Reflections on Building and Teaching an Undergraduate Strategic Management Course in a Blended Format

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Abstract
This article is a personal reflection on the challenges, frustrations, and rewards of transforming a traditional face-to-face strategic management course into a blended format. The article describes both the discovery process that leads to a significantly redesigned course and the distillation of that experience into six core questions that can guide other faculty members interested in developing their own blended course. The article stresses the importance of fully integrating face-to-face learning with online activities—and vice versa—so that the entire course forms a seamless, integrated learning environment. Examples of how to completely integrate classroom and online learning are provided. The article also uses Mezirow’s transformative learning framework to better understand the changes occurring within the authors during the course redesign process.

Keywords
blended learning, strategic management, transformative learning, simulation

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At the advent of every semester, faculty members face a choice regarding their courses. Should they Maintain the course as it is? Make incremental changes (Gilinsky & Robison, 2008; Hannah & Venkatachary, 2010)? Or, engage in major course restructuring (Flannery & Pragman, 2010)? This article describes our personal experience with adapting a traditional face-to-face web-facilitated undergraduate strategic management course into a blended (also called a hybrid or mixed mode) format. We emphasize that we intentionally chose to create a blend but not as an intermediate step toward a fully online course. We chose the blended format to (a) explore more fully the opportunities for thinking, learning, communicating, and using advances in computer technology and multimedia software; (b) meld live video, audio, and online formats to help us teach more effectively and our students to collaborate more productively; and (c) better accommodate the learning needs of our students, whom we sensed wanted more flexible and media-rich learning environments (Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, Gray, & Krause, 2008; Kvavik, 2005; Prensky, 2001a, 2001b, 2005; Wankel, 2009).

This article does not present a “how to” guide on blended learning. General checklists of what to consider when developing a blended course already exist (Aycock, Mangrich, Joosten, Russell, & Bergstrom, 2008; Garrison & Vaughn, 2008). Instead, the article’s specific goal is to share our challenges, frustrations, and insights as we researched, experimented with, and taught our undergraduate strategic management course in a blended format. We can point to no single, overwhelming “aha” that succinctly encapsulates our experience. Rather, as we worked to build the blended course, we realized that something profound in how we now viewed the course had occurred for us. We describe this discovery process in terms of our responses to core questions in the hope that readers interested in developing their own blended course can “make changes in their own thinking and practice” (Schmidt-Wilk, 2009, p. 415) just as we did.

The article is in four parts. We begin by discussing definitional issues from the relevant literature related to management faculty members’ experiences with developing blended courses. We also provide a rationale for the use of a blended format. Second, we explain the process we used and some of the hurdles we faced as we transformed the strategic management course into a blend. We present the final course design and describe several assignments specifically created to foster content integration across face-to-face and online learning environments. We offer several guiding questions that emerged from struggles we encountered during the course transformation process. The third part presents our reflections on what we learned from course planning, creation, and implementation and uses Mezirow’s (1991, 1997) transformative
learning framework as a way to better understand what had actually occurred within us. Finally, we conclude with ideas for next steps in our ongoing experimentation with the blended format. We also provide five supplements (a course schedule, objectives and activities, a syllabus, a grading rubric, and a list of online resources for designing blended courses) online at http://jme.sagepub.com/supplemental.

The Blended (or Hybrid) Formats in Management Education

A review of the literature suggests that blended learning can have different meanings for different people, depending on their perspective (Arbaugh, Desai, Rau, & Sridhar, 2009; Picciano, 2007; Vignare, 2007). Allen and Seaman (2007) provide criteria that help structure a classification framework. They divide courses into four groups: traditional, web-facilitated, blended, and online. Traditional courses use no online technology. All course material is delivered orally or in writing. Web-facilitated courses have up to 29% of their course content delivered online and “use web-based technology to facilitate what is essentially a face-to-face course” (p. 67). Blended courses have 30% to 79% of course content delivered via computer, whereas fully online courses have 80% or more of their course content delivered in this manner. We admit this formulation feels a bit mechanistic, but it does begin to delineate what is and is not a blended course.

More germane to a conceptualization of a blended course is Vignare’s (2007) two-part definition. First, “blended courses integrate online with face-to-face instruction in a planned, pedagogically-valuable manner,” and second, they “do not just combine but trade-off face-to-face time with online activity” (p. 38). Vignare’s (2007) words are well chosen. Blended courses exchange learning activities between modalities. They do not simply add or bolt together (Garrison & Vaughn, 2008) online activities into a classroom-based course. This additive approach can lead to the proverbial “course-and-a-half.” In contrast, the blended course’s superordinate goal is to completely integrate face-to-face and online learning activities so that each element complements and reinforces the other in a pedagogically valuable manner (Arbaugh, 2010; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Joosten, 2009; Picciano, 2007; Power, 2008).

As is true of online courses, blended courses challenge conventional beliefs that the classroom and the lecture are the most effective means for “engaging students in critical and creative thinking and learning” (Garrison & Vaughn, 2008, p. 146). Yet unlike online courses, blended versions have the unique challenge of allocating instructional activities across two different
learning environments: classroom versus online. Effective allocation requires integration—the meaningful articulation of face-to-face interaction with online learning and a complete merger of online learning with classroom teaching—such that each element complements and supports the other. The successful intermixture and sequencing of technologies and technique creates an integrated holistic learning environment.

In general, research into blended learning has focused on technology rather than on teaching (Arbaugh, 2008). Yet as blended learning has gained traction in management education, researchers have begun to compare the traditional classroom format or fully online format with the blended course format in economics (Terry, Lewer, & Macy, n.d.; Walker & Arnold, n.d.), statistics (Utts, Sommer, Acredolo, Maher, & Matthews, 2003; Ward, 2004), marketing (Haytko, 2001; Shellhase, n.d.), entrepreneurship (Frederick, 2007), and human resources management (Amerine & Potosky, 2005). Furthermore, studies indicate that students greatly value and appreciate blended courses (Balci & Soran, 2009; Jackson & Helms, 2008; Mackay & Stockport, 2006). Discussion of the choices and trade-offs that business school faculty members must make as they move from an additive to an integrative perspective has begun (Arbaugh et al., 2009; Dineen, 2005; Hwang & Arbaugh, 2006; Picciano, 2007; Power, 2008; Ross & Rosenbloom, 2009; Webb, Gill, & Poe, 2005). A number of narrative accounts share management instructor experiences with changing from face-to-face into an online course (Arbaugh, 2010; Bailey & Cotlar, 1994; Coppola, Hiltz, & Rotter, 2002). However, few articles describe the detailed thought processes of faculty members as they seek to create a blended course. Even more limited, if not entirely missing, is a conversation on the possibly transformative nature of engaging in the development process for building and implementing a blended course. We discuss both issues next.

**Redesigning a Strategic Management Course: The Guiding Questions**

Historically, strategic management has been the business school’s capstone undergraduate management course. Its goal is to explore and practice strategic analysis and decision making as a means of learning to think holistically through problem situations; integrating earlier-learned, discipline-focused content; and devising logical solutions (Kachra & Schnietz, 2008; Stephen, Parente, & Brown, 2002). Until recently, our undergraduate strategic management course was best described as web-facilitated (Allen & Seaman, 2007).
It was completely face-to-face; used a well-known, 600-page strategic management textbook; was case driven (with six Harvard-style cases assigned for class discussion and four for written analysis); had three in-class, multiple-choice/short answer exams; and used asynchronous course management system support to post syllabi, assignments, readings, and occasional reminders. Graded course components included participation (10%), exams (35%), class presentation (10%), case analysis (35%), and the major field exam (as described next). To assist in meeting AACSB International accreditation standards, the faculty as a whole decided that all graduating seniors must take a comprehensive major field exam. It is given in the capstone course and weighted as 10% of the course grade. The exam tests functional area knowledge in business disciplines including accounting, economics, finance, production, statistics, and so on.

Our redesign efforts resulted in a very different course. What ultimately emerged was a 60:40 split, where 60% of total class time was face-to-face and the remaining 40% was online. The 14-week course was front-end weighted with 6 weeks of classroom learning in which we greatly reduced the number of Harvard-style cases and relied much more heavily on in-class mini-cases. Also, we devoted 1 week to familiarizing students with a simulation they would play during 6 weeks of primarily online learning. We say “primarily” because we learned that we needed two “extra” face-to-face sessions during the weeks students were playing the simulation online to deal with generic problems all teams were experiencing. The net result was 8 weeks in class and 6 weeks online. We discuss this decision further below.

As we developed our blended course, we worked our way through six guiding questions. These questions did not exist a priori; rather, they emerged as part of the iterative development process within the limits of the blended structure. The questions became

1. What is the challenge that prompted our move to a blended course?
2. What content is essential to strategic management?
3. What did we want students to know and to be able to do at the end of the course?
4. What activities should be face-to-face versus online in our strategic management course?
5. What activities could we develop to demonstrate student learning?
6. What did we need to do so that activities in one modality enhanced effectiveness in the other?
These six questions represent a distillation of our experience as we reframed the course. Our answers are embedded in various sections of the following narrative.

**Question 1: What Is the Challenge That Prompted Our Move to a Blended Course?**

We were drawn to the blended format by its apparent ability to help us more effectively address the needs of our traditional and nontraditional students, without stripping away important personal aspects of our teaching. The trigger for us was a strongly felt obligation to better serve a wider range of student requirements without compromising our intellectual and performance standards. We firmly believe that a pure online course is not who we are. For example, one author’s core teaching style is to engage students in a series of spontaneous, small group active learning activities in class. The other author firmly believes that the face-to-face, inductive method of topic discussion is central for learning. By the same token, we realized from our web-facilitated experiences that online learning offered benefits, such as ease of email connections with and among students, opportunities for asynchronous discussion that enabled participation from more students, and ready access to course materials that we wanted to develop further. We understood that many course developers transition from a face-to-face environment into the blended format as an intermediate step on their way to creating a 100% online course (Arbaugh, 2010). Our goal, however, was to intentionally build a blended course right from the start and to achieve “the best of both worlds,” or in Osguthorpe and Graham’s (2003) phrase, “to maximize the benefits of both face-to-face methods and online methods—using the Web for what it does best and using the classroom for what it does best” (p. 227). This laudable goal is hugely easier said than done!

**Question 2: What Content Is “Essential” to Strategic Management?**

All course designers must consider the fundamental, albeit challenging, question of what is the essential core of course content. If faculty members are to proactively avoid the trap of creating a blended course as two independent courses bolted together as one (one face-to-face, one online), then faculty members must begin by asking, “What are the core content areas in the subject?” What is “core” or “essential” to strategic management will likely vary somewhat by individual professor and in relation to student level, undergraduate
or graduate. Furthermore, the notion of “essential” itself implies a forced choice of pedagogical emphasis: either broad coverage of a subject, a kind of mile-wide and inch-deep survey approach, or a more focused, constructivist approach aimed at pushing students more deeply into demonstrable competencies. We chose the latter approach, in part, because our cumulative teaching experiences confirmed that fostering deep learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007) in students was more satisfying for both our students and ourselves.

Essentially, we asked the following: What kind of learning did we want to have occur in this blended format class? What content understanding was requisite to improving demonstrated performance in course activities? What main, or core, ideas need to be understood and practiced by our student learners so deeply that how they think and act was changed? How could we entice students to grapple with course ideas and construct a new understanding? In all this, we were bound by time and technology. We established the undergraduate course’s core content as involving three main parts and then further subdivided the parts into nine topics that could be dealt with substantively face-to-face and then amplified through application in the online environment. The core course thus involved analysis (which included strategic direction setting and internal and external analyses), strategy formulation (which included business, corporate [multibusiness], and international levels), and strategy implementation (which included topics of control, organization design, and leadership).

Our desire to focus student learning specifically on these topics suggested that we needed a textbook that was perhaps half the length of the standard course text. After several weeks of intensive deliberation and evaluation of competing texts, we decided to trim a 13-chapter textbook with 25 cases into a custom-published book with 9 “core” chapters (see topics above) and 3 longer cases including one of our own. To emphasize, this choice was not lightly made. Our aim was to use every bit of time—students’ and our own—such that course activities mutually reinforced each other within a coherent whole. As it turned out, our chapter selection mirrored many shorter strategic management “essentials” texts.

**Question 3: What Did We Want Students to Know and to Be Able to Do at the End of the Course?**

To answer this question, we needed to embed the main course ideas within broader student interests. For example, most students claim they want to be leaders and aim to be managers not long after graduation. Perhaps the critical value added aspect of the course is its opportunity to foster in students the
ability to pull the functional pieces together into a whole organization view and then act with overall organization performance in mind. In other words, we had to create a way to let our students practice managerial analysis and decision making. To use a sports analogy, we did not want students to be able to explain how to swim; rather, we wanted swimmers.

That goal explains why the undergraduate strategic management course is billed as the capstone course in our business program. Course objectives are part of a broader “profile of a college of business graduate,” which is a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes deemed important by both faculty and administrators for every graduate to have acquired by graduation. Since upper-level business courses tend to specialize by business function, all AACSB International accredited business programs have a course or courses designed to give students practice in pulling the functional pieces together into an integrated, whole-organization view. Management department faculty members, specifically those teaching strategic management, selected the following four objectives from among the profile objectives as being critical to and consistent within all sections of the strategic management course. We discuss below the several activities designed to link course core content to attaining objectives. The objectives are the following:

- Know, apply, and demonstrate the ability to integrate the content in one’s major.
- Apply and demonstrate the ability to integrate accumulated cross-discipline concepts.
- Write articulate business reports and make articulate individual and team presentations.
- Foster leadership potential in self and others.

These objectives are an amalgam of content, abstract thinking, and interpersonal skills. How each of these objectives is accomplished varies by professor, and reasonable latitude is allowed in choice of text and overall approach to the course. For example, “foster leadership potential in self and others” may be encouraged in face-to-face group exercises or in a major project.

Although initially we did not intend to engage in backward design, we essentially rediscovered the model (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). The backwards design model suggests that the course design process should begin with identifying the desired results and then “work backwards” to develop instructional activities. Thus, we began to spell out our desired outcomes, and then to determine how we might measure student success in attaining them.

We planned our instructional strategies and significant learning experiences
accordingly, and, to better mirror working world reality, we did this in the context of multiple modalities. This recounting of events all sounds quite straightforward. It did not happen that way. Nothing sprung fully formed from our combined foreheads.

As we reexamined the fundamental premises of our pedagogy and the received wisdom on how to teach the strategic management course, several things happened. We started to experience the course itself as a “whole organization” that would change as each piece changed. We became willing to let go of “set-pieces.” To achieve our best-of-both-modalities goal, we were literally forced to determine what our students should be able to do. How could we optimally connect objectives, course content as embodied in various activities, and (measurable) outcomes? For example, to achieve the objective, “make articulate individual presentations,” we developed a recorded video assignment that not only encouraged each student to go more deeply into a strategy topic of personal interest but also provided measurable evidence of accomplishment. Not only did we need to link specific learning activities to the course objectives but we also had to decide in which learning environment (face-to-face or online) each activity should take place. We discuss these decisions next.

**Question 4: What Activities Should Be Face-to-Face Versus Online in Our Strategic Management Course?**

Approximately 6 months prior to first teaching strategic management as a blend, we began doing our homework. We sought advice from professional staff at the campus learning center and from various colleagues. In the beginning, as we “theorized” about how to better achieve our course objectives, we tentatively attempted to match each learning activity with the learning environment where we thought it might work best. Then came the changes. We have been setting out a more or less sequential, yet iterative process because the course was continually reorganized which meant that with each change, each aspect of the “whole organization” had to be realigned across modalities.

We knew, for instance, that certain main ideas such as “strategic direction” could be developed effectively in class. So we decided to keep an in-class active learning exercise to develop a vision-mission statement for the university. This exercise had consistently achieved two critical course goals in earlier versions of the course. First, it enabled students to get to know each other by working together in teams. Peer connectedness, we have found, is important to success in the major project discussed later. Second, the exercise demonstrated the strategic importance of a long-term direction for any organization.
It also helped that their university was an organization that all students knew (or at least thought they did!). It was easy to remind students of this exercise’s key learning potential in later online projects.

Similarly, we realized that some activities or functions might be more efficiently accomplished online. These included ease of access to course materials, ease of communication with students, ease of facilitating discussion among students, and so on. We knew as well, even at this early stage in the course development process, that we needed more online content. Therefore, we decided to record brief video summary topic modules that would supplement in-person lectures but those we could post online. One author tried to record podcasts, then vodcasts using Apple technology, but these proved to be of very modest quality for the amount of time invested. In frustration, he went to the on-campus learning center technology group, and they introduced him to a hardware–software package that allowed streaming video, audio, and visual aids (slides) to be synchronized as the presenter spoke. After a brief trial at the campus learning center, we chose this software as the primary means for creating new, online content. Not only was the technology easy to use but the learning center also provided accessible, capable, reliable technical support. We proceeded to record nine topic modules and post them to the course website. A typical topic module video lasted 15 to 20 minutes, included the three most important ideas in the chapter, added a “connection” to a current corporate example not covered in class, and ended with a forward-looking statement of how this topic related to what would be studied next.

**Question 5: What New Activities Could We Develop That Would Demonstrate Student Learning?**

Part of the challenge in crafting the blended course was to be efficient in our course design. We had been warned by professional staff at the campus learning center to avoid a “dual or parallel track” approach to conceptualizing the course. In essence this meant that if we *first* thought about all the teaching and learning activities we wanted to accomplish in the classroom and *then* thought about all the teaching and learning activities we wanted students to do online, we would, most likely, end up teaching two courses: One face-to-face and one online. Not only does this dual track approach raise issues of course effectiveness (did the two sets of teaching and learning activities really create an integrated learning environment for students?), but it also raises issues of course efficiency. (Were students being asked to do a “course and a half” because of duplicative work in both learning environments?)

Thus, our goals here were twofold: (a) to be creative in developing new, significant learning assignments and (b) to do so in light of our previous
question of whether that significant learning was best achieved face-to-face or online—without having a preconceived answer to that question. We provide four examples to illustrate the kinds of changes or activities that we believed would integrate face-to-face and online modalities more effectively while not doubling the work for either our students or ourselves. To illustrate how we integrated face-to-face and online learning environments, we describe new learning activities: a student video assignment, mini-cases, a simulation, and a mini-journal assignment.

**Student video assignment.** Student presentations have been an integral part of most strategic management courses, including ours. The initial thought about retaining student presentations in the blended format was straightforward: to replace individual in-class student presentations with separately recorded video presentations available online. The assignment objectives, as provided to students, are listed below:

- Encourage students to deepen their knowledge of a topic of personal interest
- Give students practice in front of a camera as a means of demonstrating their professional presentation skills that later can be listed on their resume.

Specifically, each student had to select one course topic of interest and prepare a 5- to 8-minute video presentation that not only explained the topic but also amplified it with current, relevant business research. On completion, all student presentations were posted to the class discussion board. To encourage genuine student effort in creating a “professional quality” video, the assignment was accompanied by an online grading rubric (available at http://jme.sagepub.com/supplemental) and contributed 10% to the student’s final grade.

This student video assignment had a number of benefits:

1. It mapped directly onto one of the course’s learning objectives—to make articulate presentations.
2. In the language of assessment, the video was an external assessment that could be evaluated by the professor as well as other instructors.
3. With regard to assurance of learning (AoL) standards, the videos provided permanent evidence of the “quality” of student presentations.

4. In terms of quality improvement, by viewing peer presentations students could see varying levels of peer presentation “quality” and so seek to improve their own performance. Reviewing peer presentations was optional but encouraged. For example, with regard to use of current research to make connections between text and business world, an increasingly ingrained tendency of our students is to do a quick online database search and use whatever pops up first. We note that our instructions for this assignment direct students to higher quality reference sources. The “pop-up” approach receives a lesser score. We also note that we did not specify what software or format students should use for their video presentation. The majority of students used the presentation software we used but a certain number attempted YouTube-type versions. The latter were uniformly of quite poor quality.

5. Students now had an online video library of peer-generated, current topic illustrations (in addition to those developed by instructors).

Elimination of Harvard-style cases and creation of mini-cases. In nearly every strategic management course, significant portions of class time traditionally are spent in case discussion. Indeed, a common course design feature is to sequence cases in terms of their ever-increasing complexity and their concomitant demand for holistic thinking and analysis. As we grappled with the issue of what-works-best-where, we needed to reframe the role of case studies in the course. On one hand, we could have traded less online time for more in-class, case-discussion time. This choice, however, would have severely reduced our in-class time for learning activities other than cases. On the other hand, we could have attempted to extend discussions of long-form cases into the online environment. But we felt this approach would come perilously close to creating a course-and-a-half. Indeed, some pioneering faculty members, who have shifted to online classes, have begun exploring new skills involved with online case discussions (Ivancevich, Gilbert, & Konopaske, 2009; Rollag, 2010). Our personal experiences with online discussion forums supported Rollag’s assessment that to effectively manage and maximize student learning in online case discussions, considerable ongoing time commitments were required. We were mindful of this point.

Dissatisfied with these choices, we next did something that went to the very core of our blended course development process. We stepped back and reframed the question we were asking ourselves. Instead of forcing ourselves...
to choose one of the options just described, we asked: How could we better achieve the learning objectives inherent in the use of the long-form case (Webb et al., 2005) without creating the unacceptable course-and-a-half? In response, we did two things. First, we opted to drop most Harvard-style cases from the course. Second, we substituted or wrote our own short cases. These short-form cases would be downloaded, read, and discussed in face-to-face sessions where we could more closely manage and focus student discussion.

The few cases finally selected were chosen both for the strategic issues they raised as well as for their ability to serve as exemplars for students to revisit when working on the major project. For instance, we used a nine-paragraph mini-case on Boeing circa 2000, written by one of the authors, to illustrate the difficulty of trying to resolve a strategic dilemma. Our in-class discussion focused on the conflict between Boeing’s strategic intent to be number one, with its implication of very large expenditures on innovation, set against its need to cut costs while simultaneously maintaining its absolute requirement for 100% safety. This case previewed for students the importance of not only a “whole enterprise perspective” as they “engaged the numbers” but also of the need to consider a company’s internal situation in relation to external industry circumstances. Students would later learn that these very same topics (whole enterprise perspective, rigorous data analysis, and internal–external fit) were central, strategic issues in the companies they managed during the simulation.

Although this discussion of our decision to substantially reduce the number of Harvard-style cases and to use three mini-cases might seem like it was an easy, comfortable process, it was not. The authors would debate whether to keep a case and to perhaps move its discussion online. For example, a favorite sequence relating to biotechnology had involved a guest speaker, an author’s cases on the industry and a biotech company. The sequence typically would take nearly two full 75-minute class sessions. On the plus side, if we had moved discussion online, we could have retained some of the interesting content of a familiar case. On the minus side, our debate about the value of a particular case sometimes overshadowed one of our foundational premises about course redesign: that we needed to focus first on learning outcomes and not on specific course activities.

**Simulation.** Although simulations are commonly included in strategic management, we had never used one. We reviewed a number of them and eventually, we selected a simulation that had the following benefits: It came with excellent support, was closely aligned with course content, provided continuous and varied assessments, and featured considerable scope for peer-to-peer and student–faculty interactions. It was administered wholly online by a vendor.
affiliated with the text publisher and had 24/7 reliable accessibility. The simulation provided two online open book tests, practice in evaluating financial and market data, and regular online team progress reports. Faculty members, using these reports, could then provide focused feedback especially to lagging teams. Importantly, the data collected from student performance within the simulation enabled what the designers termed a “learning assurance” report directly linked to AACSB International accreditation standards. Furthermore, in what the designers label an “entertainment” function, the simulation provides ongoing comparisons of performance among concurrently participating teams from several hundred other universities. We thought that the various performance assessments embedded in the simulation would provide an objective assessment of student learning, and present our reflections below. Bottom line, the simulation elegantly met two major course objectives: (a) to know, apply, and integrate the content in one’s major while (b) applying and integrating cross-discipline concepts. The simulation anchored the online portion of the class. We now agree with Kachra and Schnietz (2008) that simulations are a pedagogy well-suited to integrative learning.

**Reflective mini-journal.** A new assignment for us was the modified or mini-reflective journal. The benefits of a learning journal are well documented (Pavlovich, Collins, & Jones, 2009) and the possible gains in student learning dovetailed nicely with the course objective of content integration. Since we expected each student to commit significant and serious time to the simulation, we felt that we could not require a second major assignment. Therefore we developed this shorter, focused variation of a learning journal assignment and essentially converted, or perhaps “down-sized,” the standard learning journal into a mini-reflective paper to help students summarize their learning across the entire course. The assignment required the following:

- A brief statement—two lines maximum—that students might use in their resume to describe practical skills learned in strategic management.
- A brief statement—two lines maximum—that students might use in their resume that describes the skills learned while completing a “video” assignment.
- Thoughts on how material and practices learned in strategic management can translate into career success—including course concepts and simulation.
- An explanation of how the application of conceptual material to the simulation provided practical experience in running a business.
A role-playing scenario in which students described concisely yet fully to a fictitious CEO what was learned in the strategic management course. We call this the “30-second elevator ride” description.

This assignment was specifically designed to encourage students to critically evaluate and review their most significant learning but without verbal padding. The journal’s 350-word limit forced, by design, pithiness in writing and a distillation of personal experience.

**Question 6: What Did We Need to Do so That Activities in One Modality Enhanced Effectiveness in the Other?**

Fink (2003) makes a compelling point when he notes that most books on instructional design in higher education base the course design process on linear, deductive reasoning rather than on a relational process that highlights the interactive relationships among key course components. With a blended course’s inherent goal of maximizing student learning across two very different modalities (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003), Fink’s (2003) course design question, “Are all the components connected and integrated, that is, are they consistent and supportive of each other?” (p. 63), takes on increased importance vis-à-vis blended learning. We fully concur with Power’s (2008) insight that the design of a blended format should be such that “learners, as they move from activity to activity, immerse themselves ever more deeply in discussing and understanding the subject matter, thereby obtaining objectives linked to increasingly more elaborate knowledge construction” (p. 506). We illustrate how we intentionally fostered integration between classroom and online learning by describing how we used our mini-cases, as well as our strategy for maintaining trust and connectedness between students.

**Mini-cases.** One of our most significant decisions was the change in major activities used to meet course objectives. Although our decision to use a simulation did not eliminate completely our need for cases, it did modify the role that case discussion had within the course. We consciously used insights from mini-cases as we prompted student teams to apply what they learned in the face-to-face portion of class to the simulation. For example, we asked (more than once), “So . . . do you remember the Boeing case? How do you think it applies to your team’s current situation in the simulation?” The Boeing mini-case thus created an intentional bridge between face-to-face and online learning.

**Social presence.** Social presence is the need for learners to feel that, when they are online, they are working with real people whom they can trust and
with whom they can have a productive relationship (Garrison, 2007). Establishing social presence is foundational for pure online courses because learners never physically meet. On the surface, social presence would not seem to be an issue here. We had, after all, front-loaded the class with 6 weeks of classroom-based learning. However, we sensed that in the context of blended learning, the challenge of social presence was less about fostering it during online portions of the course and much more about using social presence as the glue that bound our two disparate learning environments together.

Our aim was to create positive peer interactions in the classroom that would ensure a seamless and smooth transition to collaborative learning online. To illustrate, we opened the course website before our first class meeting and asked students not only to introduce themselves online but also to go on a course “scavenger hunt.” To complete the assignment, students were required to peruse the course site, find and review the syllabus and schedule for answers to scavenger hunt questions, and then turn in hard copy answers at the first class session. The first in-person class built on the scavenger hunt; it involved in-class introductions and a group exercise that delineated “expectations” for the class. During later in-person sessions, we used active learning exercises designed to promote effective collaborative relationships in the online simulation. These included “draft-a-question,” where student pairs created possible test questions; “mind-mapping,” where student groups built a visual map of a chapter’s content; and “think-pair-share,” where students could process responses to instructor questions. Our aim was to create positive, valuable, and even fun experiences with peers in the face-to-face portion of the class that would transfer to their online teams.

Once the course was fully online, we discovered that students needed help in ways we had not always foreseen. A pivotal choice for us and one that made a significant difference in team performance on the simulation was our decision to maintain on-campus office hours during scheduled online sessions. We essentially broke the “online” protocol of no face-to-face interaction when class was scheduled online. Benefits of this decision were several. Teams wanting feedback and individuals requesting personal help could meet with us. Also, we could easily reel in underperforming teams for an in-office, team tutorial—which we did on occasion. Our in-office availability, we feel engendered confidence in students and helped us forge more personal connections (MacDonald, 2008). Perhaps most important, though, was that our physical presence on-campus strongly communicated to students that they were not being abandoned or “left out to dry” simply because the class schedule said, “online.” Borrowing language from the community of inquiry model,
our physical presence supported in its most tangible form “instructor immediacy” (Arbaugh, 2001, 2006; Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Garrison & Archer, 2003; Hwang & Arbaugh, 2009). Routine in-office availability became another bridging element that fostered continuity between the face-to-face and the online portions of class.

Reflections

Our primary goal was to design a blended strategic management course that included the best elements of face-to-face and online education and to do so in a way that was seamless, integrated, and intentional from a student learning perspective and that resulted in a deeper learning experience for our students. We have used the word “reframe” several times. We chose this word purposefully because we believe that it captures a fundamental insight: That by tackling the course redesign challenge as we did, we became more aware of both the positives and the negatives, heretofore mostly unarticulated, in our normal approach to teaching. We did not experience a “eureka” moment. Our basic assumptions about the course and our frame of reference for how we might approach all our courses in the future were fundamentally changed in this process.

We did not set out to experience “transformative learning” and readily acknowledge that the whole process of distilling our experiences for this article led us into thinking about our own thinking in strategy and pushed us into these critical reflections. We affirm, strongly, that the scholarship of teaching matters (Boyer, 1990). We suggest that real benefits reside in the possibility of converting newly articulated insights into better teaching practice. We conclude that reflecting on and writing about our experience has proved an integral part of our transformative process.

Transformative learning, a theory developed by Mezirow, appears to do an excellent job of explaining the deepest, most profound learning that humans can have (Mezirow, 1975, 1991, 1997; Mezirow & associates, 1990). Mezirow (1991) grounds his theory in cognitive and developmental psychology, especially the work of Habermas (1971) and Piaget (1990). Through further development by other theorists, transformative learning has come to dominate the field of adult higher education (Cranton, 1994; Kitchenham, 2008).

Transformative learning transcends learning skills and facts, such as how to correctly calculate net present value or how to correctly interpret a beta coefficient or what it means to segment a market. Instead, transformative learning occurs when individuals change their frame of reference with regard
to a particular topic. Mezirow’s (1975) ideas stemmed from his study of adult working class women who were reentering college and how their traditional ideas about women’s roles were changed as they encountered feminism. A profound, transformative process occurred in these women as the more inclusive feminist frame of reference gradually replaced their traditional view.

For Mezirow, the catalyst for transformation is a significant event, or what he calls a “disorienting dilemma.” Without it, frames of reference, or the sets of assumptions and expectations that individuals hold about their world (Mezirow, 1997), remain unchanged and unexamined. Transformative learning occurs when, in light of a disorienting dilemma, critical reflection results in a change to an individual’s frame of reference, or to an individual’s point of view, or both.

Our “disorienting dilemma” became our choice of creating a new blended format to better accommodate our traditional and nontraditional students. One author, for example, sensed a growing gap between himself and the media-rich environment that he saw his students lived in daily. As he walked through the school’s cyber café, where a subshop and computer workstations were housed together, he saw students doing their homework with a Blackboard assignment open in one computer window, a Morningstar report open in another window, a social media homepage open in another, and an Internet search engine open in a final window. All the while students were listening to music on their MP3 players with their cellphones or smartphones on top of their class notebooks ready for text messaging. Furthermore, he sensed that students were more fully engaged when he showed short video clips or illustrated a textbook concept by surfing to a corporate website live in class. Ultimately, he applied to himself one of his favorite in-class quotations from Sun Tzu: “Don’t fight forces, work with them.” Hence, his interest in developing a blended course.

This seemingly mundane anecdote leads to an observation by Cranton (1994): “Examining the sources and consequences of assumptions (thereby questioning their validity) is the core of working toward transformative learning. The educator who engages in critical self-reflection on practice almost invariably will revise that practice” (p. 228). Cranton’s (1994) summary dovetails nicely with Mezirow’s (1991) statement that all transformative learning is based on critical reflection: “Reflection is the process of critically assessing the content, process, or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience” (p. 104). This article is, in fact, our critical reflection.
We can now ask: What did we learn? And by implication: How have we changed?

Foremost, we learned that transformative learning is a process of “letting go” (Chia, 2010). As noted, on the surface it may appear that the decision to replace some of our favorite long-form cases with the simulation and a couple of mini-cases was easy. It was not. “The educator who is venturing into critical self-reflection and transformative learning must begin by developing a self-awareness about current practices” (Cranton, 1994, p. 215). As we dropped a favorite case, we could have moved discussion online; however, we realized that the same learning points could be achieved in a more efficient and effective way through a simulation. We point to this example because disorienting dilemmas come in many guises, not all of them comfortable.

We also learned that such a journey required energy and time. Our early learning curve was substantial, in part because the course’s redesign called for new activities that would stretch students to apply whole enterprise thinking rather than bog them down with mundane tasks and busywork. Initially, we believed that costs were going to substantially outweigh benefits. We received no release time; although as noted, we did get advice and help from professional staff at the university learning center (but one has to learn what to ask for!). We estimate that from an early spring beginning to a fall start time, a total of about 6 months, we expended approximately 200 development hours. For subsequent semesters, we estimate another 2 to 5 hours per week or about 30 to 75 hours per semester, in addition to the estimated 25 to 50 hours time typically spent per semester on nonteaching course maintenance functions (i.e., new text and case reviews, notes revisions, updates, and so on). Although we project an increased merging of normal course maintenance activities with those of blended courses, incremental amounts of time are still likely to be needed because of continuous learning and synchronization of multiple environments. For example, even after teaching the course for several semesters, one author enrolled in a Sloan-C online workshop on blended courses, which added at least 25 hours to the continuous learning aspect. Since we expected to use the blended format in the same course over several semesters, the emerging benefit-to-cost ratio seemed justifiable.

We reaffirm that strong technology platforms and their available competent support were absolutely critical to the conduct and success of the course (Picciano, 2007). If not for this support we would think long and hard about even attempting a blended course. The risk of being bogged down with technology hassles is simply too high.
Did our blended course meet its objectives at least as well as our traditional course? We knew from published studies in business courses that student performance in blended courses is equal to, if not better than, the teaching in the traditional face-to-face format (Arbaugh, 2010; Dziuban, Hartman, & Moskal, 2004). We knew from course exam totals, anecdotal face-to-face evidence, and simulation scores that we had at least the beginnings of an objective view of overall student learning. We can state that students were achieving in accord with the above cited research. Although we have considerable hopes for measurably higher student achievement, more consonant with our time invested, such a broader claim goes beyond this reflective article.

Summary and Next Steps

We suggest in this article that the blended approach contained the seeds of a genuinely transformative learning experience for us as faculty members (Cranton, 1994, 2002). It also may have the potential to facilitate deeper, integrative thinking in our students (Kachra & Schnietz, 2008). Other faculty members teaching strategic management, or any other management course, may have (or should have) different responses to a journey of discovery and may or may not experience transformative learning. The following points capture our observations on what we did and why we did it. We

- Aimed to move from a web-facilitated to a blended course rather than a fully online course
- Responded to our “guiding questions”
- Created or modified assignments, such as the student video presentation, to meet multiple course objectives
- Aimed for clarity of expectations and instructions relating to all assignments, both synchronous and asynchronous, and began providing grading rubrics
- Built in a number of outcomes assessments related to objectives
- Used active learning exercises, such as “draft a question,” to foster better connections to course material
- Provided regular developmental feedback throughout the simulation, both synchronous and asynchronous, such as maintaining office hours during online sessions and providing small group tutorials, and regular performance reports
- Exercised, with close cooperation from professional staff in the university learning center, the flexibility to rearrange on-campus or online sessions based on our assessment of emerging student needs
• Insured, to the extent possible, technical support on an as-needed basis for all technology platforms we used including the course management system, the video system, the simulation, and publisher materials.

We approached this adventure in a very entrepreneurial, yet quality-oriented spirit: Think about what you want to achieve, develop a plan to do it, then do it, assess it, improve it, and then continue the process. Many, if not most, faculty members have their way of doing things and any alterations they make come in relatively small, measured steps. The consequence may be that they remain well within their comfort zone. Any reflection on their teaching process revolves around a search for continuous improvements. That is how our process began but along the way something seemed to change.

We now are confident that our blended course design works for us as well as for our students. Moreover, we are increasingly clear on why it works. We firmly believe that the key to the course’s success was its clear, sustained emphasis on learning outcomes within an integrated course design. Course concepts introduced, discussed, and tested in the face-to-face sessions provided a foundation for success in the simulation. The simulation required evermore elaborate integration of knowledge and students seemed to perform better as the course progressed. As well, a constant back and forth referencing occurred throughout the semester between text materials and simulation—and between learning environments. In fact, the dynamic interplay between and among the key questions we asked, taken as a gestalt, defined our reflective journey.

To strengthen our understanding of the blended format, we envision five next steps for refining the design and measuring more closely where student learning gains occur. First, we want to examine the efficacy of peer interactions, the issue of free riders, and how to improve team performance in the simulation. Second, we plan to test explicitly for the utility of media enhancements such as the continuous use of live presentation software technology for both instructor and students. Third, we will continue preparing necessary supplements, such as tailored mini-cases. Fourth, we plan to develop a questionnaire that assesses student learning in the context of our blended course design, as opposed to adapting an off-the-shelf survey to a blended course. Only then we will be able to base further research on longitudinal data. As a corollary, we will develop comparisons with face-to-face, blended, and online versions of the course. And finally, we would like to explore faculty member workload effects engendered by multiskill requirements of a blended course environment. In sum, although we see challenges, we also see a very promising future for the blended course format.
Authors' Note

The following five appendices are available online at http://jme.sagepub.com/supplemental: Appendix 1, Example of Blended Course Schedule; Appendix 2, Blended Course: Objectives and Activities (50:50 schedule); Appendix 3, Syllabus Course-at-a-Glance; Appendix 4, Video Assignment Grading Criteria; and Appendix 5, Some Online Resources for Constructing Blended or Hybrid Courses.

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