

Faculty Leadership Seminar 2011-2012 Project Report:
Linked and Build-Your-Own Block Course Assessment

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Introduction

In association with the Mellon-funded study of Colorado College in relation to our peer institutions, Henry Fricke and I led a discussion of the block plan and its possibilities at the Faculty Forum in September, 2010. During this session, Henry and I introduced the possibility of supplementing the block plan with courses formatted in ways that complement the strengths of the intensive block format. More specifically, we proposed a format in which students would take two concurrent courses stretched over two blocks, in either a “linked-block” (two related courses, intentionally paired) or mix-and-match format.¹ In the first model, students would sign up for two concurrent paired courses – though the courses would be distinct, they’d be related, and students would be required to take both courses simultaneously. Under the second model, students could choose one course from each of two lists of courses with complementary schedules. The Psychology Department adopted the latter model for their “Build-Your-Own-Block,” or “BYOB,” program, which they committed to run during blocks 5 and 6 for two years, beginning in 2011-2012. Fricke and Hourdequin used the paired course model in blocks 7 and 8 of the spring semester, 2012, when they taught Introduction to Global Climate Change (EV 128) and Environmental Ethics (PH 246/EV 281), respectively. Students in the BYOB program were primarily juniors and seniors (94%), and most were psychology majors (75%). Students in the linked courses were exclusively first year (93%) and second year (7%) students.

The paired/linked format courses aimed to achieve a number of objectives. In particular, we hoped that the stretched format would enable greater opportunities for students to reflect on their work in each course and create some gestation time, offer more time to meet with instructors to discuss paper drafts and revisions, and generate synergies between courses, as students made connections between ideas across or within disciplines.

As part of the 2011-2012 CC Faculty Leadership Seminar, I assessed both the BYOB program’s first year and the Fricke-Hourdequin linked courses. This report summarizes data gathered from: 1) a lunch meeting with BYOB faculty during block 5 (spring 2012); 2) two lunch meetings with groups of BYOB students in blocks 6 and 7 (spring 2012), respectively; 3) results from a survey of BYOB students; and 4) results of a survey of linked block students. Surveys were developed with the assistance of Mark Saviano, technical director for the

¹ It should be noted that this was not a “new” idea, but rather the reinvigoration of an old one: in the early days of the block plan, especially, but extending also into more recent times, faculty have experimented with extended format courses along these lines. In the early days of the block plan, many different formats were utilized.

Psychology Department, and were administered electronically using the Qualtrics survey platform. Student survey results for BYOB and linked block courses are contained in Appendix A and Appendix B, respectively.

Summary of Student Responses

BYOB and Linked Block Student Surveys

Learning:

BYOB and linked block students overwhelmingly agreed that they “learned many concepts” in their BYOB courses, with 94% and 87%, respectively, answering “agree” or “strongly agree” on this question. However, students generally did not feel that they learned more or more deeply in BYOB/linked courses than in typical courses.

Making Connections Between Courses:

Students in BYOB and linked block courses felt that ideas from both courses intermingled to enhance their learning (59% and 60% in the “agree” or “strongly agree” category for BYOB and linked block students, respectively), and many students felt that this intermingling was more effective in the BYOB/linked courses than in regular block courses (50% and 40% BYOB and linked block students, respectively). Students generally did not feel that they had more time to reflect on the material in their courses, however, with only 29% of BYOB students and 20% of linked block students indicating that the alternative format gave them more opportunity to “thoughtfully reflect on course material.”

Managing Two Courses:

Students generally did not feel that taking two simultaneous classes inhibited their learning (with only 13% of linked block and 30% of BYOB students agreeing that their learning was inhibited), and some students felt that coordinating efforts for the two courses helped improve their time management skills (35% of BYOB students and 40% of linked block students). However, only a third of students (30-33%) felt that the alternate format allowed them to hone their time management skills more than regular block classes. Moreover, 100% of BYOB students found it more challenging to coordinate efforts for the two courses than for regular block plan. Interestingly, only 43% of linked block students found coordinating their efforts between the two courses challenging, though 78% found it harder than in two single-block courses.

Challenges of Keeping Up:

A high proportion of students in BYOB found it difficult to keep up with work in their courses (70%), whereas only 29% of students found it difficult to keep up with work in the linked block courses. Nevertheless, a majority of students in both formats found it harder to keep up in the alternate format courses than in regular one-block courses (76% of BYOB students; 57% of linked block students). Relatedly, most students found the workload difficult (88% for BYOB; 71% for linked block), and more than half of the students in both formats found the workload more difficult than in typical one-block courses. Similarly, more than half of students found studying for exams more difficult than in the regular format. Many students found the alternate format stressful, with half or more finding the format more stressful than the standard block plan (65% for BYOB; 50% for linked block).

Assignment Clustering:

A large proportion of students in both BYOB and the linked block courses felt that assignment deadlines for the two courses tended to spike at the same time (100% for BYOB and 65% for linked block students), and students overwhelmingly agreed that too many major assignments were due in the same week (88% BYOB; 93% linked block).

Newness and Adjustment:

Perhaps because they were primarily older students with more block plan experience, a substantial proportion of BYOB students felt that the newness of the BYOB format made it difficult to adjust to (69%) and 56% felt that it would be easier with practice. Only 28% of linked block students felt newness made the adjustment difficult; 43% of linked block students thought it would be easier with practice.

Understanding of Goals:

93% of students in the linked block courses agreed that they understood why the format was being tried, whereas only 63% of BYOB students felt that they understood the reasons for using this format. (The disparity may reflect the fact that linked block format instructors were able to take advantage of feedback from BYOB students in block 6 on the need for clarity of goals.)

Enjoyment and Recommendation to Others:

Although about 75% of students in both formats agreed that they enjoyed their courses, only 37% of BYOB students and 21% of linked block students enjoyed their courses more than typical block courses. When asked about the format specifically, only 13% of BYOB students and 7% of linked block students expressed a preference for the alternate format. Similarly, relatively few students expressed an interest in taking more courses in the alternate format (19% of BYOB and 14% of linked block students). Finally, few students (12% and 21% for BYOB and linked block, respectively) would recommend the format to other students (though, oddly, 38% of the psychology BYOB students would recommend the BYOB format for other departments). In general, students felt that BYOB and linked block courses should either be used sparingly as a complement to the regular block plan, or eliminated entirely.

Best Uses/Possible Improvements:

Students generally felt that these alternative formats would be effective for courses with similar or related content (47% and 41% agreeing that learning would be enhanced, for BYOB and linked block students, respectively) and less useful for courses with dissimilar content (12% and 0%, respectively, agreeing that learning would be enhanced). Coordinated assignments across the two courses were overwhelmingly favored by students in both BYOB and linked block formats (81% and 100%, respectively).

Qualitative Data from Survey and BYOB Student Luncheons

The qualitative data gathered from student luncheons (BYOB students only) and survey comments (BYOB and linked block courses) reinforced the quantitative survey findings. Students grow accustomed to the block plan format, and after adapting to it (or having chosen it prior to attending CC because it fits their learning style), they find it hard to move back and forth between two subjects. Students noted that it was hard to shift gears, prioritize workloads for two

classes, manage time, and think intensely about two different fields at the same time. A number of students noted that taking two courses at once is not consistent with the spirit of the block plan and that the advance planning required is “not our mode of working.” Some BYOB students seemed resentful of the alternate format:

“I do not think you can have students perform on a one-block system and then suddenly ask them to do two at once.”

“I hate it. The reason we came to CC was for the block plan, and I spent two years developing study skills that work well with [the] block plan, then was forced to switch it up.”

Two linked block students made similarly negative comments:

“I longed to be taking only one block at almost all times. It jumped back and forth and was often way too long between classes.”

“The linked block structure was absolutely terrible.”

On the positive side, a small number of students noted that the BYOB and linked block formats facilitated stronger connections across disciplines, more complex thinking, and more multi-perspective thinking. One BYOB student noted, “I loved the integration...[though] evaluation was stressful.” Another BYOB student said:

“It’s unclear to me whether taking these classes in conjunction or something external to the courses changed the way I see things, but either way, right now my thinking is much more complex than it has ever been, in a way that I’ve never experienced before. I think taking two classes together...pushed me to consider many perspective relative to each concept beyond what a single class can present as class material.”

And linked block students commented:

“I really liked the linked-block structure. Switching off between classes allowed for a change of pace, and if you planned ahead well, you were only working on one class’s homework at a time. I definitely feel like I’m going to retain more knowledge from this class than I would normally with the one block format.”

“Dealing with two different sets of homework required me to prioritize my time differently and learn to shift gears quickly and efficiently. Having the ability to relate ideas from both classes so immediately and directly facilitated discussions in both classes and helped to more fully develop the ideas we learned.”

Anecdotally, my impression is that a small number of students – typically the best students – found the alternate format exciting and invigorating. Others found it more difficult and did not see a benefit from the added challenge.

In terms of improvements, students in both formats emphasized the benefit of greater communication and integration between faculty. Students in the linked block course favored an integrated final project. BYOB students emphasized the importance of defining the goals of the new format more clearly and explicitly. BYOB students also noted that faculty should not assume that students have more time than in a regular block course.

Summary of Faculty Responses

BYOB faculty with whom I had lunch during block 5 (the first block of BYOB) generally had a favorable impression of the program. Faculty noted that the pacing requires adjustment: there is a sense of having more time, but the number of days of class is no different than in a standard block. There was general agreement that faculty benefited from greater flexibility in terms of preparation time and scheduling. In addition, the alternate day teaching schedule increases the ability of faculty to handle illness (avoiding the need to cancel class or to teach when very ill) and to accommodate other life events that generate significant stress under the regular block plan (e.g., having time to attend to a sick or dying relative).

With respect to pedagogical benefits, in addition to the added prep time, faculty commented that BYOB might help counteract the “binge and purge intellectual culture” associated with the block plan. Initial faculty impressions also suggested that thesis students enjoyed and benefitted from the BYOB format. Some students find a thesis block a very difficult adjustment after many years of the structured daily block schedule. The BYOB format mitigates this: students have 2-3 days a week to focus on their theses, but they have the structure of a class to keep them focused and in the academic rhythm. From the student perspective, the relatively small number of thesis students made it hard to confirm these impressions. Some students seemed to like the structure of taking a class while simultaneously working on the thesis; others found that their class work colonized their thesis time.

As a faculty member who taught a linked block class, my own impression is that some students benefitted significantly from the format, while others found it harder to sustain focus and attention. For example, some students excelled in a blogging exercise I use in my typical one-block environmental ethics class, while others procrastinated (despite reminders), leaving many of their blog posts to the end of the two-block period. It is hard to know whether to blame the format of the course for these problems; another interpretation is that block plan students need *more* experience managing multiple academic commitments and sustaining attention over periods longer than three and a half weeks, and that the fact that many found the linked block format difficult was symptomatic of their lack of experience in these realms. Personally, I very much enjoyed teaching on the linked block schedule. Though there were some tradeoffs in the sense that I didn't have the entirety of students' academic attention over the course of the two blocks, I did find that I had much more availability to meet with students to discuss paper drafts and could do so in a more relaxed way. I also found that the linked block format made it easier to manage non-class-related responsibilities (thesis supervision, committee work, research commitments, etc.) and was significantly less stressful than teaching a regular block class. As others have noted, though, the format does stretch out faculty teaching, such that a faculty member teaching a linked block course would only have one non-teaching block under the standard six-block teaching load.

Discussion

The overall student impression of the BYOB and linked block format courses was neutral to slightly negative. Most students found the formats workable, and there were no pronounced differences in students' impressions of how much and how deeply they learned. Some students strongly disliked the new formats, and a few students very much enjoyed them. The students who liked the alternate formats generally cited pedagogical advantages such as interconnections between courses and multi-perspective thinking associated with learning two subjects simultaneously. Students who disliked the formats indicated that BYOB and linked blocks violated their expectations of the block plan, did not fit well with their study habits, were more stressful, and had limited pedagogical benefits. Since students generally found the linked/BYOB format courses more challenging in terms of time management, it is hard to discern what effects these challenges had on students' impressions of potential pedagogical benefits. It seems clear that if these formats continue to be used, their pedagogical goals should be clearly communicated, and perhaps students should be offered greater support with time management.

Students expressed a strong interest in greater integration across courses, and saw the potential of BYOB and linked blocks in this regard. An alternative and perhaps better way to achieve such integration would be through two-block, co-taught courses, though it is difficult for faculty to spare the time in their schedules to co-teach such courses. While one-block co-taught courses certainly have significant benefits, they do not achieve all of the objectives of BYOB/linked block courses, particularly the aim of sustaining students' focus on a particular topic for more than one block. Given the emphasis on community engagement noted in President Tiefenthaler's recent "Year of Listening" report, it might be useful to continue experimentation with two-block format linked, BYOB, or co-taught courses, since effective community engagement often is hard to cultivate in the short space of a block.

More generally, the survey results and student luncheon comments indicated that students are strongly attached to the block plan in its current form, and they have very specific expectations associated with academics at CC and the block plan format. Insofar as the curriculum would benefit from innovations within the broad context of the block plan, more work may need to be done to prepare students for variation from their standard routines. Students and faculty alike recognize the benefits of connections and integration among classes, and the sequential format of standard block plan courses makes it more difficult to establish these connections. In addition, the block plan fosters "just in time" style studying, writing, and assignment completion. While this develops an important skill set, it provides less space for reflection over time, and for recursive processes of writing and revision of ideas. With this in mind, I would encourage continued experimentation with formats that complement the block plan's strengths and build a broad range of skills in our students, equipping them with the flexible capacities for learning and thinking that will benefit them in their careers and in their lives more generally.

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