Teaching Hybrid Sections of English 1100 and English 1500
Some Concerns and Some Suggestions

This document is the result of a small group discussion among faculty who have taught hybrid sections of first year English courses. We wanted to share issues we encountered so that faculty who are new to teaching hybrid courses might be better prepared when they encounter them in the classroom.

The problem: Students in these courses tend to underperform in the online portions of the class relative to the traditional face-to-face portions.

This was the biggest problem that faculty faced when teaching hybrid sections. Everyone who had taught hybrid sections had the same experience of students who came and participated in the physical classroom but who did not participate at an acceptable level for the portion of the week that required online activities. This was quite different from our experiences teaching courses held entirely online. In online courses, students seem to recognize and fulfill the course requirements (or, at least the failure rate in these courses is no greater than in traditional courses). However, in hybrid courses, students seem to regard the time in the classroom with the teacher physically present as much more of a commitment than the online portion of the class.

Interestingly, this issue seems to be worse in English 1500 than it is in 1100. We think this is probably because hybrid sections of 1100 tend to draw non-traditional students for who are likely to take academic responsibilities outside of the classroom more seriously. For most of these students, putting in a day at work and then doing academics outside of work is the norm.

We agreed that our biggest challenge for these hybrid courses is to develop a culture where students understand the work requirements for the online portions of the class and that it is necessary to establish that culture early in the semester. With that challenge in mind, we offer the following suggestions:

1. Make sure that the students understand that the face-to-face meetings are only half of their work and that they should expect to spend substantial time between the face-to-face meetings doing work online. To this end . . .

    - A clear routine for the online class meetings should be laid out in the syllabus, perhaps under the heading "What You Should Expect from a Typical Class Week." (This is already a recommendation for online courses.)
    - How the online work will figure into the course grade should also be spelled out in the syllabus. Most faculty already have minimum requirements for attendance (please see the English Department's attendance policy listed elsewhere on this web site) and how many assignments may be missed or submitted late before there are consequences to students' grades. This should be clearly articulated in the syllabus.

- It was suggested that it may be wise to have the expectations for the class spelled out in a document that students are asked to sign in the first week of the semester to demonstrate that they are aware of the course requirements.

2. Even in a face-to-face class, students can drift, losing track of how many classes or assignments they have missed. Since this problem is exacerbated in hybrid courses, it's probably a good idea to issue periodic progress reports to students as the semester unfolds, informing them how many absences they have, how many assignments they have missed, and whether they are meeting the expectations for the class. Students in trouble might be urged or even required to meet for a conference. Using the Starfish Student Success link on your faculty page will also let other staff members in the University's support services know that there is a problem so that they can touch base with the student. We cannot "save" all students or probably even most, but there are students who might benefit from some sort of intervention.

3. It may help to be explicit and intentional about how the work done in the online portion of the class connects and spills over into the face-to-face meetings. Otherwise, students may tend to view the online portion as supplemental, like homework for the face-to-face classes that they can choose to do or not do. One way of doing this would be for the faculty member to capture formal or informal writing done online and to use this writing as the launching pad for discussion in the face-to-face classes. Projecting what several students have written onto the screen in front of the classroom and otherwise using class time to reference material and activities from the web site is a good way of emphasizing how the online time is an extension of the face-to-face class and how the face-to-face class is also an extension of the online time. By making student work visible and part of discussion, we also emphasize students' accountability for online work.

4. Sometimes problems in the online portions of the class can spill over into the face-to-face portion. We have had students who said that they did not come to class because they had not done the online assignment. This can quickly snowball until the student has no chance of passing the class. It's important to be aware of this tendency and to reinforce the need for students not to accumulate additional absences by skipping class.

In addition to the above suggestions, IRT offers a "Quality Matters Rubric" workshop that can help faculty set up a course website in a way that is to make it more user friendly for students. They also offer a "Blended Learning Boot Camp" that explicitly addresses hybrid courses. For more information on these seminars, please visit the IRT web page: wpunj.edu/irt