During the pilot J-term, I taught a hybrid course—an experiment within the experiment.

The J-term format:

• My students and I enjoyed the chance to concentrate on a single course, free from most of the multitasking that is the norm during regular semesters.

• Given that classes would meet for just two weeks, I chose a topic (the *Godfather* films) familiar to most students, so that we might readily focus on new concepts and their application to the familiar raw material. This turned out to be a productive choice.

• The calendar complicates things, because support staff are on vacation in the run-up to J-term; and then a snowstorm closed the College upon their return to work.

• Athletics complicates things, because the winter sports schedule of practices and competitions is intensive. There was no separation of academic and athletics schedules in J-term. Perhaps a time slot reserved for courses would be mutually advantageous.

• I wonder if a brief, intensive format suits some topics and disciplines better than others. I suggest experimentation with courses from all divisions of the College.

My hybrid course:

• The seminar had excellent enrollments (18 registered, then 1 was blocked by a “hold” and 2 withdrew); a few too many. Twelve would have been optimal.

• Preparation of online instructional materials (multimedia lessons) required much time and a willingness to learn new softwares (Adobe Premiere Pro, Camtasia, WebEx). ITS Director Suzanne Aber kindly provided access to softwares; ET Director Jason Jones provided generous, flexible guidance and help.

• My students and I enjoyed the mix of instructional formats (8 traditional seminar hours, 12 multimedia online lessons, asynchronous Moodle forums based on questions from the multimedia lessons, and 4 synchronous online WebEx classes). Each type of instruction and interaction was valuable in its own right, and the whole was greater than the sum of the parts, thanks to synergies, complementarities, variety, and the overall sense of adventure.

• Because my multimedia lessons were available online, I was able to devote the traditional classroom hours and WebEx classes entirely to a rotation of seminar presentations. I worked closely during office hours and by email and skype with students to help them prepare their presentations. The traditional classes ranged from very good to outstanding, partly because I was able “to let go,” knowing that
my ideas were available in the online materials, and that the students were well prepared to conduct the seminar meetings themselves. Presentations ranged from solid to strong and stimulated broad discussion with many fresh insights.

- The asynchronous Moodle posts were generally thoughtful, often polished paragraph responses. They added another dimension to discussion, because the thoughts were more “digested” than can occur in spontaneous seminar discussion. In fact, I learned much from the students’ posts, which were full of fresh insights.

- The WebEx software for synchronous online classes is first-rate. It allows integration of clips, slides, weblinks, and access to materials on one’s desktop. Students figured it out quickly. It can be accessed by computer or smartphone. The formal presentations by WebEx were on a par with those in the traditional classes, and the discussion was fairly broad, especially given the tight time frame (half-hour sessions). I would experiment with 50-minute sessions or even longer in future hybrid courses.

- The online part of the course was audited by former Trinity Trustee and internet entrepreneur Donald McLagan.

- The online part of the course and one week of traditional classes were audited by a high-school student from School of the Woods in Houston, TX, Anna Defrancesco, who is writing her senior thesis about the mafia. Somehow Ms. Defrancesco found me and my hybrid course and asked me to be her external advisor for her senior thesis. She devoted her intersemester break to a trip to Connecticut to audit the second week of the course. And now she has applied to Trinity for college.

- The hybrid format of my course cannot be assessed as a controlled experiment by comparison with my regular courses, because my hybrid course involved three changes that cannot be isolated from one another: J-term format, hybrid format, new subject matter. Moreover, a controlled experiment would require a protocol for comparing learning outcomes between the experiment and the control. In a humanities course on this subject matter, the instructor’s assessment and the students’ evaluations might be the best ways to assess learning outcomes. In my judgment, the learning outcomes in my hybrid course were better than what they would have been had I produced the course in traditional format. The students’ course evaluations have the same general thrust in favor of the hybrid format.

- An alternative counterfactual (rather than a traditional course) would be a “flipped” course, in which all instruction is delivered online and the traditional contact hours in the brick-and-mortar classroom are fully preserved for presentations and discussions by students. My intuition is that a fully flipped course would amount to much more than the baseline course load for instructor and students alike.

- I suggest that Trinity broaden and diversify its experimentation with hybrid and online courses, in all semesters and divisions of the College. Trinity should experiment with hybrid formats, with fully “flipped” (double) formats, and—at least in the summer semester when most students are away from campus—with fully online courses.

- A proper program of experimentation will require investment and institutional support.