Who is afraid of a blended classroom?
by Laura Brunner, Doctoral Student, Women Studies

Hybrid or blended learning classes, which incorporate both online and face-to-face components, inspire complex and contradictory reactions from faculty and students alike. In my field, Women's Studies, many instructors worry that rich classroom discussions will be lost in an online format that encourages the unidirectional delivery of information from instructor to students. A “flipped” classroom, where students merely apply the prepackaged concepts presented to them in the online lecture, is their worst nightmare. My foray into teaching our introductory course, “Women, Art and Culture,” as a hybrid course this spring convinced me that these fears are overblown and that the format can be an effective way of teaching in Women's Studies and the humanities in general.

In reality, hybrid courses have a number of synergies with traditional face-to-face teaching. The benefits and draw-backs are not endogenous to the format; they are, for the most part, merely in the details of the execution. For those worried that online sessions will flatten educational experiences, it is important to recognize the extraordinary range of possibilities for online sessions, from the standard recorded lectures to self-paced guided exploration of source material, the most effective and popular sessions among my students.

My 200 level students seem to benefit from the increased individual engagement demanded by the format; they lose the option to disengage as they might in a classroom discussion. For any reader now eager to celebrate the infinite possibilities, it is important to note that hybrid courses still produce students with a varied level of investment in the course material and ability to perform academically. The loss of face-to-face time with students is real and can significantly change the dynamic between teacher and students.

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Anyone considering a hybrid course, and what it means for the future of teaching and learning, should, realize that some students may not learn as well without the direct involvement of the instructor. Regardless of the format, students need real qualitative feedback that takes into account their intellectual and personal development. Hybrid course instructors can be very effective by devoting their “virtual time” to posting frequent announcements and demonstrating careful and consistent reading of regular student assign-
Each year we select a book that will provide a shared intellectual experience for all first-year students, faculty, and staff. The First Year Book signals to incoming students the importance we place on intellectual engagement across the curriculum. We endeavor to select a book that will provide an opportunity for all of us to look at a topic, issue, or experience from different perspectives—from the sciences to the humanities and across diverse historical backgrounds, cultures, and ideologies.

The 2013-2014 First Year Book is The Signal and the Noise by Nate Silver. Silver asks us to consider: why are most predictions—even by experts—so woefully wrong? And what can we do to improve our ability to sift through the noise to see the signal of what is most likely to happen? Nate Silver has been right often: in 2008 he predicted the presidential outcome in 49 of 50 states and named the winner in all of the Senate races. He went on to correctly predict the outcomes in all 50 states in the 2012 election and 31 of 33 Senate races.

In The Signal and the Noise, Silver analyzes baseball, elections, climate change, the financial crash, poker, and weather forecasting. He explains why existing models so often fail and proposes ways to improve our predictions. He can also tell you why even he can not predict reliably which teams would be in the Super Bowl. “Most predictions fail, often at great cost to society, because most of us have a poor understanding of probability and uncertainty. The signal is the truth. The noise is what distracts us from the truth. This is a book about the signal and the noise (p. 17).”

I look forward to engaging in a campus-wide conversation in 2013–14 on how we use—and too often ignore—the tools available to us when we look to the future.

For more info go to fyb.umd.edu.