

Technology

Hybrid Courses: An Emerging Phenomenon

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While distance education programs have exploded in recent years, a new trend has emerged in the field: "hybrid" or "blended" courses. Hybrid courses are those in which a significant portion of the learning activities have been moved online, and time traditionally spent in the classroom is reduced but not eliminated. These courses are distinguished from online courses that are taught in large part over the Internet and may have very few if any face-to-face meetings. Web enhanced classes should not be confused with hybrid courses. Web enhanced courses may have a website or even a text online, but students in web enhanced courses meet in the traditional face-to-face classroom for the traditional number of hours for that course.

As educators, we are to some degree polarized in our preferences and teaching strategies between best practices online and the traditional methods we use in physical classrooms. Online and on-campus teaching have, paradoxically, come to be perceived as divergent methodology, even though the goal of student learning is common to both (Sands, 2002).

The goal of hybrid courses is to join the best features of in-class teaching with the best features of online learning to promote active independent learning and reduce class seat time. Using computer-based technologies, instructors employ the hybrid model to redesign some lecture or lab content into new online learning activities, such as case studies, tutorials, self-testing exercises, simulations, and online group collaborations.

This model can appeal to a wide range of instructors, even those who are critical of online learning, and it can be used to improve a variety of courses. For one thing, faculty are more accepting of hybrid courses because they do not eliminate face-to-face sessions, which many consider an essential ingredient of the learning process. Many hybrid course supporters argue that instruction via live lecture does not suit all students. For example, online courses might encourage shy students to participate and help students by means of using varied learning approaches.

Some universities have used the hybrid model to solve classroom space shortages,

to improve communication between students and instructors in large classes, and to address students' needs for computer and technology literacy (Young, 2002).

Online Teaching and Learning

Distance learning has shown substantial and dramatic growth in the past decade. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that during 1994–95 some 33% of colleges and universities were offering distance courses, with another 25% planning to begin within 3 years (NCES, October 1997). In another study conducted in 2000–01, NCES learned that 56% of institutions were offering distance education courses and 12% were planning to begin (NCES, July 2003). Additionally, according to these two reports, the number of institutions responding that there were no plans to offer distance learning opportunities decreased from 42% to 31%.

Further comparison of the two reports also shows extensive growth in number of students and number of courses offered. According to the data, 753,640 students were enrolled in distance courses in 1994–95, while enrollment jumped to 3,077,000 for the 2000–01 academic year. During the 1999–2000 academic year, 8% of undergraduate and 10% of graduate students were participating in distance education.

Preliminary research at the University of Central Florida indicates that when comparing hybrid instruction to face-to-face or web-based courses, hybrid courses achieved a student success rate of 87.9%, compared to 83.5% and 82.9% for face-to-face and web courses, respectively (Sorg, Juge, & Bledsoe, 2000).

Why "Hybridity"?

According to Young (2002), hybrid courses, and hybrid degree programs, promise the best of both worlds, offering some of the conveniences inherent in all-online courses without the complete loss of face-to-face contact. Since the origin of online courses, some students living on campus have chosen them, citing their convenience. Many administrators initially tried to discourage

such students from taking online courses, but they are now warming to the idea.

Hybrid models appear to be less controversial among faculty members than fully online courses have been, though some faculty members are concerned about any move away from an educational system that has worked for generations. These courses offer a number of advantages over face-to-face teaching and totally online courses. Instructors have reported that the hybrid course model allows them to accomplish course learning objectives more successfully than traditional courses do. Many faculty note an increased interaction and contact among their students and between the students and themselves.

Instructor Positives

Voos (2003) and Young (2002) maintain that the best thing about conducting classes in two separate spaces is that the instructors choose the division of learning activities based on their own experience of how they teach best in each type of classroom. It is clear that instructors are more comfortable and effective employing the teaching techniques that come naturally to them. Using an online course as an extension of the classroom allows them to apply their most effective traditional classroom methods in the physical classroom, while using the online portion of their courses to gain advantages offered by an asynchronous space. Blending online best practices with face-to-face techniques assures instructors access to a range of teaching strategies they would not have in online or traditional settings alone.

Student Positives

Many students select online courses because of the time flexibility and convenience afforded by an asynchronous environment. Occasionally students living on campus take online courses because it accommodates their schedules; perhaps the on-campus course occurs concurrently with another course they need to take, or perhaps the on-campus course is scheduled when the student needs to work or has other conflicts.

A less obvious advantage of hybrid

courses to students is that when instructors have access to the full range of instructional strategies offered by online and traditional environments, student learning will be enhanced. In short, students have more opportunities for success! Some universities are beginning to require students to learn online for at least a portion of their academic career, due to the growing prevalence of online training required in the workplace (Young, 2002).

Institutional Positives

A primary reason for the growing number of hybrid courses is an institution's need for space efficacy. Investing in virtual infrastructure is, over time, much less expensive than building physical classrooms. Not having to build and maintain buildings, or even distribute paper collateral, delivers an overall cost savings.

Keys to Developing Successful Hybrid Courses

To teach a successful hybrid course, an instructor must invest significant time and effort in redesigning a traditional course (Aycock, Garnham, & Kaleta, 2002). Because class seat time is reduced and a significant part of learning is moved online, instructors must reexamine their course goals and objectives, design online learning activities to meet those goals and objectives, and effectively integrate the online activities with the face-to-face meetings. In addition, many faculty must acquire new teaching skills such as learning to facilitate online interactions and assess student online learning; they may also need to acquire some new technology skills.

Sands (2002) identified 5 simple principles that may help teachers connect their work online with face-to-face teaching:

1. Start small and work backward from your final goals. This is a basic precept of course planning: what do students want to be able to do at the end of the semester? When planning major integration of digital communications between technologies to a course, careful attention to learning objectives assumes a greater level of attention to learning objectives, helping teachers avoid a counterproductive focus on the technologies themselves.

2. Imagine interactivity rather than delivery. While information transfer may be more effective online, simply putting materials up on the web will not guarantee that students will engage with and learn more from them.

For that, you need activities that require students to perform basic academic tasks, such as summary and analysis, and tasks that place them in conversation with each other.

3. Prepare yourself for loss of power and an uneven distribution of demands on your time throughout the week. Once seat time is reduced and everyone is online but not in the same room, opportunities to monitor and manage interactions move from the geographic space of the classroom to the temporal space of whatever unit of time intervenes between classroom meetings.

4. Be explicit about time-management issues and be prepared to teach new skills. Students who have spent their academic careers in traditional classroom settings will have to learn new skills to cope with the distribution of requirements over time.

5. Plan for effective uses of classroom time that connect with the online work. Hybridity requires skill in bringing dissimilar elements together to perform the same functions and achieve a shared result.

What many are now calling low-threshold applications, such as email and word processing, are pretty well integrated in students' lives. Conversely, many students who claim significant computer literacy really only have experience with email, chat, and web surfing, but not necessarily with the full complement of applications.

Conclusion

Hybrid courses are gaining in popularity in various disciplines. Examples of hybrid courses conducted in physical education range from physical activity settings in colleges such as Los Angeles City College, where Adapted Swimming Instructor, Coaching Competitive Swimming, and Water Aerobics Instructor courses may be taken through this means, and Tacoma Community College, where students can enroll in hybrid courses such as Total Fitness, to Mt. San Jacinto College's Menifee Campus, where students can enroll in hybrid classes such as First Aid and Sport Psychology.

Los Angeles City College is integrating new technology, trends, and teaching techniques into online distance education classes that are a hybrid of on-campus and online offerings. Foundations of Health & Physical Education may be taken as a hybrid course at Kingsborough Community College in New York. It is anticipated that the list of activity and theory courses being delivered through this means will grow dramatically in the very near future.

The literature about hybrid, or blended, courses is full of examples from all disciplines, at all levels across the spectrum of education, and with a wide variation in technologies used and in face-to-face meeting time. Blended learning courses can replace synchronous class seat time with asynchronous online learning activities so that instruction occurs both in the classroom and online. Given the fluidity of the technologies and the nearly infinite ways that technology is applied and courses are organized in higher education, the presence of both conditions distinguishes blended from wholly online classroom programs and courses.

The hybrid course arrangement creates new opportunities. The blended learning model allows existing course resources to be redesigned rather than completely reinvented. This process can be very effective in terms of cost and human capital, and is an effective means of creating and managing learning environments.

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