

NEW CHALK TALK

BLENDED LEARNING AT AUC: AN OVERVIEW

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SIGNIFICANCE

In AUC's new strategic plan, President Anderson talks about our "*need to become more sophisticated in our use of the new information and communication technologies*" in teaching and research and adds a little later on that:

"The Center for Learning and Teaching will also supervise and support the introduction of blended and online courses in a limited and careful way ensuring that we maintain our quality standards and use appropriate analytics to track student success". (p 17)

In **November 2014**, CLT organized a Blended Learning Day to raise awareness of blended learning at AUC, and share progress on this front so far. The keynote speaker was Charles R. Graham, Professor of Instructional Psychology and Technology at Brigham Young University who is an expert in the design and evaluation of blended learning environments as well as the use of technology to enhance teaching and learning.

This newsletter briefly shares the history of the development of blended learning at AUC, as well as plans for the future.

ORIGINS

In the **spring of 2012**, during the presentation of his strategic plan for the academic area, the late Provost Haroun identified online learning as one of AUC's strategic goals.

This issue took on special interest when the administration was forced to close the campus for extended periods of time as a result of several crises. The first major crisis occurred in the fall of 2009 with the H₁N₁ alert during which the university closed twice for a total period of three weeks. This was followed by the student rebellion and the "closure of the gates" events of the 2012 fall semester. The third, and hopefully last, crisis occurred during and after the 30th of June 2013 events when many instructors teaching summer courses were asked to resort to some distance learning measures.

Starting with the first major crisis, the Center for Learning and Teaching (CLT) collaborated with University Academic Computing Technologies (UACT) to offer numerous trainings and full support to faculty during the suspension of classes. In each case it was apparent that a large majority of faculty were inadequately prepared to deal with the situation. Ultimately these "crisis management" efforts did not necessarily result in additional faculty subsequently adopting digital technologies to supplement or enhance their face-to-face teaching, and for most the focus lasted only during the critical period.

In **January 2013**, the Provost earmarked the ASHA grant of 2013 for "e-learning" and the Center for Learning and Teaching submitted a proposal to "procure equipment to enhance online, blended, mobile, and web-enhanced learning capacities at AUC."

During that same month, President Anderson convened a number of faculty for a conversation about the "online world and AUC". As a result of this initial meeting, in **May 2013** the President formed a Task Force on Blended Learning charged with developing a systematic approach to offering blended courses at AUC, the mandate being specifically to "develop guidelines and best practices for an institutional implementation of blended learning at AUC and to assess AUC's readiness for such an initiative".

2013 – 2014

In the summer of that same year, task force members were chosen and the task force started its work in the **fall of 2013**. One of its first orders of business was to make it very clear that **blended learning was not about contingency plans to go online in moments of crisis**. It also went on to adopt a definition for blended learning based on that of the Online Learning Consortium, (the leading professional online learning organization in the US), namely:

Blended learning courses are defined as courses that integrate online with traditional face-to-face class activities in a **planned and pedagogically beneficial** manner; and where a portion (institutionally defined) of face-to-face time is replaced by online activity. (Emphasis added)

The Task force concentrated on four areas and made subsequent detailed recommendations to the President regarding these four areas:

- a) Faculty Support and Instructional Design Support
- b) Institutional Planning/Support and Quality Assurance
- c) Student Support
- d) Technology Support

I am happy to say that many of the recommendations of the Task Force were implemented, including the formation of a standing Committee on Blended and Online Learning in **May 2014**. The Committee reports to the Provost, is chaired by Associate Provost Ted Purinton and includes several representatives from CLT, four Deans and four Associate Deans representing Schools and Graduate Studies as well as representatives from the office of Data Analytics and Institutional Research (DAIR). The charge of the committee is to set or recommend policies and strategies at the University level for blended and online instruction.

One of the first tasks of the committee was the formation of an ad-hoc subcommittee for vetting blended learning proposals. Last **April (2014)**, faculty submitted proposals for developing blended learning courses, and on the recommendation of the ad-hoc subcommittee, the Provost awarded grants to four faculty to design, teach and assess blended learning courses, with the explicit condition that the awardees attend a blended learning workshop offered by CLT and open their courses for formative and summative evaluation to inform future plans at AUC. The awards went to faculty members from the departments of Construction Engineering (Ezzeldin Yazeed, “Advanced Topics in Construction Engineering”), SAPE (Carie Forden, “Community Psychology”), as well as the TAFL Program (Raghda Essawi, “Methods of Teaching a Foreign Language II”) and the TEFL Program (Lori Fredericks, “Research Methods in Applied Linguistics”).

In the **summer of 2014**, CLT ran the first 3-week “preparation-for-blended-learning” workshop for faculty¹, and continued to offer follow-up instructional design and course development support as awardees designed their courses during the summer and early fall.

In **April 2014**, the ASHA grant was awarded to CLT to lay the technical groundwork for developing online, blended, mobile, and web-enhanced learning capacities. This goal is to be achieved by 1) establishing a general e-learning unit at CLT; 2) equipping lecture capturing classrooms and availing mobile video conferencing units; 3) establishing an e-content development lab for the School of Sciences and Engineering; 4) establishing two Arabic language e-content development labs in New Cairo campus and in Zamalek campus; 5) establishing a general video production unit.

2014 – 2015

In **September 2014**, the Committee on Blended and Online Learning continued its work with an expanded membership, and in **October 2014**, a blended learning vetting subcommittee was designated to review the redesigned courses (based on specific criteria that had been developed). The subcommittee will continue to be responsible for vetting all blended course proposals. It was decided that AUC will not permit courses to be offered in a blended/online format without approval from this subcommittee on their design.

In the **spring of 2015**, the first formal blended learning courses will be offered at AUC and will be assessed by CLT during and after the semester is over. A call for other blended learning course proposals will be made during that same semester and CLT will offer a training workshop for interested faculty. This, in a nutshell, is a summary of the work that has been done so far to get this initiative off the ground.

The Committee for Blended and Online Learning will consider various possibilities for the expansion and utilization of blended and online courses and will provide detailed proposals to the Deans’ Council, the Schools/ departments/ centers/ faculty senate *etc.* depending on the relevancy.

The Blended Learning Program is still in its infancy at AUC, and while AUC is very late in the game, we have the advantage of learning from others, and we will proceed at a pace that is purposefully in tune with programmatic needs.

CLT has faculty and staff who are well trained to meet the needs of the University. Although we are challenged by budgetary constraints and staff reduction plans, we aim to build capacity within programs and departments to ensure sustainability as the program evolves.

CLT invites questions, comments, or suggestions that can be sent to clt@aucegypt.edu

¹ Feedback was sought and will continue to be sought from workshop participants, and based upon it the workshop will continually be revised and offered for faculty who wish to blend in future semesters.