HIGHER ED EVOLUTIONS

By Symone C. Skrzycki

Striking a Balance in Learning Methods

"Totally fascinating."

That's one way Barry Bandstra, professor of religion at Hope College in Michigan, describes a hybrid learning project through the Midwest Hybrid Learning Consortium (MHLC).

"One of our instructors at Hope College is a specialist in jazz organ," Bandstra conveys. "Jazz organ is quite a specialization. Not every faculty or college can afford to have on staff a jazz organist. He lives in Ohio. But he's developed over the last couple of years a way of teaching jazz organ to students remotely.

"Working one-on-one with students (at Hope and at Grinnell College in Iowa), they're both at their organs. He can play something and they not only hear it, but they get the musical transcription (and vice versa). It's the most amazing thing. And on a couple of occasions, he travels to meet them."

Four additional institutions comprise the MHLC: Wabash College and DePauw University in Indiana, Albion College (Michigan) and Lawrence University (Wisconsin). A group of 16 faculty members works in pairs across institutions to promote hybrid learning, which blends in-class and out-of-class instruction.

"They're going to be working with a colleague in roughly similar academic fields – whether it be kinesiology or religion or biology," Bandstra offers. "What they're doing is brainstorming ways and developing materials they can share."

The basic concept? Students will take greater control of their learning and preparation before they enter the physical classroom. The benefit? They'll engage in the material and discussions at a higher level.

Funded by a $330,000 grant from the Teagle Foundation (focused on advancing the liberal arts education), the MHLC kicked off in 2014.

Debbie Seltzer-Kelly, associate professor and chair of education studies at Wabash College, partnered with a Hope English professor on peer-to-peer writing instruction.

"We weren't being encouraged to collapse things into simple, objectively measured criteria," Seltzer-Kelly asserts (such as), 'Watch this video and answer these 26 multiple choice questions,' which is what an awful lot of online education turns into, I'm afraid. We were looking for robust conversations using a variety of means to introduce new materials to students, and having them reflect on them and learn from each other."

Bandstra adds, "This is not the monster class with anonymous students you might find in what are called MOOCs (massive open online courses) that were the rage back in 2012 and 2013.

"The possibilities are very exciting."

RESOURCE: Midwest Hybrid Learning Consortium at hybridliberalarts.org

'Free' to Engineer Their Own Pace

Jeff Rhoads, professor at Purdue University, inspires students about how engineers can impact people's lives. They can only do that if they continue in their course of study.

"Traditionally, as a field, engineering has not done a terribly good job marketing itself. People always talk about (the brilliance of) rocket scientists. But the reality is that the people who put rockets into space aren't scientists – they're engineers," he points out with a good-natured laugh.

The Purdue Mechanics Freeform Classroom is helping to prepare students for diverse careers by adopting an approach that appeals to a variety of learning styles.

"If I have a criticism – which is maybe a harsh one – of the academic community, it's that sometimes we do research on what's the best way to teach students, but that doesn't mean we always adopt what the conclusion is," Rhoads asserts.

Determined to prevent that outcome, he and others established an innovative course blog.

"The blog is the backbone of it all," he energetically relates. "It's not a blog like we might think of today. It's more evolved from the old-school blog. It's a file repository. I like to think of it as a 24/7 access portal to your peers and the instructor."

The class primarily targets sophomores, but includes students from all grade levels.

Employing multiple mediums is key.

"My colleagues and I recorded hundreds and hundreds of problems. Not only all of the examples in the lecture book, but everything they'd do in homework. And we created these rather stripped-down videos. They're short because we want to be conscious of attention spans. They demonstrate best practices on how to solve problems and – more importantly – not necessarily always the nuts and bolts but, 'What's the thought process?' "

Online experiments that may be difficult to attempt in the classroom, often featuring students assisting, add another element.

"One of the reasons we see students not continue in their engineering studies is, frankly, the subject's tough. And one of the things we do is show that, 'We're not asking you to get this the first time. We're not asking you to get it the 10th time.' We want to provide the resources so you can learn how to perform at a high level, but at your pace that makes sense for you."

He marvels at the breadth of careers engineering graduates enter.

"We're increasingly seeing more people going into law and politics and business," Rhoads notes. "We've actually, in recent years, seen a strong uptake in people going to medical school."

Professor Jeff Rhoads (left) likens the Purdue Mechanics Freeform Classroom to "an educational buffet. Students can kind of pick and choose what they want to engage with and find the formula that works best for them. We know there's different types of learners out there." Charles Krousgrill (right), a Purdue professor of mechanical engineering, pioneered the concept *(Purdue University/Mark Simons photo)*.

RESOURCE: Jeff Rhoads, Purdue University, at www.Purdue.edu/freeform

More Internships Going Virtual

Consider these statistics.

A *Forbes* survey of its top 100 companies conducted in 2016 revealed a 36% increase in virtual job listings over the previous year.

According to the Indiana Commission for Higher Education, 80% of employers prefer to have students who have completed an internship.

WGU Indiana – the state's nonprofit, online university – is bringing the two worlds together with its virtual internship program.

"It helps our students gain valuable work experience and it allows Hoosier employers to work with qualified interns, especially ones that aren't bound by semester timetables or geography," comments WGU public relations manager Sharon Smith. "There's a real benefit on both sides of the table when it comes to this sort of internship. It could be a real win-win."

In partnership with Indiana INTERNnet, WGU Indiana developed a virtual internship guide.

"There's two playbooks: one for the student and one for the employer," Smith outlines. "We really tried to create a roadmap for each to understand how best to pursue these opportunities and how best to create them."

Robert Bryant, a 59-year-old WGU Indiana student, is pursuing a degree in accounting. He's a customer service specialist with Amazon and devotes 20 hours each week over four evenings. Virtual training, virtual team meetings and virtual resources are all part of the package.

"We ran through 50 to 60 training modules in a couple weeks and then, boom! Right into the fire you go," Bryant declares. "They said you'll learn fastest this way because it will stick with you. And it's true. I learn every night."

Bryant's career – and life – took an unexpected turn seven years ago when he shattered his humerus bone falling on ice.

"I was a ceramic tile setter. After I got hurt, I had to find something else to do."

Concerned about job prospects in his 50s, he went back to school. He earned his associate's degree before enrolling at WGU Indiana, where he says he feels like he's "part of something."

WGU Indiana – average student age of 37 – provides a platform for adult learners to study online.

RESOURCE: Sharon Smith, WGU Indiana, at Indiana.wgu.edu/virtualintern