

Implementing Blended Learning in Language Studies at Mohawk College

Opportunity

Mohawk College in Hamilton is positioning itself as a blended learning institution in order to enhance student learning and reduce face-to-face time in physical classrooms. The priority areas, the three steps in the process, and the faculty training provided are described in [eLearn@Mohawk](#), part of the Pockets of Innovation Series.

As part of the eLearn@Mohawk initiative, all key course information was made available online in 2011. The second stage stresses online course communication and assignments; during the third step, core and supplemental learning materials are delivered online. The goal is to have high-quality contact, teaching, and learning in both the virtual environment and in the face-to-face classroom.

Professors at the college have been integrating blended learning into their course offerings in ways that best suit their students and the content they are teaching. This description focuses on the language and communications courses offered in Interdisciplinary Studies. Other innovations in Human Services and Health Sciences are depicted in [Blended Learning In Health Sciences and Human Studies at Mohawk College](#).

Innovation

Language Studies professors first introduced blended learning in 1999-2000 and continued to follow developments and research in this area. They welcomed the college's move to blended learning as an opportunity to enhance student flexibility and provide essential skills in technology-based learning, writing, and research that increase student employment skills.

Most programs require students to take at least one language/communications course. These courses may be offered in the classroom, as blended offerings, or fully online. The models for blended learning vary as class time may be split each week with one-half in the class and one-half online, or students may have face-to-face classes for three weeks in a row and then focus on online learning, with extensive practice and grammatical exercises. The pedagogical approach matches the student learning needs.

The online portions of a blended course in communications may include reading chapters of the text and articles from the course pack, watching a video, answering discussion

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questions, reviewing PowerPoint slides, responding to self-quizzes, completing grammar exercises and writing assignments, and completing additional exercises suggested by the professor for individually targeted skills improvement. An online question and answer component provides important interaction with students and an opportunity to share responses that may be of wide interest. The discussion area encourages student interaction, as well as providing the professor with a tool for communicating messages that may be of interest to all class members.

In class, the focus can include the analysis of readings and of different kinds of writing styles, in addition to completing writing and grammar exercises. Final exams are held in face-to-face proctored exam centres; the online mid-term has a retracted block of time once it is downloaded.

Some pilot projects have been adapted specifically to the program or faculty in which the students are enrolled. For example, in academic year 2012-13, the students in the Manufacturing Engineering Technician - Automation program are using iPads as part of a pilot study, in which most of the course materials and apps used by professionals in their field are on the tablet. In their Communications course, taught by Shantal Woolsey, a professor in Language Studies, students will use the iPad as a research tool to help with their writing. They will find articles to review to improve their critical thinking, writing, and revision skills.

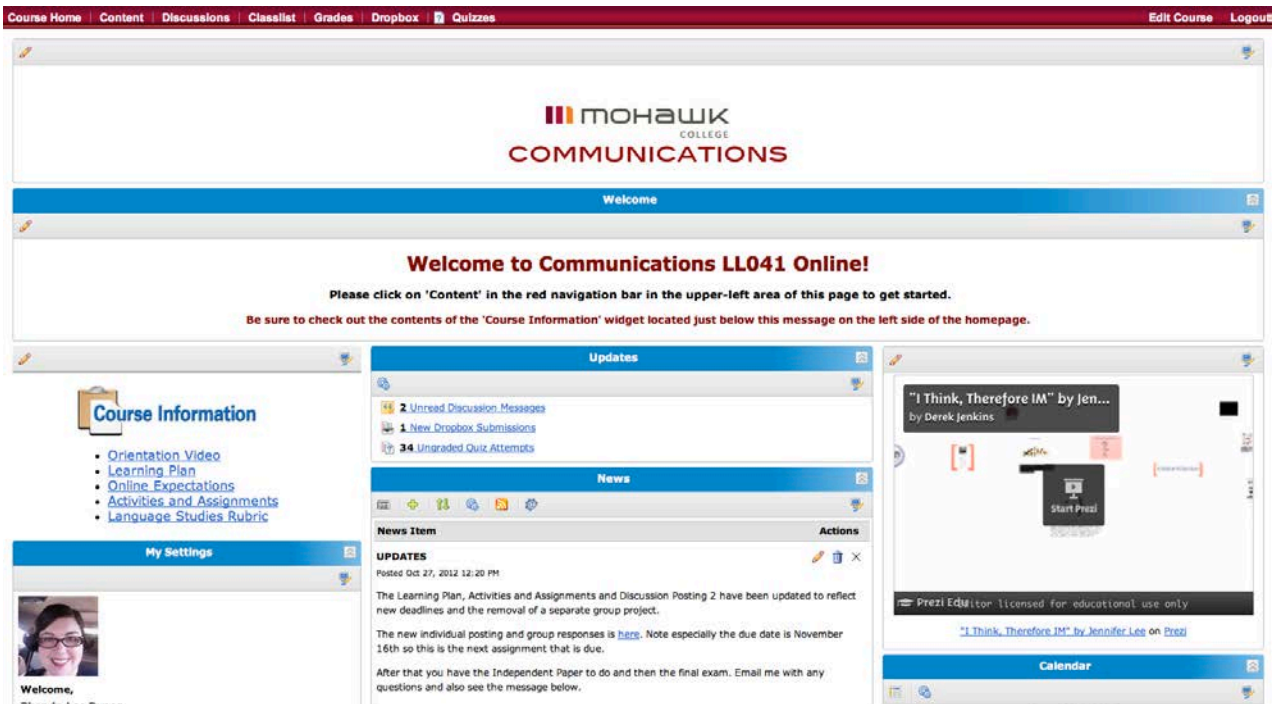
The screenshot shows a tablet interface for a course page. At the top, it says 'Communication - COMM-LL041-68' and 'Logged in as shantal.woolsey Thursday, November 8, 2012'. Below this is a navigation bar with icons for 'Discussions', 'Classlist', 'Grades', 'Dropbox', 'Rubrics', and 'Quizzes'. The main content area is titled 'MANUFACTURING ENGINEERING TECHNICIAN Communications'. It features a video player with a play button, a 'News' section with a 'Last day to drop a course' announcement, and a 'Fun with Apps!' section featuring a Prezi presentation. The instructor's name, Shantal Woolsey, is listed in the left sidebar.

The home page for the iPad pilot Communications course

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A professor in Language Studies, Rhonda Dynes, developed an approach to blended learning that stresses the relationship-building strengths of the face-to-face component and the content delivery and individual practice capacities of online. Devices and software are not heavily used in the classroom so that time spent there is more action oriented and focused on interpersonal communication.



The home page for Rhonda Dynes' online Communications course

Outcomes and Benefits

The anywhere, anytime access to the online course notes and videos is a great advantage not only for the students studying online but also for the in-class students. The access and flexibility possible through online access to course materials can be offered to all students for study and review purposes.

Technology can be adapted to provide specialized information and practical exercises suited to specific groups of students, whether in creative writing or engineering programs. Discussions online can also be more involved and passionate than those in the classroom, with wider involvement for students less likely to participate in face-to-face classrooms. Shantal Woolsey describes this aspect of online learning as "an equalizer."

Offering students opportunities to learn online aligns with the college role in preparing students for technologically-based workplaces and demands that professors keep current with industry demands and developments.

Challenges and Enhancements

The online portion of the blended course presents challenges to students as they have to be self-directed and independent learners to properly prepare for classes and work through the practice and other assignments. For some students, it is a struggle to understand that the online portion is as much a part of their learning as face-to-face classroom time.

Some students are challenged by using the technology. The text focus of the online materials poses extra difficulties for those with language difficulties.

For some of the online assignments, such as discussion postings, there seems to be a mark threshold of 10 points before some students are willing to get involved. Students miss online deadlines as they are less 'visible' than when in class. Personalizing writing assignments helps to reduce plagiarism when the work is done outside the classroom. To give professors a sense of their writing styles prior to assignments, students may be asked to participate in chat rooms. Group work is hard to structure online as there is less of a sense of accountability to each other. The online portion of courses demands more maturity and self discipline for students.

Both Rhonda Dynes and Shantal Woolsey stress that it is important to be aware of and plan for what is lost with each new factor of communication. An online presentation of the course modules, with materials and assignments, that is consistent from week to week in appearance, order, and navigation makes access easier and more comfortable for students. In some cases, adding video commentary to explain assignments or learning processes can help students understand expectations.

Potential

Rhonda Dynes and Shantal Woolsey consider blended learning as adaptable to almost all courses and programs, but it should be offered as a choice for both faculty and students. Training and support are essential for both groups as well, with research built in to track student responses and concerns. A list of essential elements for quality course development

is crucial in guiding the development of each course and providing a consistent institutional approach.

Both professors are very willing to talk to their colleagues in post-secondary education about the experiences with blended and fully online learning.

For Further Information

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