

The Perfect Blend

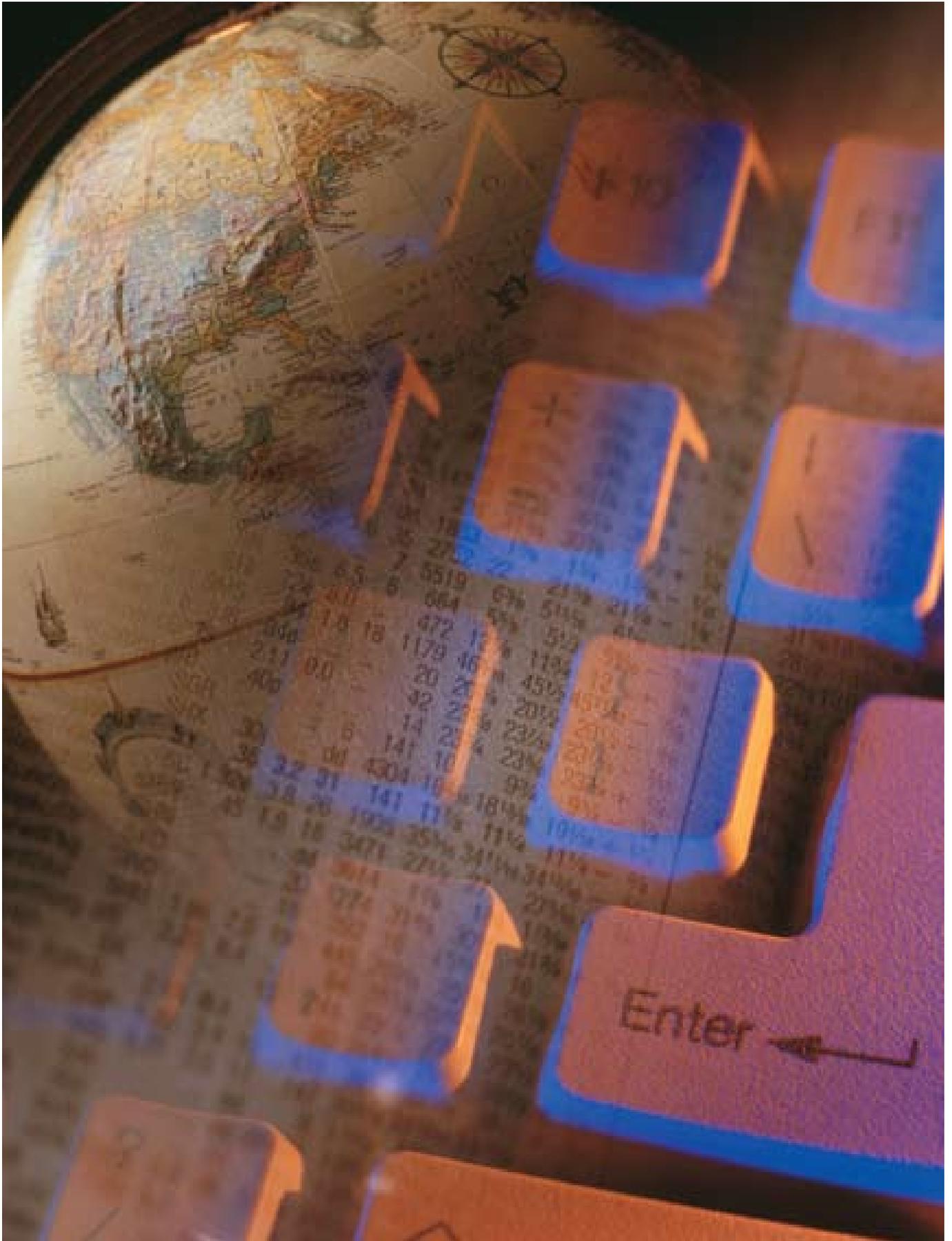
by Susan Gautsch and Charla Griffy-Brown

Before the arrival of the Internet, learning most often happened when students and teachers met face-to-face in a classroom. Even with all the new options available today, face-to-face learning is still a powerful approach to education that promotes spontaneity, fosters a sense of community, makes it simpler to resolve conflicts, and allows students to carry out time-based activities.

But with so many different methods of learning available today, face-to-face learning is often only one component of education. In fact, 125 AACSB-accredited business schools offer some form of online learning, and many combine on-site instruction with online education to create blended learning programs. A growing number of interactive collaborative tools have made blended learning easier to use and, therefore, more attractive to many schools.

Online education can take many forms, but it's most commonly divided into three modalities: multisite synchronous, remote synchronous, and asynchronous learning. The challenge for business educators is to determine which blend of modalities works best for their own programs. Before we describe how blended learning works at our school, Pepperdine University, we'll take a look at the various permutations and examine how each one suits certain aspects of teaching and learning.

Pepperdine University mixes on-site learning with collaborative online tools to prepare students for the new realities of the workplace.



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Many Modalities

In *multisite synchronous* learning, small groups of students gather at a particular physical site and use videoconferencing to engage with their professor and other small groups at additional sites. This modality is excellently suited for programs offered at multiple campuses across town or around the globe. The professor may teach from the same site all the time or alternate sites from session to session.

Programmatically, multisite sessions provide students an extraordinary level of flexibility, opportunity, and choice, while reducing travel costs and lowering the consumption of fossil fuels. At the same time, they offer schools the ability to expand dramatically into new regional markets. However, videoconferencing systems and network infrastructure can be expensive to implement and resource-intensive to maintain.



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A *remote synchronous* modality enables students and professors to meet in real time, whether they’re at home, at work, or even traveling in another country. Participants attend classes by using a computer, a broadband Internet connection, and online collaboration tools, such as those listed in the sidebar on page 31.

As with multisite learning, remote synchronous education offers students a great deal of flexibility and reduces their consumption of natural resources. It also allows professors to shorten or eliminate their commute times and open their calendars to professional travel that might otherwise conflict with class schedules. There are several other benefits: Desktop conferencing and collaboration technology rarely requires additional infrastructure investments, is relatively inexpensive, and is readily available wherever students or professors happen to be.

The *asynchronous* modality, which is not determined by time or place, provides the most convenience and flexibility. It enables teams and individual students to complete assign-

ments and participate in activities and online discussions according to their own schedules. While asynchronous learning usually takes place over an extended time period, it works best when anchored by concrete guidelines, hard deadlines, constructive feedback, and frequent assessment. New Web 2.0 tools, such as those listed in the sidebar, make asynchronous learning much more engaging through interactive, collaborative, audiovisual, and social media.

All three of these online learning modalities offer vast improvements over computer-based training of the past, which was largely text-based, self-directed, and passive. Today’s technologies not only allow a high level of active learning and student interaction, they are congruent with technologies currently in use in the workplace. Thus, students not only hone their 21st-century professional skills, they also are well-positioned to continue learning after they graduate.

The challenge with blending these modalities is that no single formula or “recipe” will apply across disciplines or programs. Every school must determine the best way to design its own blended educational environment and measure learning outcomes.

The Pepperdine Blend

At Pepperdine’s Graziadio School of Business, blended learning allows us to personalize business education, foster strong relationships among students and faculty, and prepare students to perform in the digitally interconnected business world. We have created a number of blended learning offerings for business professionals who work full-time while they complete graduate or undergraduate work.

Several of our four-unit information and process systems classes for MBA students are blended. One of these classes is anchored in face-to-face sessions that occur over four weekends. In between those sessions, students asynchronously view narrated presentations created online by the professor, using a very simple tool called Voicethread. Later, working individually or in teams, students create their own narrated presentations. Like blogs, Voicethreads allow others to post comments to the creator of the presentation, but these comments are either verbal or recorded as video. Students and the professor also can ask questions or give constructive feedback that has a more personal touch.

In addition, using online media such as Elluminate or Skype, students in the class collaborate on a group project. Key elements are then posted in an online portfolio site, which becomes a learning repository for the class. Students also participate in an online information security simulation

and learn about cloud computing and search engine optimization. At the same time, they become familiar with the knowledge management tools many large and small businesses use today, such as Google Apps, Google Analytics, Yammer, and Delicious.

An undergraduate leadership class in the organizational theory department uses some of the same methods and technologies, but blends them differently. This two-unit class is anchored by two face-to-face weekend meetings. In between meetings, students watch narrated mini-lectures in VoiceThread and engage in online discussions using a threaded discussion board in Blackboard. They also take two self-paced quizzes in Blackboard and receive immediate feedback on their scores and individual answers.

A trimesterlong decision science course allows students to gather for four hours per week for ten out of the 14 weeks of the class. During the fourth, seventh, tenth, and twelfth weeks, when students do not meet face-to-face, they work asynchronously to solve problems set by the professor. The teacher uses simple screen-capture tools such as Camtasia or Jing to prepare short videos about solving each of the problems; students can watch these as often as they like. Students also use the Internet to collect data they need to address complex real-world business problems. The students aggregate and share the data in different ways; many use Delicious, a social bookmarking Web service for storing, sharing, and discovering new Web bookmarks. They record their own solutions, also with the help of screen-capture tools, and the professor provides individualized feedback on each video.

An economics class uses an internal social network called Yammer to engage in hearty, asynchronous discussions. Because Yammer relies on a conversational style similar to that of Facebook, students find it easy to use. Discussions tend to be highly interactive as students ask each other questions, debate specific points, and expand on each others' ideas. And because each post displays the author's picture and name, students and professors develop a close sense of community, even when they do not meet face-to-face for weeks at a time.

These four examples demonstrate that blended learning can be personalized, interactive, experiential, and applied—and that no one type of blended learning will suit every professor, discipline, or school.

Measuring Success

Despite their versatility, blended learning techniques can be considered successful only if assessment measures prove that students are actually learning. Research suggests that they



Tools to Enhance Distance Learning

Multisite audio/videoconferencing:

Polycom, Tandberg, Cisco Telepresence, and LifeSize

Synchronous desktop videoconferencing and online meetings:

WebEx, GoToMeeting, Skype, Elluminate Live, Adobe Connect, Elluminate VCS, Yugma, DimDim, ooVoo, Vidyo, and many more

Asynchronous (and synchronous) collaborative spaces:

Google Docs, Spreadsheets, and Presentations; Microsoft Office Web Apps; Zoho; ThinkFree; OpenOffice

Classroom capture:

MediaSite, Tegrity, CourseCast, Echo360, Camtasia Relay

Screen capture:

Camtasia, CamStudio, Adobe Captivate, Jing

Social media, networks, and bookmarking:

Voicethread, Slideshare, Ning, Twitter, Yammer, Socialcast, SocialWok, CubeTree, Delicious, Zotero, Digg

Course and learning management systems:

Blackboard, WebCT, Angel, Desire2Learn, Sakai, Moodle

“According to one report, students in online learning conditions performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction.”

are. Recently, SRI International and the U.S. Department of Education teamed up to examine 93 different comparative studies conducted between 1996 and 2008 on online versus traditional classroom teaching.

In the comprehensive report, released earlier this year, analysts come to a striking conclusion: “On average, students in online learning conditions performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction.” Online learning is no longer simply about access; it is no longer viewed as “better than nothing.” Like other disruptive innovations, it has improved dramatically over the years. (The full report is online at www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf.)

Another detailed study looks at how more than 10,000 faculty members perceive online learning. This study was prepared jointly by the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) and the Sloan National Commission



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on Online Learning. Some of the findings are paradoxical. For example, 70 percent of participating faculty believe the learning outcomes of online courses are inferior to those in face-to-face courses. However, more than 80 percent who have taught online or blended courses have recommended online learning to their students, and this holds true no matter what age the faculty members are or whether or not they have tenure. Even among professors who have never been involved with online courses, 40 percent have made the same recommendations to students. (More detail can be found in the full report at www.aplu.org/NetCommunity/Page.aspx?pid=1347.)

It seems that even professors who don't have high opinions of online learning believe it has some value, probably because it offers students greater access to education. Those with some firsthand experience of its benefits realize it has a great deal to offer.

The study offers other important insights. Specifically, most faculty believe it takes more effort to teach online than face-to-face; and most are dissatisfied with the institutional support and incentives that exist for delivering online courses. These conclusions confirm our belief that successful blending requires much more than skillful faculty acting as “celebrity chefs.” To be effective, it requires consistent and unwavering support from the administration.

Online in the Future

As real-world business endlessly adapts to economic challenges and technological advances, business education will likewise evolve. We expect more and more business educators to acknowledge that learning can happen anywhere, whether in the formal classroom or the coffee shop; it should not be bound by time limits; and it must always yield measurable learning outcomes. In short, we expect business education to be driven more and more by blended learning.

Blended learning is also critical because it uses the same tools that will help executives stay competitive in global business. Thus, it is more important than ever that business schools develop their own personal “blend” so they can remain relevant to the students and businesses they serve. ■

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