



## **Planning for Blended Learning: The Right Blend of Time**

by [\*Sarah Barnhardt\*](#), [\*Jessica Farrar\*](#), and [\*Chester Gates\*](#)

Hybrid, hyflex, flipped, face-to-face, remote learning...we are now faced with so many instructional modalities. What they all have in common is a mix of synchronous and asynchronous learning—in other words, some real time and some independent online time.

In a sense, this is not new because, traditionally, students have always had a mix of classwork and homework. If we use this as our starting point of common understanding, we can easily move into blended learning—a mix of instructional modalities. Blended learning can now be thought of as either a mixture of face-to-face with online (traditional definition) or a mixture of real-time video chat (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet, or Teams) with online (more common now as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic). Either way, blended learning can be optimized through intentional planning of the instruction in the two modalities—synchronous and asynchronous (McGee & Reis, 2012). See Figure 1 for a breakdown of instructional modalities, from fully face-to-face to fully online.

Our interpretation of blended learning is a seamless integration in that both modalities are always working to support each other. What students are doing independently online supports and aligns with what is happening in the real-time classroom. The interactions of learner-learner, learner-content, and learner-teacher seamlessly exist in both modalities. Look at the vocabulary lesson presented in Appendix A to see how content can be delivered differently and similarly in multiple modalities.

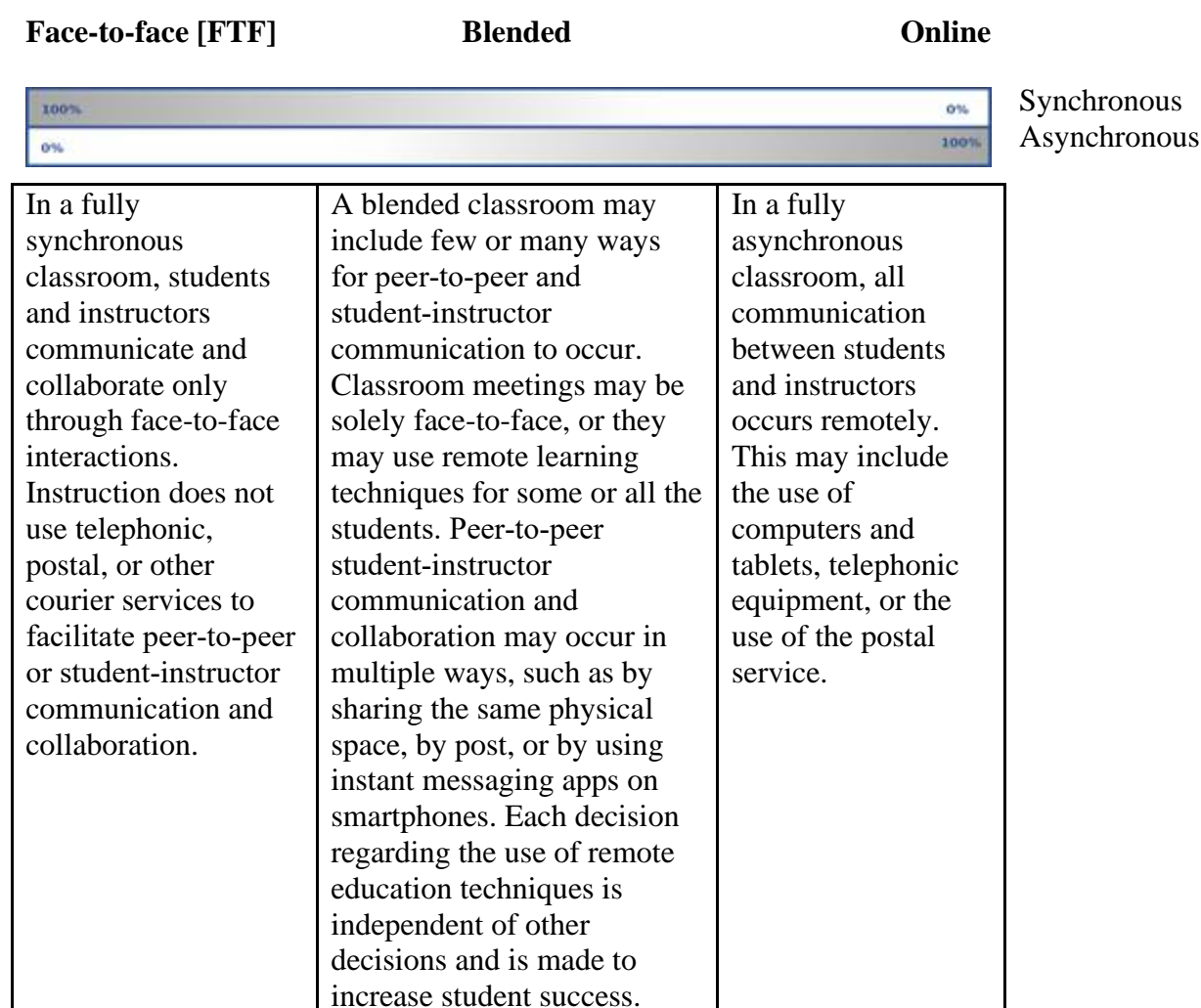


Figure 1. Course modalities.

In 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, blended learning came to the forefront as we quickly shifted to online learning, but many times still maintained a synchronous presence via video. Blended learning provided learners and teachers with an array of opportunities. Learners reached greater possibilities of independent learning while still having the support of the instructor through real-time video chats. This was many times a difficult and challenging process as educators were pushed into new and sometimes uncomfortable realms. We learned new technologies and techniques to create an engaging blended environment.

## Course Design and Delivery in Blended Learning

Traditionally, blended learning allows for more flexibility in terms of time and collaboration and has been understood as course delivery—in other words, how we deliver and teach a course. But it should also be thought of as course design—in other words, how we imagine and build the course from the beginning. Shifting the focus to course design first to determine the right blend

of time can make delivery more intentional. Intentional course design is a key focus in a flexible blended format.

Hybrid and flipped learning are commonly delivered at time ratios of 50/50 for in-class and out-of-class work. However, that may not be the optimal blend of time for all students, contexts, and courses. The right blend of time involves intentional design and alignment of course elements, technologies, and interactions between learners, teacher, and materials. One way to look at this is by determining whether content and activities need to take place online asynchronously or in the synchronous environment (Chatfield, 2010).

We can examine it in more detail by looking at what needs to occur before the synchronous meeting, during the synchronous meeting, and after the synchronous meeting. For example, readings and videos might be assigned prior to class to get students activating their background knowledge. Then, in-class activities could focus on discussions and collaborations. Follow-up online activities could be self-assessments, summaries, and synthesizing information. Alternatively, a context might require that students need more teacher explanation and feedback in the synchronous time, and discussions and collaborations occur in the asynchronous environment.

When and where content occurs will be specific to the class, the modality, the level of the students, and the expectations of interactions. Lower level students or students early in a course may need more content presented in class initially with more online work as a follow-up to the in-class presentation and activities. Later, students may become more independent within the course and be able manage self-directed learning by taking on more responsibility for the coursework up front. Then, class time can focus on group work, hands-on projects, and student teaching.

Be creative! Teaching can take place in class or online, depending on the nature of the task. The content should be intentionally designed to occur synchronously or asynchronously.

## **Planning for Blended Learning: The Right Blend of Time**

So how do you decide? How do you plan? To begin, we recommend mapping out course elements and design while also allowing for built-in flexibility. The map will be your guide and allow you to build lesson plans and the course itself. This results in the right blend of time, which is the ratio of in-class/online or synchronous/asynchronous work. For some classes, it still may be a 50/50 ratio; other classes could result in more time spent in class, such as 60% in class and 40% online (or 60/40), while others may result in less in-seat time, such as 40% in class and 60% online (or 40/60).

For example, let's consider a lower intermediate course at a community college where many students come from countries without technology access. Based on these factors, a blended course that allows for about 70% face-to-face instruction will allow the students to engage in more listening and speaking interactions while also developing independence and confidence in online, independent work. In contrast, suppose you have a course of international scholars with advanced degrees from their home countries; these students are self-regulating and highly

motivated learners, so a blended course of 70% independent work may allow for these learners to focus on interactive discussions during the shorter face-to-face sessions.

With large classes (100+ students), you may consider creating smaller groups that meet together for face-to-face discussion of materials once a week; in this case, the ratio may be close to 80% online and 20% in class. Table 1 lists many different factors to consider for your own unique student groups and teaching contexts.

Table 1. Factors to Consider for the Right Blend of Time

Course Context	Students' Context
Institution/program mandates on online learning	Language level
Time allotment for the course	Experience with technology and the technology available to them
<i>Learning Modality</i> online asynchronous, video conferencing, face-to-face without social distancing, face-to-face with social distancing, room size for face-to-face	Ability to self-regulate learning
Size of the class	Age
<i>Delivery Style</i> lecture, conversation, collaboration	Educational level
Types of materials available (online, hard copies)	

You may not find the exact right blend of time at first. Reflect on what's working, what needs to be improved, and how your learners seem to be responding (you may even consider polling students or collecting their feedback through short formative assessments); be open to making changes if needed.

The course alignment map in Appendix B shows you how a reading course is mapped out for alignment and includes three scenarios for how the right blend of time is determined.

Now it's time for you to map out your own course elements and plan for the right blend of time for your context. (See Appendix C for a blank course alignment map; .docx)

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic forced educators and students to reassess the modality of learning when peer-to-peer and peer-to-faculty interactions became impossible; however, by the beginning of this century, the blending of remote and face-to-face communication and collaboration had already become common in the classroom. The primary issue remains the necessity of using a particular modality to meet a specific pedagogical objective.

Faculty should design courses with the needs of the students and the reliability and availability of asynchronous learning modalities in mind. By mapping the course elements, lesson plans can integrate synchronous and asynchronous learning methods to ensure the optimal blend of time for each context.

## References

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