

Supporting the Hybrid Learning Model: A New Proposition

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Abstract

With the growth of online learning doubling over the last several years, learning delivery methods are continually being explored for viability and effectiveness. This paper examines a hybrid course delivery model that positively impacts course delivery and student success. Hybrid delivery is defined as a course in which at least 50 percent of learning activities are transferred to the online format. The model's effectiveness is measured by student success in the course and their satisfaction with the delivery system.

Keywords: hybrid, online, learning community, online delivery

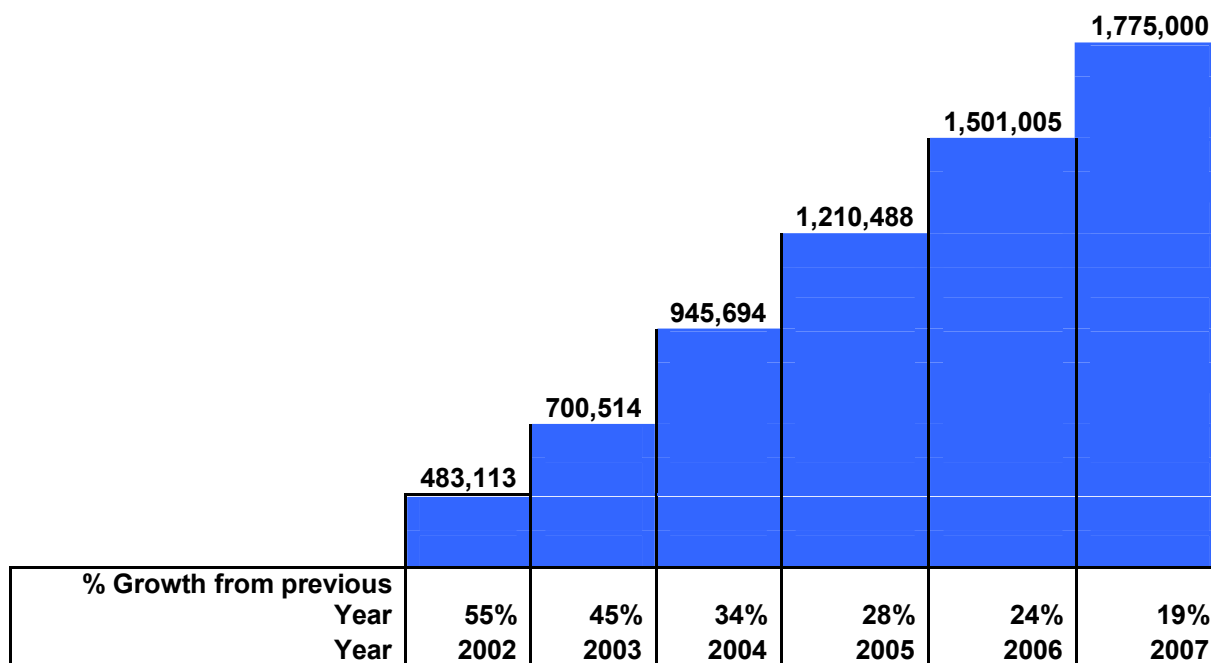
Introduction

Since 2000, the growth of online learning has been tremendous. Enrollment in online programs has more than doubled in the last few years (Romano, 2006), and this trend is likely to continue. Industry analysts predict that growth will double again in the next two years (Sloan Consortium, 2006). Figure 1 illustrates the growth of online enrollments from 2002 – 2006 and expected growth for 2007.

Several factors contribute to the growth of online learning: enhancement of technology, perceived value or improved reputation, and increased accessibility. In addition, changes in financial aid policy have also affected growth. Educational institutions no longer need at least 50 percent of their courses to be taught onsite in order to offer government financial aid to students for online courses (Fisher, 2006). As a result, educational institutions can offer all or part of their curriculum online. They can also offer a particular course using a combined online and onsite format as well. This dual format is referred to as a hybrid class.

The hybrid format applies to any instruction where content is delivered both online and in onsite facilities. In the scope of this research, hybrid is also defined as a course in which at least 50 percent of learning activities are transferred to the online format. The main goal of hybrid courses in some institutions is to enrich the students' learning experience by combining the best features of onsite and online classes.

Figure 1. Online Enrollment Growth



Source: Eduventures, From Romano article Washington Post, May 16, 2006

Background

Some universities have already experimented with the hybrid format and have reported promising results. In “Creating A Hybrid College Course,” (August 10, 2005) Gordon Hensley refers to studies conducted by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and University of Central Florida. Studies conducted in Milwaukee found that students benefited from the hybrid format by:

- learning more
- writing better papers
- performing better on tests
- discussing course materials more meaningfully
- completing higher-quality class projects

Data from the University of Central Florida also indicate that students participating in hybrid courses received better grades than those taking traditional onsite classes or online courses. In addition, Chuck Dziuban, Director of the Research Initiative for Teaching Effectiveness at the University of Central Florida has found that student success rates in hybrid courses on the Central Florida campus are “equivalent or slightly superior” to face-to-face courses. He also notes that the hybrid courses have lower dropout rates than courses that are taught solely online (Dziuban, 2006).

Proposition

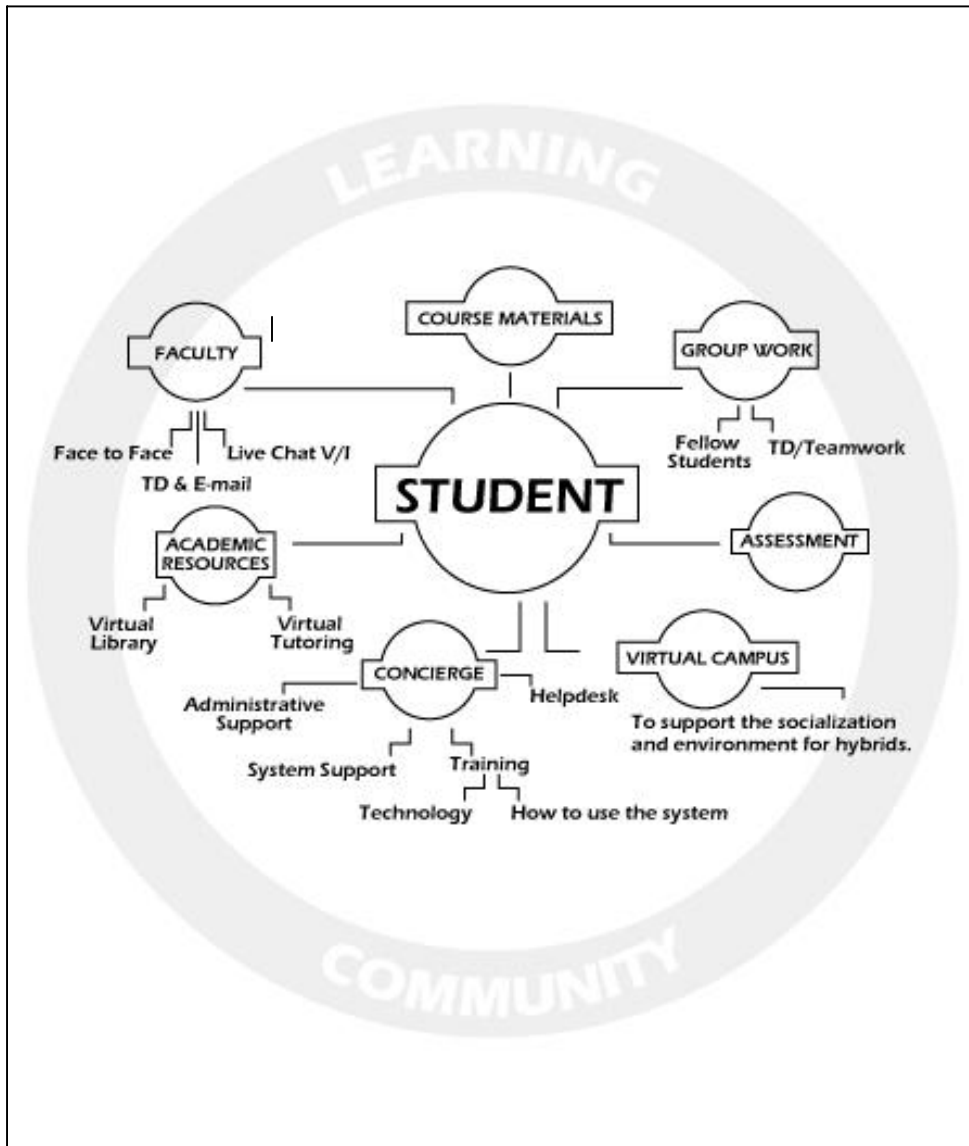
The Learning Community in the Hybrid Model

Every year, institutions in higher education spend millions of dollars creating communities on campus. In contrast, very few institutions spend money creating an online community or promoting such communities to their online students.

However, without creating an online environment in which students feel connected to one another and connected to the institution, no significant differences exist between so-called online programs (for example, using fax or email) and traditional programs that employ high technology.

In fact, research has suggested that setting up an effective online learning community is necessary in order to offer a meaningful online program. In a successful hybrid model, students should be at the center of the learning community with all other activities designed around them. The figure that follows, Figure 2: The Hybrid Online Model, illustrates the current stage of the hybrid model learning community.

Figure 2. The Hybrid Online Model



Learning communities like the one illustrated above facilitate active student participation in the learning process, improve academic excellence in the online environment, and reduce costs. As Parson and Ross (2006) have suggested:

Learning will permeate the larger community, in homes, cafes, libraries and other gathering places; it will not be confined to the campus. With energetic and imaginative development of computer-based learning, reinforced by a rich, engaged and collaborative on-campus experience, capital investment can be reduced, the quality of learning can be improved, and the community as a whole better served.

In hybrid programs, students have a greater opportunity to adopt and promote the learning community because they have simultaneous access to the face-to-face and virtual campus. A plausible offering to students in the proposed hybrid-course includes the ability to:

- access and interact with faculty and administrators both face-to-face and online
- apply learned material during both face-to-face meetings and online
- communicate with other students in both traditional and online formats, and
- work as a team in both traditional and virtual classrooms

In the examination of the community at large, it is also critical to look specifically at the interactions among faculty and students.

Interaction with Faculty and Fellow Students

Students can plan their learning more effectively when they have the opportunity to interact with faculty and fellow students both face-to-face and in cyberspace. Of course, the effectiveness of the interaction depends on how well-trained both faculty and students are in communicating in the dual environment. For example, faculty needs to plan his/her teaching in a more organized manner for the online environment and students should be able to communicate in both formats effectively.

In addition, how efficient and user-friendly the technology components are presented and managed. From instructor point of view, besides understanding the pedagogical factors, planning and designing the structure of the course well in advance is a real challenge.

Faculty Training: How to Manage Online or Hybrid classes

Usually, the most common type of training provided to faculty is course management software (CMS) training, which is provided by companies like eCollege, Blackboard, and WebCT. However, software training is generally not enough to implement a successful hybrid course. Faculty also need training on planning and managing the course. While this training is necessary for both online and face-to-face teaching it is more critical when faculty teach a hybrid course because of the technology component. In hybrid environment, faculty need to be more conscious about how to guide students in order to enhance their learning and not confuse them poor design flow or have technology become an obstacle to the experience.

Planning for Teaching

Experience indicates that students learn better when courses are clear and well-planned. Students tend to be more confident about their learning abilities in such classes. They also perform better and are better able to prepare for class when the course itself is well-defined. In essence, a course road-map is equally, if not more important, in a hybrid course for both faculty and students since in a hybrid course students are working in two distinct environments, virtual and face-to-face. As a result, they need to know what they should do and what are expected from them in each of the environments.

Thus, faculty should plan and design the structure of the hybrid course well in advance. Advance planning has a greater impact on student learning than other course considerations. The course outline, some institutions may refer to this as a course syllabus, which is provided to the students either before the class begins or on the first day of the class should reflect this process which will help students to be more

prepared, this is the prescribed road map for the course but also for operating in the face-to-face and online environment.

Hybrid course planning is more complex than traditional, face-to-face course planning. In addition to the typical classroom considerations, faculty must consider elements such as:

- the relationship between the course and the curriculum in a mixed modality
- how technology will be used
- how the goals and objectives of the course should be achieved in a mixed modality
- how subjects are covered and the format used
- what materials are prepared and given in the face-to-face environment, online forum, or offered in both
- what role is to be played (for example, guide, facilitator, mentor), and
- how to measure feedback and assess learning using technology versus paper-based typically found in the face-to-face classroom.

One suggestion for planning the hybrid course is to divide it into these six sections:

1. Policy and procedures
2. What to be done before the first meeting
3. How class activities should be divided between in face-to-face and online format
4. Managing online activities, particularly managing live chats
5. Class participation policy (both face-to-face and online)
6. Evaluation and lessons learned

Faculty should note that while many of these sections must also be addressed when planning traditional, onsite courses, special consideration must be given to how courses are divided into onsite and online formats. Class participation also requires special consideration.

In addition to these planning considerations, faculty must also keep the university's culture in mind when creating the hybrid course. For example, are there institutionally established design templates or requirements to consider? Also, is the culture fully supportive of the use and application of technology in the learning experience? These topics on their own merit a research focus, as a result, the authors' of this proposition paper will examine further in a future research endeavor. The next section review online content design.

Interaction with Administrators and the University's Governing Bodies

Smooth and effective communication between students and university governing bodies is another key element in building a successful learning community. Students become frustrated when they need help and none is available, or when they are put on hold for long periods of time. Hybrid programs to some degree address these issues by encouraging outside-the-classroom communication.

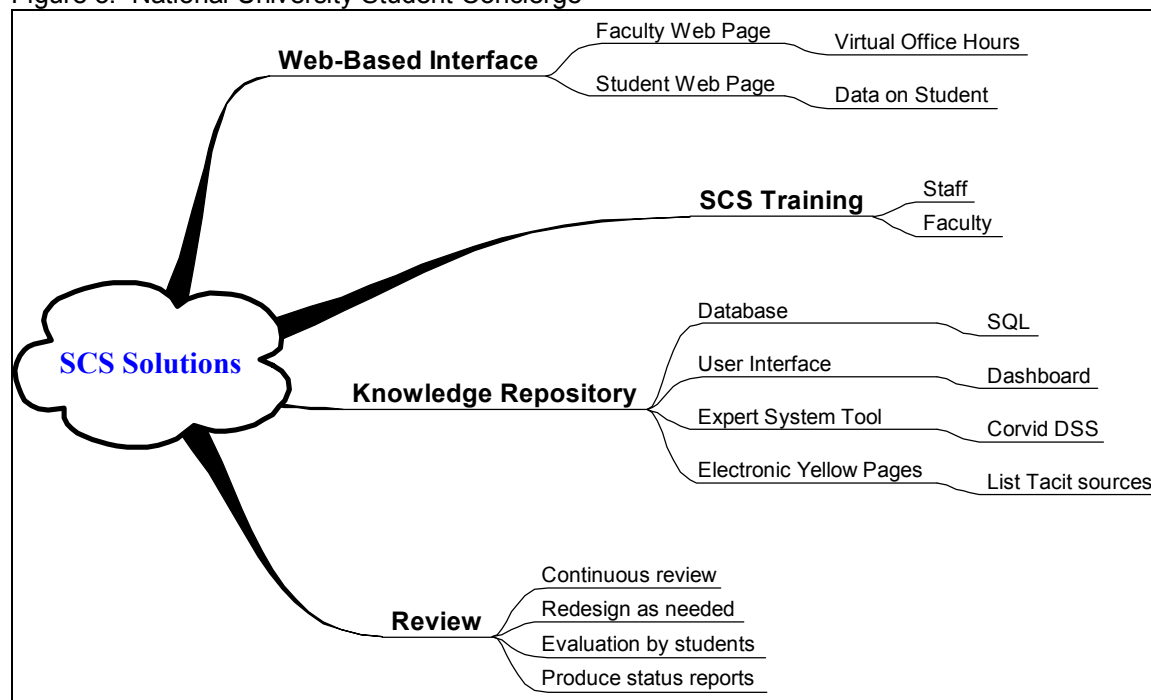
A recent study conducted by faculty at National University concluded that student concierge services are an effective means of communication between online students and all university parties. The study was based on a successful concierge practice by Walden University. The following is a summary of the National University report:

The committee recommends development of personalized web page(s) for each student similar to the system used by Walden University. Students would access their web page by entering their logon name and password provided to them at the time of registration. On this web page, the student will have links to their specific academic programs/ faculty, student technology support or administrative information. The name of the assigned Concierge, his/her telephone number and email are also will be posted in this site.

Students would need to be oriented to the use of their web page(s) to enable quick access for answers to common questions and the system designed needs to be user-friendly, especially for those students who do not have highly developed technology skills. The student's web page would provide interface and links to the current Strategies Operations and Resources (SOAR) system (PeopleSoft ERP implementation, CRM, HR, Student Admin, Finance and Portal) that would identify the user by the login and take the student to his/her specific information rather than necessitating negotiation through multiple pages.

Setting-up a web-page similar to Walden University's can help hybrid students communicate with the university efficiently and with minimum confusion. Figure 3 illustrates the how the system works:

Figure 3. National University Student Concierge



Support System

In the proposed Learning Community of the Hybrid Online Model having a support system is also important when creating and maintaining an effective online learning environment. The support system should address the following:

- Training – How to manage the online or hybrid course (faculty)
- Training - How to use the online system (student)
- Technology
 - System functionality
 - Integration with:
 - Student information system
 - Adaptive technologies (i.e., iLinc, Elluminate)
- Availability of resources:
 - Student/ Faculty Help-Service Desk
 - Virtual Library
 - Virtual Tutoring

- Web-based services (database of FAQs)

In addition to the support, online content design plays an incredibly important role. The next section elaborates on this importance.

Online Content Design

Industry research suggests that since the 1990's, the movement to the online learning environment has involved transferring what has been done in the classroom and putting it online. In other words, simply taking lecture notes, PowerPoint slides, articles, and other text heavy documents and uploading them to the virtual space (See Exhibit A: Typical Online Course). While text-heavy uploads may have been acceptable beginning, this approach has quickly become archaic in the dynamic online learning industry.

In fact, the quality of content is increasingly becoming a central issue in online learning. *Training Magazine* reported that "high quality content is the most-important factor used to determine the success of e-learning efforts" (September, 2005). Therefore, for the continued growth of many traditional and non-traditional institutions, offering quality online education will be a critical competitive factor. No longer will the traditional text-heavy courses be considered the norm, but a trend of the past and former benchmark. Exhibits B, C and D present static design samples of content improvements suggested.

Moving from text-heavy courses to courses that are more engaging and interactive are directly in line with what George Hislop suggested. He indicates that online education is facing a future where "graphics, audio and video are expected and text materials will not be sufficient" (Hislop, 2003). As of 2005, few institutions are offering this more dynamic way of learning. However, the trend toward creating a more effective online learning experience using models like the Effective e-Learning Model (e2L) designed by Spectrum Pacific Learning Company and National University management and faculty (Exhibit E: Effective e-Learning Model) is beginning to take hold. This model provides content and design elements for the online venue that surpass the current benchmark for typical online learning design by incorporating rich, media content (Exhibit D).

The movement from text heavy course to more engaging courses is applicable whether a course is taught online or as a hybrid. The e2L model suggests that consistency in content and design are critical. The model is based upon a strategic presentation mix of concept, theory, and application using the design elements and follows the suggestion of Hislop for online design. The model ensures that (list is not inclusive but provides example)

- learning is being measured
- learning styles are being addressed through a diverse presentation of critical content
 - audio, visual, and kinesthetic
- an interactive learning community is created, and
- information is combined into small segments for a key learning outcome or learning objective (list provides an overview but is not limited to what is presented)
 - brief pre-assessment
 - reading assignment
 - threaded discussions
 - view a 3 to 5 minute video lecture related to reading assignment
 - an activity that requires kinesthetic learning opportunities
 - written assignment
 - post-assessment

The benefit of this model in a hybrid delivery is that if a student missed a learning opportunity or did not completely understand the lecture in class, the student can log on to the online environment and review the material in several delivery modes:

- audio (a review of the in-class lecture)
- visual (a script of the audio file)

- hands-on (an activity that helps the learner process the information)

In addition to designing an engaging online or hybrid course, it is equally important for an institution to leverage the availability of consistent information in the classroom and online. With the hybrid model providing content online to the student as well as in the classroom, faculty has the ability to add information to supplement the online learning. Faculty can also pull information from the online environment to add to or enhance the classroom experience and vice versa.

Another useful element in online content design is to include access to videos or DVDs. Videos and DVDs that are too long to show in a single class period can be broken into segments in the online environment and reviewed over a period of time. The content may then be discussed in class or through discussion threads.

Conclusion

As this proposition paper outlines, there is much to be considered when designing and delivering a hybrid course; however, this is also potentially much to be gained in terms of the student learning experience. The Hybrid Online Model which emphasizes the impact and interaction on critical elements within the learning community: preplanning (course roadmap) with careful attention to face-to-face classroom content as well as online content and design, technology training for faculty, facilitated interaction between faculty and students but also among students, and critical support elements in all aspects of the learning environment. Online learning is in its infancy when compared to the traditional face-to-face delivery history and research in this learning arena needs to continue to be explored and documented. The proposed model in this research work may provide a foundation for further research, specifically as it relates to the mixed modality of the hybrid course learning experience.

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Appendix

Exhibit A

Typical Online Course

The screenshot shows a Blackboard course page for 'MGT 602 (OLD): STRATEGIC DECISION MAKING... WEEK 1'. On the left is a navigation menu with buttons for Announcements, Syllabus, Week 1-4, Communication, Tools, and Course Assessment, along with a Course Map icon. The main content area includes:

- Learning Outcomes:** A list of five bullet points describing student learning objectives related to organizational strategy, competitive advantage, ethics, board responsibilities, and strategic planning.
- Discussion Board:** A prompt asking students to write a brief bio (two paragraphs) about their professional and sports interests.
- Chat Topic:** Labeled as 'TBA'.
- Required Reading:** A prompt to click on a folder to review weekly reading chapter summaries.

Exhibit B
Content and Design Improvements 1

This screenshot shows an improved version of the course interface. The left navigation menu is more detailed, including 'Welcome', 'General Workplace', 'Construction Site', 'Communication', and 'Tools'. The main content area features:

- A list of safety-related items (9, 10, 11) with an accompanying image of a construction site fence.
- Learning Activity:** A section with a purple header and a blue button labeled 'Click here to begin your activity.' next to an image of hands holding a fan of cards.
- Construction Site Safety Post Test:** A section with a test icon and text stating the test is designed to assess learning and will assign a final grade.

The bottom of the screen shows a Windows taskbar with the Start button, several open Microsoft Office applications, and the system clock showing 3:29 PM.

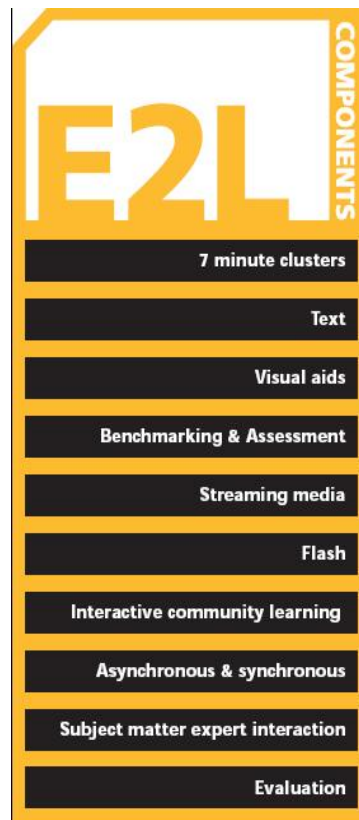
Exhibit C Content and Design Improvements 3

The screenshot shows a Blackboard course interface. On the left is a dark blue navigation sidebar with links for 'Announcements', 'Course Information', 'Week 1', 'Communications', 'Tools', and 'Course Map'. The main content area is titled 'Lesson One: Key Learning Activities'. It features a large image of a modern skyscraper. To the right of the image, the text reads: 'What is Strategy and Why is it Important?' followed by links for 'View Chapter 1 Summary', 'Analyze Case Study: Starbucks', and 'Watch Interactive Lecture'. Below this is 'The Managerial Process of Crafting and Executing Strategy' with links for 'View Chapter 2 Summary', 'Analyze Case Study: Netflix', and 'Watch Interactive Lecture'. A 'Practice' section includes a link to 'Play Business Strategy Game online'. A note at the bottom states: 'Note: To play the strategy game you will need to register. Please refer to the credentials provided in your textbook or visit the publisher's web site.' The Windows taskbar at the bottom shows the time as 5:07 PM.

Exhibit D Content Design Improvements 4: Rich Multimedia

The screenshot shows a Blackboard course page. The top section is titled 'Pre-test' and contains the text: '1121 - Pre-test: What do you know about Workforce Planning, Development and Outsourcing? The points are based on completing the pre-test, this is more about self understanding and awareness of the content and to get you started on your learning path, and/or to validate what you already know . 4 points total'. Below this is a link: 'Click Here to Take the Pre-test'. The next section is titled 'Readings and Video' and lists 'Readings: Chapters 1 – 3' and 'Streaming Video: More Than A Gut Feeling'. Below the video title is a video player showing a man in a suit speaking. To the right of the video player are four buttons: 'Play part 1 of 4', 'Play part 2 of 4', 'Play part 3 of 4', and 'Play part 4 of 4'. The Windows taskbar at the bottom shows the time as 12:05 PM.

Exhibit E
Effective e-Learning Model (e2L)



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