

New Blended Learning Teaching Approach Enthusiastically Received

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AUB's Academic Computing Center (ACC) recently completed a pilot project in blended (or hybrid) learning, which replaces a portion of the time spent in the classroom with a carefully designed on-line learning environment. Four professors from different faculties participated and received training and guidance from ACC in the redesign and delivery of their existing courses.



Blended courses combine the advantages of traditional instructor-student face-to-face contact with many other benefits. Such courses encourage active and independent learning by engaging students in activities that enhance their ability to think critically. Students tend to interact more in group work and other collaborative efforts that ultimately strengthen individual performance. Professors and students alike benefit from a more flexible schedule.

The four professors, May Massoud (FHS), Myrna Doumit (HSON), Salma Talhouk (FAFS), and Thalia Arawi (FM), all agreed the new methodology lived up to its promise. Students actively engaged with course materials and showed an improved grasp and understanding of course content in response to on-line activities. In turn, the professors found themselves challenged by their students and pushed to provide more detailed explanations as the rapport between them increased in ways they had seldom before experienced in the classroom.

Professor May Massoud said redesigning her course allowed exploration of new approaches to teaching. "Blended learning not only meant digitizing the course material, but also totally changing the way it is taught," she said, crediting blended learning for prompting a "higher level of thinking" in her students. They read more, checked out more library books, followed up with greater enthusiasm, and studied harder. But Massoud noted a downside. The time required to redesign was lengthy, and student email response could be overwhelming. Yet Massoud said she would offer blended courses again. "Blended learning is the future," she said.

Similarly, bioethicist Thalia Arawi found that even though applying the blended technique was time-consuming, she enjoyed the process. Her students gained increased flexibility necessary for managing Emergency Room rotations. Blended learning allowed students to remain up-to-date by accessing Moodle wherever they were at any time. Arawi and her students were also able to hold on-line discussions with Professor Margaret Battin, a distinguished professor of philosophy and internal medicine at the University of Utah.

Myrna Dumit felt blended learning promoted "a new way of thinking and inquisitiveness" in students, while making it much easier for instructors to identify student weaknesses. Blended learning students read more and were always well prepared for classes, both face-to-face and on-line. She echoed the challenges faced by Massoud and Arawi, but praised the presence of ACC to assist with any difficulties.

Professor Salma Talhouk and co-instructor, Monika Fabian spent long hours redesigning Talhouk's course extensively, but said the rewards were worth the effort. Not only did student engagement increase, but reevaluating her course, she became a better educator. When asked to evaluate their experience, Talhouk's students were overwhelmingly positive, providing for the first time clear feedback on what to keep and what to modify in the course.

In May 2009 an ACC workshop on blended course design taught in blended format by Alan Aycock, professor of anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, a man with over ten years of experience teaching blended courses, had piqued the interest of the four faculty members. ACC director Rosangela Silva noted it is crucial that AUB instructors go through the center's training program, Blended Course Redesign, before attempting to teach in this format.

With the help of ACC, students in the blended courses were given orientation sessions at the beginning of the semester to provide skills required to succeed in the new environment. By the end of the fall semester, 57.3 percent of the students said they would prefer taking a blended course to a face-to-face course. One student said, "It was a new experience . . . I had the chance to acquire new knowledge and learn new information [actively] on my own. . ."

ACC's "blended team," Rana Haddad, Rayane Fayed, and Hossein Hamam, assisted the four faculty members at every step of the way—from course redesign, to course delivery, to evaluating student feedback, to updating the courses based on student input. They have also compiled documentation to serve as checklists and guidelines for future blended courses at AUB. This paper trail is important to ensure following the correct process when moving to a blended format.

The four faculty members, Arawi, Doumit, Massoud, and Talhouk will all participate in ACC's May 2010 8th Faculty Seminar on Teaching Technologies, where they will share their thoughts on blended learning with the AUB community. They will be joined by three instructors introducing blended courses during the current semester: Zane Sinno (FAS), and Sara Khaddaj and Khaled Joujou (FEA).