Building a Hybrid Learning Community

As email, synchronous and asynchronous threaded discussion boards have increasingly become important communication tools for students and teachers, building a hybrid learning environment plays a critical role in enhancing student learning. "Hybrid" is the term commonly used nationwide to describe courses that combine face-to-face classroom with computer-based instruction. Activities in a hybrid course could be a mixture of Web-based and face-to-face discussions, or virtual classes where students could upload and share their works online before presenting theirs to others in the face-to-face learning environment. Also after their presentations, others could review their works for feedback. Because a hybrid learning environment allows students to have more time in giving their opinions, students could express their thinking and learning without being limited by their shyness or learning disabilities. For example, a near-blind student could take the time needed to read others’ responses, or an English as a Second Language student could take time to understand other’s writings.

Teaching with a hybrid format allow instructors not only having activities for usual face-to-face meetings, but also uploading a course syllabus, files, assignments, PowerPoint presentations with voice and sound recorded, streaming videos, posting grades and tracking student works. The instructors could make announcements or send messages to each or all students through the message board. Once class information was uploaded onto the class website, instructors would know for sure that students could get access to the information without worrying about student’s losing their works or instructions. Using this hybrid format, students can take more responsibility in their own learning. For example, they can upload their assignments onto the course site, share their work with the class or with members of a work groups at their choice, or can search the web and email each other directly using clickable email aliases embedded in the course pages.

The threaded discussion forum allow instructors to check on students’ knowledge through conversations exchanged on the forum or from topics covered through reading assignments. Best of all, the discussion forum allow students to share ideas with other students in class, extending the work during in-class discussions. Here is what students say:

- I enjoyed using the threaded discussion board for various reasons. It helped to create a thoughtful dialogue as each person carefully thinks over their answers. I enjoyed hearing from each of my classmates. My classmates writing often give me something to respond to in my writing. Sometimes I feel like it was kind of impersonal since I couldn’t always connect the writing with the actual person in the room. Overall, however, I think it is a successful tool.
• I have really enjoyed having access to this online site where the class can find information, share ideas, contact our classmates etc. It is something new and I enjoy exploring its different features.
• I really like typing my responses and reading the comments of my classmates. First, I like that I don't have to do some extra journal before class. I like coming and applying what I read. It helps me see if I understood it after awhile and also serves as a refresher for the class discussion. I like reading everyone else's comments as well. They are written highly intelligently and sophisticated. I find I get more out of my classmates written and synthesized thoughts than if we just had an oral discussion. In an oral discussion, not many people talk and those that do always talk. It's nice to hear shy people's thoughts as well as boisterous ones, because they are all very important and have contributed significant insights to me.
• I think the threaded discussion board has worked fairly well -- it gives everyone in class the opportunity to express his/her opinion thoughtfully and everyone has a chance to be heard. Too often, one or two voices dominate class discussion but the online discussion eliminates that problem.
• I like this web-based environment as a tool for this class. It is convenient to get assignments online and respond to discussions online. As far as learning, I can't say that I've learned a completely new concept but it adds a new dimension to the course.