind. The hybrid model, understood in this broad sense, can provide a much richer learning experience than can traditional classroom instruction alone.

Even as we consider technology-based blended learning more specifically, experiential courses that blend two very different learning modes can provide a more useful precedent than does the history of strictly online course delivery taken alone. The field and experiential model allows us to understand how learning objectives can be met, and often surpassed, in many different learning environments, ones not necessarily as structured or controlled as the traditional classroom. Understanding hybrid or blended teaching models that employ face-to-face and online components as having long and varied institutional precedents may also help to convince resistant or skeptical faculty, parents, students, or administrators that blended learning is—or at least can be—a viable educational model. Nor is blended learning, even as a member of the larger e-learning family, necessarily going to be predisposed to the same problems that have plagued strictly online learning.

But while individual faculty have been trading classroom learning time for other learning experiences for many years, and while such blended models as field and experiential studies have, in many cases, a long institutional history, we are right now, as we move out of the first decade of the 21st century, seeing the nascent period of organized, institution-wide growth in hybrid learning that involves traditional classroom and online learning modes. In other words, many college and universities are—as institutions—either going or are about to

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go hybrid. Blended learning is more and more becoming one of the standard delivery options available to students.

In fact, where we stand now with blended learning looks much like the pre-boom period we saw in the early 1990s for strictly online learning. Writing in 1989, in his foreword to Kamala Anandam's collection, *Transforming Teaching with Technology,* Ken King, then president of Educom, observed that "information technology is starting to change higher education in major ways."[1] Scarcely a decade later, Sir John Daniel, former vice chancellor of The Open University, the distance learning university founded and funded by the British government, wrote that "the dot-com frenzy of late 1999 and early 2000 was a nerve-wracking time."[2]

The fundamental paradigm shift away from traditional classroom instruction and toward online learning that happened in the 1990s—a shift whose effects reverberate today—was one of the most ground-shaking that higher education has ever experienced. It was a game changer, and hybrid and blended learning may be ready to change the game again.

In the case of online learning in the past, numerous individual faculty, the so-called early adopters, were using various online tools to manage and teach classes. However, from these scattered instances, online learning became a highly visible institutional priority on campuses across the United States. Entire online programs were developed, as were the institutional services required to maintain and administer booming online course development and enrollment. It is a truism now that online learning has become a permanent fixture of higher education, no more unusual or alternative a delivery mode than traditional face-to-face learning.

Blended learning is not there yet. Some in the teaching profession have even experienced changes in local departmental or institutional leadership that result in a move away from blended learning rather than toward it.[3] In other words, depending on whom you ask and when, blended learning might not necessarily be here to stay, much less might it be the next high-demand learning model for the 21st century.

But we are definitely at a point when blended learning is going to become a widely visible hot-button issue, on the institutional level, at many campuses. So now is the time to consider blended learning in broad historical and cultural terms, time to examine how the hybrid model is currently being deployed, and time to imagine what hybrids might look like, and what they might enable, with some creative and informed decision making.

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TERMINOLOGY

The reader will notice that the terms "hybrid" and "blended" have been used to this point more or less interchangeably. Other terms that describe the same basic curricular model include "mixed mode" and sometimes just the catchall "flexible," though this term is particularly misleading. But what better evidence that the field of hybrid/blended learning is in its nascent stages than this still-shifting terminology?

Books on the subject often employ the term "blended," as in the collection edited by Anthony G. Picciano and Charles D. Dziuban, *Blended Learning: Research Perspectives.*[4] Many people prefer the term "blended" because it has a less mechanized or scientific feel than does the term "hybrid." In popular culture, the concept of the hybrid can sometimes connote the negative sense of identity-erasing assimilation, though we are finding the opposite to be true more and more of the time. One notable example of the implicit dark side of hybridity is the Borg race from the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Voyager* series. The Borg, from "cyborg," an organic/synthetic hybrid, operate as a collective mind, assimilating all that they encounter. The phrase "resistance is futile" gained pop culture currency thanks to the Borg's appearance in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode "The Best of Both Worlds."[5] Interestingly, this best-of-both-worlds idea, and often the exact phrase, is sometimes applied to hybrid learning. The University of Massachusetts's "UMass Online" homepage provides a typical example: "Blended Learning: Combining the Best of Both Worlds." Or see the homepage for Sandhills Community College's Evening Hybrid Program: "The Evening Hybrid Program provides the best of both worlds."[6]

The Borg are never referred to explicitly as hybrid, however. This is an important rhetorical point because we note that, while a basic idea can be in place (the best of both worlds, for example), it is ultimately the precise language that circulates around the idea, brings it into being, that communicates its cultural value, be it positive (the hybrid car), negative (the Borg), or neutral.[7] Perhaps the key distinction is between the idea of combination as assimilation—the erasure of distinctive characteristics in favor of a homogeneous singularity—and that of combination as hybridizing. This latter sense, as we will explore later on, more often connotes the creation of something new but without destroying the defining characteristics of the original ingredients...a rhetorically and culturally value-positive version of the best-of-both-worlds premise.

The rhetoric of hybridity has, in fact, gained considerable cultural currency. You find it in the most surprising places. I picked up a shoe

box in a retail store one day because printed across the top, in bold lettering, was the phrase "100% Hybrid." An odd contradiction, connoting both purity and multiplicity, but this phrase captures exactly the kind of positive implications that the term "hybrid" carries. The shoe brand was Keen, whose latest advertising campaign promotes "the Hybrid Life." Indeed, visit the Keen Web site and you can join the "HybridLife Community" or learn about Keen's "Hybrid.Care" non-profit programs. Of course, you can also "Buy Now."[8]

Popular and consumer culture associations relative to the term "hybrid" aside, however, the term "blended" may eventually gain popular academic traction simply because the Library of Congress uses "blended learning" as a major subject heading. So a library catalogue subject search for "blended learning" will return available results. A subject search for "hybrid learning" redirects researchers to "blended learning." This implicitly privileges "blended learning" over "hybrid learning" (though both searches can return useful results). A subject search for "hybrid" alone is likely to return a rather extensive list of subheadings, from "hybrid corn" to "hybrid vehicles."

This latter phenomenon draws me to the term "hybrid": it denotes a category with wide cultural application, especially now, in the age of hybrid cars…and corn. That the term "hybrid" can sometimes imply dark motives of assimilation and the erasure of difference makes it that much more interesting, retaining as it does a sense of semantic nuance and discursive subtlety. The idea of the hybrid—and thus of hybrid learning—seems less a model with roots solely in the world of higher education and more a cultural dynamic with implications for and applications to a number of different fields.

The group of educators that constitute the "Best Practices for Online Writing Instruction," which is a part of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) organization, has tried to delineate a distinction between hybrid and blended learning. Beth Hewett, the CCCC "Best Practices for Online Writing Instruction" committee chair, has explained that "'blended' means meeting most of all classes in a computer lab/classroom and working both via networked computers and face-to-face"; "'hybrid' means meeting classes both in a traditional classroom and in a computer lab/classroom (often done in a one day on/one day off arrangement)."[9] Hewett further clarified this distinction when we corresponded, noting that, in the committee's vision, the blended learning model "seems to us to be one where both face-to-face interaction and computer-mediated interaction is always available at one time."[10] In this sense, blended learning still means that most class meetings take place face-to-face. Hybrid learning, on the other hand, may involve a substantial non-face-to-face online learning component.

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It may be less useful to arrive at consensus on one term just yet or to argue for the rightness of one label over another than it is to explore the very unsettledness of the terminology itself. For every book that employs "blended," we could likely find an article that uses "hybrid." Take Margie Martyn's "The Hybrid Online Model"[11] or Catherine Gouge's "Hybrid Courses and the Future of Writing Programs"[12] as just two examples. The Sloan Consortium, publisher of *Blended Learning: Research Perspectives,* asks visitors to its Web site, "What term does your institution use?" Options include "Blended," "Hybrid," "Mixed Mode," and "Other." Of the more than 1,000 votes recorded, 51 percent indicate that "Blended" is the preferred term; 39 percent indicate that "Hybrid" is preferred; 4 percent indicate "Mixed Mode"; and 6 percent (more than those who selected "Mixed Mode") indicate "Other."[13]

The terms "blended," "hybrid," "mixed mode," and even "flexible" are used more or less interchangeably throughout this book, except where it makes sense to delineate clear distinctions. The choice to let the terminology shift is meant to reflect the nascent state, not of indecision but of predecision, that we are seeing as higher education thinks broadly about mixed-mode learning that combines face-to-face and online instruction.

So, to summarize, the larger method of the book is to combine description with forward-looking vision and to offer recommendations rather than prescriptions, for we find ourselves at a point when informed decision making and informed debate about blended learning need to be happening if they are not already, at the institutional level, across the higher education landscape.

With the potential to affect the very face of education as has online learning, hybrid learning should be of interest to stakeholders beyond just the classroom: clearly, new modes of teaching will affect educators and students, but equally affected will be administrators, student support personnel, and parents and family members of college and university students. In fact, when it comes to basic issues of education, we all have a stake in effective teaching and learning.

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CHAPTER 1

The Resistant Early Adopter

We are living in an evermore media-rich—some would say media-saturated—environment. The subtitle of Todd Gitlin's 2001 book, *Media Unlimited*, makes the point precisely: "How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives."[1] Enabling this media torrent is technology in all its various manifestations, from netbooks and smartphones to Internet-ready televisions and webcams. Of course, it is possible to ignore the torrent and to resist technology, especially as these can intrude on educational spaces. Indeed, educational spaces are sometimes conceived of as retreats from the media torrent of everyday life and the 24/7 immersion in technology that can be all too common for many people. The classroom often privileges the practices of reflection and deep analysis, neither of which finds a comfortable place in our sound-bite culture. Some thus argue that the more technology-dominated our everyday lives become, the less technology-dominated should be our educational spaces.[2]

The classroom in higher education has also traditionally privileged text-based learning. The typical college class is a biblio—or book—centric space. And perhaps resistance to change, as that change appears in the form of technology, should come as no surprise, given that the mandate laid upon college educators is to develop and refine basic competencies like reading, writing, and critical reasoning. These are, at least traditionally, text-based skills, and technology can often seem like little more than a distraction from these basic educational goals. For some,

technology in education should ideally involve little more than computers as word processors if we are to maintain a literate society. But the notion of literacy is ever-expanding to include the ability to read, and create, visually rich Web pages, not just the pure text of the conventionally printed page.

In fact, technology in the form of the Web functions rather more effectively when it is deployed in ways that reconfigure the basic premises of linear, textual argument. That is, the Web communicates best, or it educates and engages most effectively, not when it is used to present a single thesis and to support that thesis in a linear fashion, as might the traditional college essay. The Web works best when it is used to reflect associative, nonlinear thinking.

For those academic disciplines whose traditions are grounded in the communication of ideas, or theses, in print, the seeming disruption of that grounding by technology can be unsettling. Mark Bauerlein has argued that "no generation has experienced so many techno-enhancements and produced so little intellectual progress."[3] And Robert Reid, a teaching assistant in the United Kingdom, thinks that "schools and colleges are awash with uninspiring technologies of questionable value."[4] These sentiments reflect a basic skepticism when it comes to technology in education: technology, rather than enhancing the learning experience, is working counter to it, and, it is becoming a costly distraction.

For many, technology provides a visually—and often aurally—rich environment, but one that is text poor. The average Web user these days will notice that most sites employ very little text and certainly no blocks of text longer than a few lines or a short paragraph. So a vision of technology as just the text-poor Web can easily provoke resistance, if not at least a sense of unease, in many educators whose own scholarly backgrounds, traditions, and allegiances are based in printed text and whose teaching objectives include cultivating in students basic critical reading and writing skills.

From here it is easy to see how and why many educators react with no small measure of skepticism when it comes to integrating technology into their curricula. The root is, in part, a narrow and fuzzy notion of just what technology is. For many, technology simply means the Web. Resistance can be reinforced by the sense that a movement toward technology is de facto a movement *away* from the very traditions we are trying to introduce to students. Simplistically speaking, you can build a Web page or you can read *Moby Dick.* But you cannot do both.

Perhaps most crucial for making technology in the classroom realizable and productive for the least tech-savvy educator, or the most tech-resistant, is to understand that technology, in whatever form, works

best when we can see and represent to others exactly what problem it is helping us to overcome. In other words, what does technology allow us to do better? In this sense, technology can more obviously become an educational enhancement (an addition to something) rather than an alternative (a replacement for something).

Part of being able to answer this question involves rethinking the term "technology." Any particular technology is simply a means, a series of steps, or a material tool for completing a task. The hammer and the wheel are technologies in this sense. So technology, in and of itself, need not suggest complexity, though it often does for many people. Certainly the printing press and the Internet are (or were) complex technologies for their time, but they share in common with much simpler technologies the fundamental characteristic that they can be employed to overcome a specific problem. The printing press can be used to produce many identical copies of a piece of text, where otherwise manual labor would be required in the form of industrious scribes to produce those copies. The Internet, as it was first conceived and as it is still sometimes used today, overcomes the problem of communicating efficiently and effectively over long distances, often among many individuals. And so the hammer, a simple tool if ever there was one, seems fundamentally different from a computer. However, as technologies, the hammer and wheel are, like the printing press and the Internet, just tools for overcoming a particular problem. How much more approachable does technology become when it is understood specifically as a means to overcome an existing, identifiable, problem? One sometimes hears that technology is a solution in search of a problem. Undoubtedly, part of effective technology use in the classroom involves identifying exactly what problem, or problems, technology can help us to confront.

We might also ask: what technologies do we all already use in the classroom to overcome the basic challenges of communicating ideas to a group of people? I personally know of no college professor who does not, at least on occasion, use chalk and chalkboard or dry erase marker and whiteboard. Chalkboards and whiteboards are not mechanically intricate technologies. They are not electric. They do not feature moving parts. But they are still technologies in the sense that they allow for a professor to communicate, on the spot, with a classroom full of students. A student's notebook is a technology, too, the purpose of which is to overcome the problem of recording information and ideas communicated by the professor in order to make future study and reference possible. So let us imagine that a couple of students show up to class, not with notebooks but with notebook computers. Certainly the computer is a much more intricate machine, but no more or less

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a technology, necessarily, than coil-bound, lined paper. The notebook and the notebook computer are used in this instance to overcome the same problem. Technology is too often misunderstood as necessitating a rejection of what has come before, when this need not actually be the case at all.

The simplified example of the notebook and notebook computer as equivalent technologies, at least inasmuch as they can be used to complete the same basic task, ultimately allows us to understand technology as most effective when responding to clearly identified, existing problems or obstacles. Understanding technology in this way can help us to make the case for incorporating new technologies (or what are often just more complex versions of old technologies) in the classroom that much stronger. Thus, an early chapter in the current work delineates some of the challenges that many colleges and universities face. These are the problems that, in some cases, technology can be deployed to address, if not actually to overcome.

Communications technologies that use the Internet—like the Web or virtual environments—are also too often conceived of as primarily passive learning tools. Because the Web is most effective as a visually rich communicator, it is commonly (mis)understood as most akin to the television, that most passive of technologies. But the Web need be anything but a passively consumed medium. Indeed, it is experiencing its greatest developments in areas of user-created content, collaboration, and circulation. Web building is easier than ever, and utilities like weblogs and wikis are free and easy to use.

In later chapters, we will look at a number of Web-based tools that can be used to facilitate student collaboration. We will explore in greater depth how so much of what is happening on and to the Web is moving in the direction of collaboratively generated content. In fact, collaboration is fast becoming a core competency on par with reading and writing. Collaboration, specifically online collaboration, is a basic skill toward which educators across disciplines are striving and that is particularly prized in many job fields. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), among many other educational organizations, has articulated a vision for education in the 21st century through its Greater Expectations initiative. A crucial component of this vision is collaboration: the new academy, according to the AAC&U, "values collaborative work, particularly in diverse groups."[5] The college essay, in its conventional and traditional application, is not a particularly collaborative exercise. It is, as many of us know, often a solitary endeavor.

Despite my being an English professor who uses technology and who teaches in a variety of delivery modes, I have not by any means

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abandoned the traditional essay as an assessment tool. I am, though, interested in extending to students multiple opportunities for collaborative work that is enabled by technology. I am an avid user of new technology—including multi-user virtual environments, blogs, and wikis—both for my everyday research and work as a college professor and as a significant component in my classes, which include composition and literature courses. I would even consider myself an early adopter.

First and foremost, though, I am a skeptic. I am as resistant as the next person when it comes to new ways of doing things in my classes. As Van B. Weigel argues in *Deep Learning for a Digital Age,* "use of technology in higher education should enrich and extend the student's exploration of new territory."[6] It should not be a shiny new toy used for the purposes of distraction or sheer entertainment.

So mine may represent a fairly typical professional position, though one that reflects apparently opposing ends of a spectrum: I am a resistant early adopter. I will thus be arguing for the inclusion of new technologies in course design and implementation, as means to enable student collaboration and expression, but with a specific focus on exactly why these technologies are worth exploring, since they often do require the investment of considerable time on the part of the teaching professor and of money and resources on the part of the institution as a whole.

Perhaps the fundamental challenge faced by students, faculty, and administrators alike, as we think about technology and education specifically in terms of making hybrid learning as effective as it can be, is exactly how to navigate the seemingly diametric poles of technology enthusiast and technology skeptic. Each end of the spectrum has something valuable to teach us.

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