

DIGITAL TEACHING

Recommendations for Designing Blended Learning Courses

Prepared by Digital Teaching Services
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Recommendations for Designing Blended Learning Courses

The following recommendations are intended to provide suggestions and points of reference to help you design and teach blended learning (BL) courses at WU.

1. Meshing classroom units and online phases

In BL courses, it is particularly important that classroom units and online phases mesh well with each other and form a coherent whole. This can be achieved by designing classroom units and online phases in such a way that they complement and build on each other in terms of teaching methods, contents, and time frame.

This means that, when planning your course, it is helpful to give careful thought to the **sequence** of the individual elements, i.e. how classroom units and online phases are structured in the composition of the entire course. Below, we have outlined three commonly used approaches (cf. Landwehr & Müller, 2008):

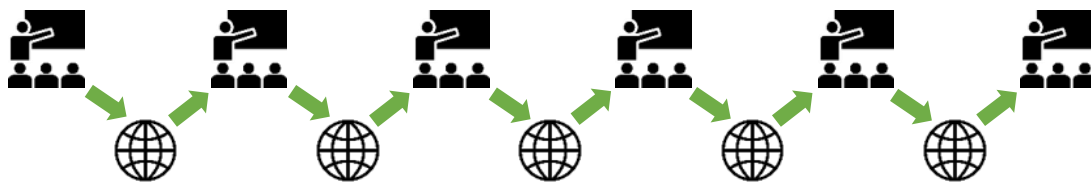


FIGURE 1: EXPANSION STRUCTURE

Classroom units alternate with online phases. The different components are designed to expand upon each other – preparing, reviewing, or deepening the content taught in the other components. Knowledge acquisition, opportunities for applying and practicing skills and knowledge, feedback, and reflection can be distributed between the two components. The clear temporal sequence of the components ensures a straightforward course structure that the students can follow easily. This model is well suited for all types of courses, from large-scale courses to smaller PI-type courses with continuous assessment of student performance. The most well-known application of this approach is the Inverted Classroom Model (ICM). In ICM courses, knowledge acquisition takes place during the online phases, where students prepare for the classroom units (cf. Bergman & Sams, 2012).



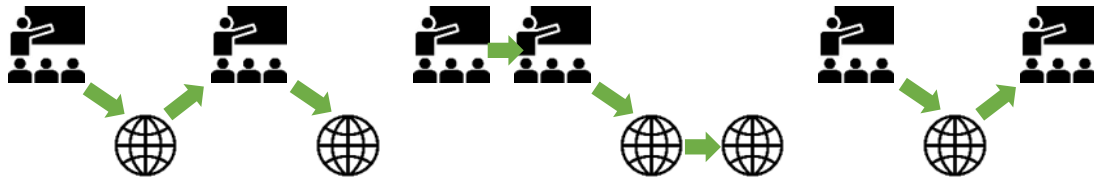


FIGURE 2: COMPLEMENTARY STRUCTURE

In this approach, there is a sequence of classroom units and online phases, which may be distributed evenly or unevenly, depending on the course topics and contents. The classroom units and online phases are not always fully integrated during the course. There may be a relatively independent sequence of integrated components, followed immediately by another sequence of integrated classroom units and online phases. Over the duration of the course, the two component types can serve different purposes. Sometimes, an online phase may be dedicated to knowledge acquisition, and sometimes to the application or deepening of skills. This offers you considerable flexibility when designing your course, but it also requires independence, self-management, and time management skills on the part of the students. Please be sure to provide your students with comprehensive information about the structure of the course and make it clear to them what they are expected to do and achieve during each phase.

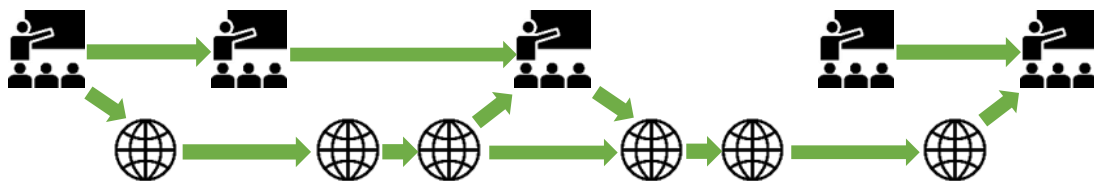


FIGURE 3: PARALLEL WORK

In this approach, classroom units and online phases take place in parallel (e.g. assignments with a large scope) and intersect at specific nodes. At these nodes, it is for example possible to discuss students' online work during a classroom unit, or to present new content to the students, who then continue to work on the new contents and develop them further during independent work, parallel to further classroom units. This approach is suited for relatively small-scale PI-type courses with a high degree of active student involvement. In large-scale courses, group work can be used during the classroom units to support and complement the students' independent work.

It can be helpful to draw up a sketch of the sequence of classroom units and online phases (e.g. in PowerPoint) to get a clearer picture of the purposes you would like to achieve with the different classroom units and online phases, and to develop a clear idea of how these two settings can best complement each other in the course.

2. Provide information to your students

In the **syllabus**, enter all the key information about your blended learning course into the field "Teaching/learning methods." This includes, in any case, information with regard to [WU's criteria for blended learning courses](#).

Please also explain the blended learning format to your students **in the first classroom unit** at the start of the semester. We also strongly recommend that, even **during the semester**, you continue to explain to your students why you are using the BL format and what advantages this format has for them. This helps to increase student commitment and will encourage your students to assume responsibility for their own learning process.

3. Adapt learning objectives and student workload

It is especially important that you provide your students with comprehensive and detailed information about the online phases, because many students will probably not be very familiar with these elements of the course:

- Please define the **learning goals** for the online phases separately. Describe what you expect your students to achieve during the online phases. This will help your students understand the importance of the online phases more clearly.
- Please also indicate the **student workload** for the online phases separately. Sometimes, however, this may be quite difficult. For example, the time students need to work on an information video may vary considerably, depending on whether they simply watch it from beginning to end or stop the playback repeatedly to take notes. In case of doubt, it is best to calculate student workload generously. Students need to know the workload (time required) for online phases to be able to plan their schedules. Please make sure that the overall workload of the course remains the same, even if the online phases of a blended learning course include extended independent study periods.
- We also recommend distinguishing very clearly between **materials that are relevant for the exam** and **supplementary materials**, to allow your students to prioritize their work.
- Inform your students about the **key activities** of every online phase and explain what they involve, e.g. graded assignments. In this way, you can highlight the commitment required for the course and support the students' continuous learning process.

4. (Re)structure classroom units

You can use the possibilities offered by BL to place more emphasis **on engaging and interactive teaching formats** in your classroom units. You can use and combine different teaching methods, for example think-pair-share, brainstorming, structured group discussions, etc. You can also **integrate digital tools**, which offer great opportunities for increasing student engagement and participation.



By carrying out student activities during classroom units, you can encourage your students to actively engage with the contents of the course and make them their own, ensuring they retain what they have learned in the long term (Wrana, 2017). It has been shown that people's attention span is generally limited to about 15 minutes (McConnell, 1996), so it is recommended to **alternate between knowledge acquisition phases** (listening and understanding) **and knowledge processing phases** (student activities). Using a diversity of teaching methods helps to keep students interested and adds more variety to the learning process.

For an overview of useful teaching methods, see the method catalogs compiled by Böddicker et al. (2016) and Hoffmann & Kiehne (2016) (both in German), and Classroom Assessment Techniques by Angelo & Cross (1993).

If you are interested in further information on these topics, you may want to have a look at the following collection of materials: [Digitale Lehre | Studierende aktivieren und in die Präsenzlehre einbeziehen](#) (in German). Digital Teaching Services also offers a workshop on how to use digital tools to enhance student engagement in classroom units: [E-Didaktik | Digitale Tools zur Aktivierung von Studierenden in der Präsenzlehre](#) (workshop held in German).

5. Provide digital materials in advance

Please make sure to make the digital materials for online phases available to your students in the learning environment in due time ahead of the next classroom unit or ahead of any deadline you may have set. By providing these materials early enough in advance, you allow your students to **study at their own pace** and take full advantage of the flexibility offered by the BL format. As a rule of thumb, a period of 14 days can often be considered appropriate (Margolis et al., 2017). Please also make sure to **clearly mark** the **contents and activities** your students are required to study and complete during the online phase to be prepared for the next classroom unit.

6. Review online phase contents in classroom units

At the beginning of your classroom units, provide a **brief summary** of the key topics or give further explanations to help your students better understand any topics that they may have found particularly difficult during the preceding online phase. Different students work at different paces, so some students may already have completed a given module some time ago. By giving a short summary at the beginning of the class, you **make sure all students are up to date** and make it easier for them to get started with a discussion or group work activity. In addition, a summary also gives students the opportunity to review their comprehension of the materials and ask any further questions that may come up. Please ensure a student-friendly, appreciative atmosphere in the classroom to encourage students to speak up with confidence if they have any questions. In large-scale courses, you can use digital tools in the auditorium to get quieter students involved in the class or to obtain general feedback on the atmosphere, the students' grasp of the materials presented, etc.



7. Structuring online phases

The success of students' learning processes during online phases depends on whether they are comfortable navigating the online learning environment (cf. Biggs & Collis, 1982; Hattie, 2011; Lehner, 2012). For this reason, please make sure that the individual elements you use (content pages, activities, downloads, etc.) are well structured and sequenced, **alternating between input and activities**, just as you would in a classroom unit. Design elements that can help you achieve this goal include written comments that provide support and additional information, separators, packages of study materials placed in specific folders, or study modules.

You can either instruct your students to follow a recommended sequence when working on the contents, or you can set a fixed, predefined sequence they have to follow. Please keep the following three aspects in mind when designing your online phases (Landwehr & Müller, 2008, pp. 143f):

- **Provide an introduction and overview:** Describe the key subject matter content, learning goals, and student workload to give your students an overview of what they have to do.
- **Present subject matter content:** You can use texts, literature, Lecturecasts, tutorial videos, and audio recordings to help your students acquire subject matter knowledge. You don't have to develop all the materials for your course yourself. You can also use open educational resources, i.e. educational resources and materials that are freely available.
- **Use study activities:** Engage your students during the online phases by having them complete targeted learning activities (assignments, exercises, self-assessment tests). You can use learning activities in a variety of ways, depending on their function in the learning process – knowledge acquisition, applying and practicing skills and knowledge, feedback and reflection.

8. Use feedback

By providing feedback on learning activities completed during online phases, you can support your students' learning processes. Receiving feedback helps students to better assess their knowledge, skills, and progress. If necessary, feedback helps students to adapt their studying behavior and make changes to improve their further learning process. For this reason, **feedback** should be a part of **all key activities carried out during online phases**, i.e. assignments, exercises, and self-assessment tests. When planning your online phases, think about the format in which you would like to give your students feedback on their work (written, oral, or automated feedback). Through feedback, you can track and monitor your students' learning outcomes. Tests that can be assessed automatically are especially helpful because they give you valuable insights into the effectiveness of your BL concept. Based on these insights, you can identify specific topics that need to be addressed, reviewed, or explained in a classroom unit (see section 6).



You can also use **peer feedback** in your course. Peer feedback means that students give their fellow students (peers) constructive feedback on their work. When giving peer feedback, students critically analyze and assess the performance of their fellow students and engage with the course contents on a deeper level. At the same time, peer feedback can also help the feedback givers to make new progress and improve their own performance (Nicol, 2010). Please bear in mind, however, that peer feedback requires good preparation and guidance on your part (Nicol, 2013).

9. Provide opportunities for direct contact and guidance

Direct contact to the students is an integral part of guided online phases in BL courses. As the teacher, your role is twofold: providing **direction** (directing the learning process) and providing **support** (advice and coaching) (Landwehr & Müller, 2008, p. 58).

You can offer the following types of guidance based on direct contact:

- Synchronous communication (online chat, online office hours) offered at a specific time
- Asynchronous communication (forum, asynchronous chat) on a continuous basis. Set and observe a limit for the maximum response time and communicate this limit to your students. This helps to ensure that communication plays an important role during online phases and students do not feel left alone (Euler et al., 2004). It is recommended to answer relatively quickly (within 1–3 workdays) (cf. Engelskirchen & Tan, 2003; Miller & Oelkers, 2005).

If you are interested, you can find further information in the collection of materials entitled [Digitale Lehre | Studierende aktivieren und in die Präsenzlehre einbeziehen](#) (in German) or you can participate in the workshop [E-Didaktik | Digitale Tools zur Aktivierung von Studierenden in der Präsenzlehre](#) offered by Digital Teaching Services (workshop held in German).

10. Ask students for feedback to improve your course

Ask your students for feedback and suggestions for improvements to develop the BL concept of your course further. This can be particularly helpful for recently launched BL courses, where feedback can help you to adapt and adjust the initial premises on which the course is based (cf. Margolis et al., 2017). Ask your students about:

- How much **time** they need to complete the key activities during online phases
- Whether the **information** about the BL course provided in the syllabus, the first classroom unit of the semester, or the online environment is **complete and clear**
- If they find the **(re)structuring of classroom units** for enhanced engagement and interaction motivating and conducive to a more successful learning experience



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Further Questions & Support

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