

# Best Practices Guide for Distance Learning Facilitators

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## Preplanning Strategies: What are some of the pre-planning strategies you need to consider before converting your traditional class to a blended-learning class?

### Understanding the differences between traditional learning and online learning.

As you prepare to teach a blended learning class you first need to consider what differentiates online learning from face-to-face learning. An important point to understand is that you cannot directly convert traditional training to online training. A variety of equivalent instructional approaches should be provided for students (Solomon et al., 2009). The online learning environment needs to be equivalent in achieving the same learning outcomes as traditional learning.

There are four key differences between traditional and online facilitation (Piskurich, 2010). It is important to be aware of these as you plan your blended class.

1. Online is more difficult to know what your learners are doing and how they are doing. Connecting with them is even more important.
2. Activities and applications are the heart of an online course.
3. Content is critical but in the end it's the activities that help them learn the content.
4. You must build time into the implementation phase to think about and practice the role you will play in facilitating the online portions of your class.

The matrix shown in **table 1.1** will provide you with some guidelines on the key differences among three different distance learning models.

**Table of Definitive Questions for Distance Learning Models**

	<b>Online Courses</b>	<b>Blended/Hybrid Courses</b>	<b>Web-facilitated Courses</b>
<b>How much content is delivered online?</b>	More than 80%	30 to 79%	Less than 29%
<b>How much separation is there between the learner and the facilitator?</b>	Complete separation between the learner and the facilitator	Most instruction happens face to face	No separation between learner and facilitator
<b>In what ways is technology used with each model?</b>	Course delivered completely through technology. To facilitate communication, interactive learning, and deliver course learning resources: simulation, video, reading, etc...; facilitate course work between student and instructor, deliver grades and feedback.	Course that blends online and face-to-face delivery. Substantial proportion of the content is delivered online, typically uses online discussions, and typically has some face-to-face meetings.	Course that uses web-based technology to facilitate what is essentially a face-to-face course. Uses a course management system (CMS) or web pages to post the syllabus and assignments, for example. (Allen & Seaman, 2007)
<b>Identify 2-3 pros for each model.</b>	Freedom in where and when learning takes place; provide educational opportunities where traditional classrooms do not exist; schools can save money without providing the physical elements of face to face learning.	Students value the presence of a learning group; informal interactions that occur before, after & sometimes during class are beneficial; Online discussions provide in-depth learning and participation; Online benefits of easy access to material where and when student and instructor choose;	Students value the presence of a learning group; informal interactions that occur before, after & sometimes during class are beneficial; easy method of following course syllabus and managing assignments with instructors.
<b>Identify 2-3 cons for each model.</b>	Takes more time for the student and the instructor; must be online to access material; completely asynchronous – can be a pro as well. May be a con for students that need synchronous learning with instructors.	Still requires specific class time; requires student to find course needs locally; little flexibility in class time and location;	Requires all synchronous learning, no flexibility in schedule, no flexibility in course location, must be on campus in classroom.
<b>What factors need to be considered when implementing each model?</b>	Student level of self directed learning; student and instructor comfort level with technology; instructional design specifically for distance education; reliable online delivery tool or course management system.	Instructional design for online portion of course; understanding what elements will be face to face and which will be online; instructor and students comfort level and accessibility to online technologies.	Instructional design for online portion of course; understanding what elements will be face to face and which will be online; instructor and students comfort level and accessibility to online technologies.

## Overview of online learning and online tools

The first step you need to take is planning your online learning environment. A Course Management System (CMS) will provide you with the online tools needed to facilitate the student activities and online discussions. There are many free CMS choices available. For ease of use and a large variety of tools I would recommend Edu 2.0 <http://www.edu20.org> Edu2.0 provides the web 2.0 tools of blogs, wikis, RSS, surveys, community, discussion forums and portfolios. Edu 2.0 will allow you to organize your class material providing an easy to follow site for your students.

Once you have selected your CMS and created the initial class site, it is time to decide what pieces of your class should be face-to-face and what should be online. You need to consider the learners, the content, the method and materials, and the environment, including the technology (Simonson, 2009). Each of these components must interact both efficiently and effectively to produce quality learning experiences.

As you are considering your current class and its content think of the following points when planning for the online portion:

- The focus of the instruction shifts from classroom lecture and presentation to visual presentations, engaged learners, and careful timing of presentations of information.
- Consider ways to illustrate key concepts, or topics, using tables, figures, and other visual items.
- Plan activities that encourage interactivity. Students may require training to participate actively in online activities.
- Plan activities that allow for student group work. This builds and supports a social environment. You may want to present case studies which the students could discuss and collaborate on a solution.
- Be prepared in the event technical problems occur. Discuss with students ahead of time alternative plans in case there is a technical problem to avoid confusion and loss of class time (Herring & Smaldino, 1997 as cited by Simonson, 2009).

It is critical for you to know your learners. If you do not already know them, or they do not know one another, the first week of class is a good time to use an ice breaker or self introduction activity. You could have each student provide an online introduction of themselves in the blog or discussion area of your class. Use this activity to allow students to form a connection with one another. This should also be used to provide you with some knowledge about your students' experience, level of knowledge on your class subject, and to see their comfort level with the online learning environment.

When selecting your content you should follow this guideline. It may be necessary to reduce the amount of information delivered and to increase the interactive value of the learning experience (herring & Smaldino, 1997 as cited by Simonson et al., 2009). You may need to get rid of some content

that had been included in your traditional class format. Clear instructional goals and expectations should be defined and shared with your students.

## Online Content and Engagement Strategies

### The Threaded Discussion

“The threaded discussion is one of the most powerful techniques used in distance education” (Simonson et al., p. 186). As you work to create a blended learning class you can take your class discussion time and make these into online threaded discussions. These discussions are very valuable to the online students. This will keep them engaged in the class on a daily basis. The online discussion provides students with the opportunity to improve and apply critical thinking skills. It is also a learning activity that enables the students to form a community with their fellow learners. Without the weekly discussions the course would be a very isolated learning experience.

Your role in threaded discussions is to read each post and evaluate the quality of the scholarly responses. You must know how to eliminate superficial answers and grade the student’s on their post quality and use of research findings. You are the facilitator of the discussion – making sure that a back and forth discussion happens. You should respond to about 1 of every 4 posts by students as a general rule of thumb. This can become less as the course progresses and the students begin to teach and learn from each other. You need to ensure that there is not misinformation given, and that the discussion stays on track (Simonson, 2009).

As the class instructor, you can keep the discussion engaging by adding additional questions to consider and provide new resources to further a student post. You may also challenge a student by offering another view contrary to the student’s post.

### Discussion Strategies

Here is a list of discussion forum strategies instructors should employ to enhance students’ online experience:

1. Post the rules of netiquette and behavior expectations at the start of class.
2. Encourage students to introduce themselves and meet one another to form a learning community where they will feel safe to share and discuss.
3. Develop discussion questions that allow the student to critically reflect on the material and synthesize it with their own experiences.
4. Encourage students to participate early and often.
5. Create their presence in the classroom but not interfere with the flow of the discussion.
6. Intervene when the discussion is veering off in the wrong direction and help move the discussion back on track.
7. Ensure that the discussion forum is a safe learning environment.
8. Promote further thinking and reflection by posing more thoughtful and engaging questions within any given discussion (Owens, 2010).

Discussion assignment guidelines to follow are:

1. Develop a weekly discussion question and topic and provide supporting online resources for the discussion. These may be articles, documents, case studies, or multimedia files.
2. Require all students to respond to the discussion topic sometime early in the week (Wednesday at the latest).
3. Read all discussion posts. Respond to anyone providing misinformation or needing guidance on the topic.
4. Ask leading questions and add comments to posts that are exemplary.
5. Require students to engage in a discussion with one another by assigning responses to one another by the week's end. Typically they should respond to two or more other posts by offering additional insight, asking questions for clarity, and or offering a counter view point on another's post.

## Roles of the Instructor and Students

### *The Facilitator*

Your role in the online segment of your class is more facilitator than trainer. Within the online segments of your class the students need to be actively engaged. To do this, you must not be the lead presenter. Rather your role as a facilitator is to monitor their online activity, make sure they are engaged, and keep them on task with the discussions and assignments.

As the facilitator follow these tips for your class to be effective.

- 1) Learn the software that you and your students will be using
- 2) Review the lesson plan thoroughly – know how the material will be taught, what the problems are the students will work on, know when and how to turn it over to the students for their experience and learning
- 3) Go through entire course and understand all lessons ahead of the course beginning – they should not be preparing for a lesson just before it is taught
- 4) Understand all learners are different. You must keep in constant contact with students in online environments. If a student is late or seems disconnected from the course – you should be in contact with them and draw them into the course interaction.
- 5) You must participate in all synchronous and asynchronous discussions, constant monitoring the discussion and following the student progress
- 6) You must show learners that you care about their success

## *The Students*

"They [students] will need to be motivated to participate and to engage in the types of learning experiences in which they may have little experience" (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, p. 162).

Provide an opportunity for collaboration:

For many students that have participated in the online format jumping in can be an intimidating experience, so the next aspect to consider is to create an online environment that allows for collaboration. "Although many distance students are cited as being independent learners, they derive value from collaborative experiences... working together creates a richer learning experience for the individual participant" (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, p. 165). However, this is not done entirely by the designer and instructor, this is a responsibility that the student must take on and embrace to be truly effective.

Students need to take responsibility for their own activity and learning in the class. They need to understand the software and technology that will be used. They must participate in all online discussions and assigned group activities. They need to take responsibility to understand the class resources available and the instructor expectations of them.

## **Summary**

As a trainer or instructor it is a very effective approach to present your class in a blended learning environment. To prepare for this you need to understand the key differences between traditional class environments and blended environments. You will need to invest time in your own understanding of this and of the technology you will need for your class.

You need to consider your content and decide which pieces lend themselves best to the online portion of your class. Through online learning you can create a very engaging learning experience. You must plan for and create online activities such as group collaboration, multimedia presentations, and links to additional resources. One of the most effective activities used in online learning is the discussion thread. A discussion thread is an engaging and effective learning tool. You must provide clear participation expectations to your students.

Your role as a trainer or instructor must change in the online environment to one of a facilitator. It is critical that you facilitate the learning. The students are the main players and their role is to be engaged and actively involved in the online activities and discussions. Students must take responsibility for their own learning and understanding of the tools and assignments in the class.

Online learning has been found to add a higher level of learning to students if the class is developed using best practices. By following this best practices guide, and investing the time to understand and redevelop your material to work in a blended environment, you will enjoy facilitating a class where your students are engaged and where they will achieve the goals and learning objectives of the class.



## References

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