Hybrid, or blended learning classes open up some exciting new opportunities for teaching and learning in the humanities while also creating new challenges for instructors and students alike. Online sessions offer opportunities for a range of creative, engaging alternatives to deliver model lectures, while face-to-face sessions help to retain invaluable group learning processes that is the hallmark of education in the humanities. Before you embark on transforming an existing class into a hybrid structure, think seriously about the changes that are absolutely necessary and those that might possibly reinvigorate your course material. Based on my experience teaching Women’s Studies 250: Women, Art and Culture in a blended online and face-to-face format, I offer the following tips and tricks to make the most out of this unique structure.

1. Quality Quizzes

Moving class sessions online means that weekly quizzes are necessary to make sure that students are in fact completing the online portion of the course. Thoughtful questions can help guide students’ engagement with the material and enhance the learning goal for the session. Efficient, experienced students, which many of my students were, will read the quiz first and allow it to guide their reading of the lecture. Setting your students up for success rather than failure means asking the right questions. For example, “who were the NEA Four? Explain.” This type of quiz question, especially in a hybrid format where students are working at their computers will provoke an answer that could pass for the Wikipedia entry, and possibly even a rewording of the actual Wikipedia entry. In contrast, analytic questions ask students to evaluate the range of information presented to them. For example, “do you consider Jon Fronmeyer’s withdrawal of funding from the NEA Four an act of censorship?” draws higher quality answers and increases engagement, while simultaneously helping students evaluate the connection between concepts and concrete examples.

2. The Guided Activity

Consider a guided online activity as an alternative to the standard lecture. The format embraces students’ desire to seek out their own information online while exploiting some of the high quality resources on the internet. When I introduced visual analysis to my students, I did it in the form of an activity that guided them through the rich online gallery of The Los Hilos de la Vida that included interviews with the student artists. The activity sheet demonstrated for the students in some detail the visual analysis of one of the quilts, how the formal elements, knowledge of the medium, and the information about the

Laura K. Brunner is a Doctoral Student in Women’s Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park. Her research focuses on the cultures and representations of women’s work since World War II. Her dissertation, Professionalism on Screen, will explore the portrayal of U.S. professional women in contemporary film and television. She has taught Women’s Studies 250: Women, Art and Culture, and acted as a teaching assistant in Women’s Studies 200: Women & Society.
Guided Activity: “The responses above average quality, but also students happily spend more time seeking more information on a topic rather than simply completing the lecture.”

3. Flexibility

Elementary as it may seem, the flexibility of the hybrid structure should not be underestimated. Students perceive a two hour movie as equally demanding on their time as an hour and fifteen minute lecture; if you used to need a class and a half to watch a movie, then get shortchanged on discussion, you will love the ability to assign the movie as one lecture and devote an entire face-to-face section to discussion. The proviso is that the flexibility comes at the considerable cost of explaining varying expectations to students and resetting their work methods each week. It takes both them and the instructor some time to adopt to and learn effectively in a new, more flexible format. For example, there are two books that I assign that are more time consuming than students have come to expect; I was able to cut back the lectures to refund them some reading time in those cases. For the first novel, students inappropriately focused their energies and blog posts on the lecture as opposed to the novel.

The good news is that students came in with a much better level of preparation when it came time to read the second longer book. The lesson I learned is that ideally, the variability of expectations across weeks needs to be explicitly stated in the syllabus.

4. Blogging

What was once my weekly journaling assignment has now become a blog that students keep throughout the semester reflecting on the readings and lecture content. In transforming the format to a public, readily available format, students were able to see each other's thinking about the materials and learn together. At this juncture in development of online learning technologies, both students and teachers are likely to be relatively new to the format; as such, setting clear expectations and providing students with a rubric at the beginning of the semester is invaluable. Each week in addition to their own posting, they were required to respond to one classmate. Often that meant that they would read more than one of their classmate’s blogs, and in a few cases, their friends from outside the class commented on their postings.

Blog posts can also provide a handy start to face-to-face discussion sections. As a side note, it is worth considering the ethics of requiring students to post publicly or privately. While I offered students the option of restricting access to their blogs or using a pseudonym, I did not strongly caution them against making their blog public. I want them to know that I believe that their ideas are valuable and important and empower them to make their own decisions.

5. Evaluation

A word on evaluating students: My old policy was that I only discussed grades with students in person in my office hours. That seemed untenable in a course were students are expected to log serious quality learning hours online. So, I made the mistake of using the default settings on Canvas that allow students to track their grades in a way that encourages them to focus on points and percentages rather than the content and execution of their assignments. The result was an unprecedented number of grade queries throughout the semester, and a much higher proportion of students who said that they were dissatisfied with their grades in their evaluations, even though grades were no lower than previous semesters.

While transparency is fundamental to student learning; this brand of transparency seems destructive. I encourage instructors planning a hybrid course, especially in the humanities, to hold off on making available the minute details of your grade book. Instead, offer students rubrics and qualitative feedback, speedy responses to their emails and unsolicited comments on their blogs.