Taking Blended Learning Beyond the PDF

A Simple Process for Enhancing Your Most Abundant Resources

The Challenge

When transitioning from traditional to blended learning, instructors can sometimes rely too heavily on PDFs. But this doesn't enhance the learning experience.

The Approach

Stepping beyond the PDF doesn't mean leaving them behind. Instead, turn your static resources into engaging content by creating opportunities for students to interact with it.

The Result

When you create a more interactive learning experience, you open the doors to more meaningful student engagement and the ability to better address struggling student needs.

PDF. It's the worst 3-letter word in blended learning today. While there is definitely a place for PDFs in modern education, they can be a crutch for instructors and curriculum developers who are making the transition from traditional to blended learning.

Blended learning, like a pastry recipe, is all about the mixture. It's about balancing face-to-face interaction and technology in the right ways to achieve your goals. Most instructors feel comfortable with the classroom part, but teaching online can seem daunting. That's where the PDF comes in.

Posting a PDF, PPT, DOC, or a lot of other three letter words doesn't equal great online learning. After all, a boring text turned digital is still boring, right?

You really need to use that content in more interactive ways than just static resources. And while there are many excellent content publishers out there, along with easy-to-use tools for creating your own engaging content, it's important to use what you already have, which is text-based documents.

So if you want to spice up static content and create a more engaging learning experience for your students, follow these three steps. They'll help you to maximize the digital side of your blended learning and transform your PDFs into something much more impactful.

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#1 Take Stock: Understand the Content You Have

It's important to first assess what content you currently have, or better yet, have access to. Those paper packets that you've been handing out can usually be scanned by your school copier and a pdf sent to your inbox. Institutions also often have some kind of repository of supplemental material that instructors can pull from.

Does your institution subscribe to content publishers that you can utilize? Do you know about publishers of OER content such as CK-12 and Merlot? Have you heard of YouTube?

You'll most likely realize that you have access to more content than you thought, which means you're off to a great start. But be warned—taking stock is usually the most time consuming and difficult step for two reasons.

First, content often isn't aggregated. That means you're going to have to find and catalog it. Second, not all content is created equal. Some things might blow your mind, but others might just leave you scratching your head.

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While you will spend more time than you want to evaluating content you'll never use, don't get discouraged. You will also find lots of great content that you won't have to create from scratch. Put that into a learning management system (LMS) and each piece of solid content is worth it's weight in gold because you can use it over and over again, year after year.

Also, the more you can leverage already created content, the more time you'll have for the many other things required of you.

And while many of the resources you'll have access to may be PDFs (that 3-letter word again), there are easy ways to make them more engaging. That starts by thinking interaction.

#2 Think Interaction: Making PDFs More Engaging

Once you've found your content, now you have to think about what your goals are for it. How are you really wanting your students to interact with it?

Just reading or looking at something is not the ultimate goal. Understanding is. That means posting a PDF doesn't, by itself, get the job done. Don't fall short of the real benefit of blended learning by just creating an online file folder. Use that content to create supportive interaction that will get your students moving forward.

Turning PDFs Into Learning Modules

First, you can enable students to interact with the content on their own. Breaking the PDF into conceptual chunks and placing them into learning modules is an easy way to start.

A learning module is simply an online test or quiz that has the content interspersed with questions. It's not a summative experience, but more of a learning opportunity for students.

The important thing is for them not to just view a PDF, but to answer questions about it. This encourages closer reading and better synthesization of ideas. And if you're using an LMS, your learning module can provide you with real-time feedback about the concepts your students get as well as those they're struggling with.

Turning PDFs Into Online Discussions

Second, you can enable students to interact with the content amongst themselves as an online community. Discussion forums create an avenue for students to talk about the significance of what they read or learn with their peers.

In this case, you can have them read over the content of your PDF (you may even want to layer in a relevant video or other engaging media) by providing them with a discussion prompt and seeing where the conversation goes.

Turning your PDF content into online discussions is like rocket fuel for students' engagement. It gives them the opportunity to think critically, build on each other's ideas, and even show their understanding or expand the conversation by recording video responses or sharing other media.

Here's a suggestion though—make sure that students have to post first before reading other student responses. This will encourage a more authentic conversation. Your LMS should have a feature that enables this.

Turning PDFs Into Interactive Projects

Lastly, you can turn your content into an assignment and enable your students to express their understanding through more creative or collaborative means. Whether you make it a small group or solo project, you can pair the content of your PDF with a prompt, as you would with a discussion, and have your students do research, write an essay, create a model, etc.

Online assignments delivered through your LMS enable students to access material and then submit work directly to the instructor. By doing this, you've suddenly created a one-on-one format where you can provide direct and personalized feedback.

Also, it's not uncommon for students to have questions about material. Creating opportunities for small formative projects allows weak points in their understanding to be quickly found and addressed.

Well, there you have it—three great ways to turn a PDF into an interactive learning experience that your students will love. Now it's time to share it.

#3 Make Sure to Share

Creating interactive content from static resources is something worth sharing. It empowers you and your fellow colleagues to have great digital learning opportunities that the blended learning classroom thrives on. Plus, the more the laborers the less the work.

The best way to share is by creating content groups in the same place you're delivering instruction to students, a.k.a. via your LMS. This helps in two ways.

One, your content is easier to find. The same place that instructors go to teach is the same place they can find and collaborate on content. It makes sense, right?

Second, your content becomes more "plug and play." If everyone in a department is using the same LMS, for example, an instructor can easily copy the interactive content they want and drop it right into their online courses. It's all ready to go.

It's Time to Tap Into the Real Benefits of Blended Learning

The technology side of blended learning can't just be PDFs. If it is, you and your students are missing out on practically all the benefits blended learning has to offer. You need to focus not only on what your students will learn (a.k.a. the content) but also how they will learn it—i.e., the ways in which they can interact with the concepts.

Hopefully after finding what's available, making some changes, and sharing with others you can start to tap into the real benefits of blended learning. Your students will thank you.

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