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Why IT Matters to Higher Education

EDUCAUSEreview

6 Models for Blended Synchronous and Asynchronous Online Course Delivery

by [Heather Farmer](#) Tuesday, August 18, 2020 [Transforming Higher Ed](#)

★ Editors' Pick

This article proposes six models of blended online course delivery, ranging from a highly supported faculty-guided model to an independent self-paced model.



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Current definitions of blended learning typically acknowledge movement between face-to-face and online course delivery.¹ In their article about blended learning, D. Randy Garrison and Heather Kanuka stress that blended learning is much more than a convergence of face-to-face and online learning experiences.

"A blended learning design represents a significant departure from either of these approaches. It represents a fundamental reconceptualization and reorganization of the teaching and learning dynamic, starting with various specific contextual needs and contingencies (e.g., discipline,

developmental level, and resources). In this respect, no two blended learning designs are identical. This introduces the great complexity of blended learning."²

Another dimension that should be considered is the movement between synchronous and asynchronous learning. Synchronous time can be scheduled for those activities where students need the support of faculty and peers, such as during group work and complex problem-solving activities, collaborative and discovery learning exercises, and peer feedback and critique sessions. When students require practice with problem sets or need time to increase their proficiency, they may benefit from an asynchronous environment. Asynchronous learning allows students to acquire new knowledge and practice skills at a pace that is optimal for their learning. This could potentially reduce the anxiety of students who fear they can't keep up with their peers. Blended learning goes well beyond learning in class at school versus learning at home on the computer; it incorporates a variety of experiences, including learning independently, collaboratively with peers, on campus, or from home.

Aligning Blended Models to the Learner's Autonomy Level

Determining the level of synchronous instructor support to provide in a course should be informed by the knowledge and skills learners have developed within the curriculum. Where a course is situated in an academic program (first year versus fourth year) may help determine student readiness. The zone of proximal development—a concept developed by psychologist Lev Vygotsky in the early 1900s—acknowledges the developmental arc that can be observed in learners. The zone of proximal development suggests that students require more guidance and support from teachers when completing new tasks or acquiring new knowledge. As students demonstrate mastery, they become more capable of completing tasks independently.³ Similarly, the conscious competence model acknowledges that learners move through stages when learning a new skill, behavior, ability, or technique: (1) unconscious incompetence; (2) conscious incompetence; (3) conscious competence; and finally (4) unconscious competence.⁴ The faculty's role across each of these stages changes greatly. A learner who is in the first stage requires the instructor to provide more monitoring and guidance, while a learner at the fourth stage is able to operate independently and is more likely to need the instructor to step back and play a mentorship role.

Student support is also closely related to student success, motivation, and learning.⁵ A 2011 study of 110 students in the United States looked at "the relationship between students' perceived support and their learning outcomes in an online course."⁶ Three categories of support were examined: instructional, peer, and technical support. The results indicated that students who perceived that they were well supported in their learning also indicated higher levels of satisfaction with the online course.⁷

The six blended learning models presented below have been arranged with these frameworks in mind. The models range from a highly supported and faculty-guided model to an independent, self-paced model: (1) flipped classroom; (2) guided lab time; (3) integrated lab time; (4) capstone/independent learning; (5) project-based; and (6) self-directed.

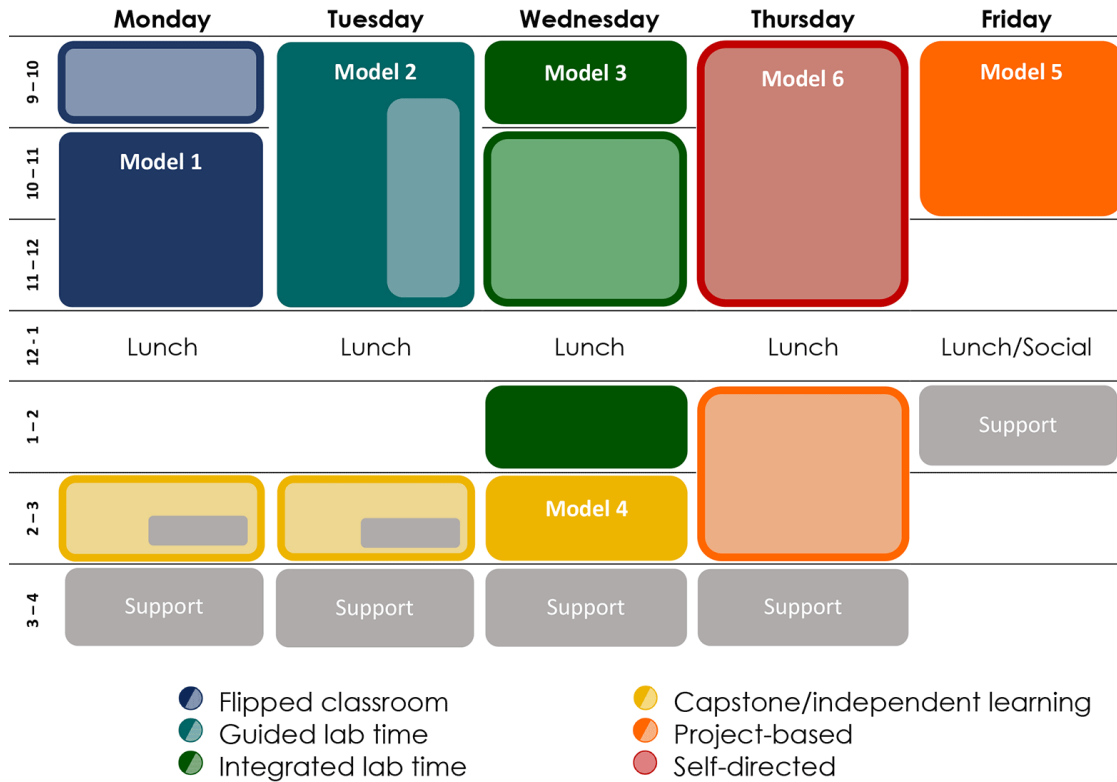


Figure 1. Six Models of Blended Learning

Model 1: Flipped Classroom

One Hour Asynchronous, Two Hours Synchronous

In this scenario, students begin the course by learning concepts and skills asynchronously. Learning can happen in a number of ways, including through videos, readings, interactive online activities, and practice exercises or quizzes. All work is completed in advance of the synchronous component of the course. Time spent learning with faculty and peers provides an opportunity for students to come together and explore more complex tasks, solve problems, and build knowledge. This model is the most successful during the first semesters of a program, as it establishes behavior expectations and good habits.

Model 2: Guided Lab Time

Three Hours Synchronous (but students or groups also work independently)

Learning in this model is guided and monitored by faculty for the full duration of the course. Though students may work on projects or exercises independently or in groups, faculty rotate through students and groups to provide feedback and coaching on students' work. This model can be found across all levels of an academic program; however, monitoring and coaching may be more frequent in earlier semesters.

Model 3: Integrated Lab Time

One Hour Synchronous, Two Hours Asynchronous, Final Hour Synchronous

Within the lab or studio, there are typically milestones that must be reached or deliverables that are due at the end of each class. Classes often begin synchronously with a discussion and a demonstration of the concept and skill being taught. This initial demonstration is followed by asynchronous time where students complete a practical component either individually or in groups. At the end of class, students come together synchronously. Faculty facilitate the sharing of student work and feedback and close the lesson with a review. This structure most closely resembles the delivery of an advanced-level project, studio, or lab course.

Model 4: Capstone/Independent Learning

Two Hours Asynchronous (with access to faculty support), One Hour Synchronous

Students engage in individual or group project work for the first two hours; however, students have scheduled access to faculty or technicians for questions if needed. While this model has some similarities to Model 2 (guided lab time), it differs in that initial instructions may be given asynchronously, and working at the specified time is optional. Students can choose whether they need faculty support. In addition, within the guided lab time, faculty actively scan and watch over student work. This model is ideal for more advanced students who have a solid foundational skill set and demonstrate more autonomy.

Model 5: Project-Based Course

Two Hours Asynchronous, Two Hours Synchronous

In this model, students work independently or in teams to actively explore real-world problems and challenges. Students are self-directed and work asynchronously on their projects for the first two hours. Faculty may schedule brief check-ins during this time. For the second two-hour block, the class comes together synchronously, and students debrief the class on the progress they are making on their project, engage in peer critiques, seek mentorship, and participate in other learning activities. This model is ideal for more advanced students who have a solid foundational skill set and have developed more autonomy.

Model 6: Self-Directed Course

Three Hours Asynchronous

All aspects of this course can be done asynchronously. This model provides students with the flexibility to complete work at their own pace. In this course model, students may engage in research, watch videos, complete group assignments, and share feedback and comments in discussion boards—all on their own schedule each week. While assignments and evaluations have due dates in order to ensure appropriate course pacing, faculty may allow for early submissions or broad module-level deadlines. This model works well for students who have demonstrated strong time-management and prioritization skills and have a capacity for independent learning.

Considerations

Selecting the appropriate blend of synchronous and asynchronous time for your course should be informed by where learners are within their curriculum. To decide which model to implement, consider the following three questions:

1. Where is my course situated within the overall academic program?
2. How independent are my learners at this point in the program?
3. What level of guidance or coaching will my learners need to be successful?

Articulating a clear rationale for the blended learning structure is critical. Postsecondary institutions are currently swept up in the rush to move courses online, and faculty need to take the time to consider which online blended model best aligns with the needs of the learner and the learning outcomes of the course. Once the model has been selected, sharing the rationale with students and explaining how the strategies support the curriculum will help them better understand why part of the course is being delivered synchronously and part of the course is being delivered asynchronously, what the purpose and role of asynchronous learning is in the course, and how the asynchronous learning fits into the overall lesson plan.

Just as Garrison and Kanuka expressed, an opportunity exists to reconceptualize the learning and teaching schedule beyond the constraints of typical classroom delivery. The movement to online learning and the integration of synchronous and asynchronous delivery options opens up new possibilities for course scheduling. Faculty and administrators are faced with an interesting challenge and an exciting opportunity to schedule programs and engage students in new ways that best fit the curriculum without the constraints associated with scheduling classrooms.

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For more insights about advancing teaching and learning through IT innovation, please visit the *EDUCAUSE Review* ***Transforming Higher Ed*** blog as well as the **[EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative](#)** and **[Student Success](#)** web pages.

The *Transforming Higher Ed* blog editors welcome submissions. Please contact us at **THEblog@edUCAUSE.edu**.

Notes

1. Heather Staker and Michael B. Horn, *Classifying K-12 Blended Learning*, research report, (Boston, MA: Innosight Institute, May 2012). ↵
2. D. Randy Garrison and Heather Kanuka, "[Blended Learning: Uncovering Its Transformative Potential in Higher Education](#)," *The Internet and Higher Education* 7, no. 2 (2004): 95–105. ↵
3. L. S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978). ↵
4. Alan Chapman, [Conscious Competence Learning Model](#), Businessballs (website), 2007. ↵
5. Ormond Simpson, *Supporting Students in Online, Open and Distance Learning* (London: Routledge, 2002). ↵
6. Sang Joon Lee, Sandhya Srinivasan, Trudian Trail, et al., "[Examining the Relationship among Student Perception of Support, Course Satisfaction, and Learning Outcomes in Online Learning](#)," *The Internet and Higher Education* 14 no. 3 (2011), 158–163. ↵
7. Ibid. ↵

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