

HyFlex Experiences and Perspectives: A Teaching Modality for the Present and the Future

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In March of 2020, higher education institutions across the U.S. were blindsided by a sudden need to shift to modified class delivery formats due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, with many institutions abruptly shifting to a completely online format to finish the Spring 2020 semester. As time progressed into the next academic year and ways of mitigating the effects of the pandemic became better understood, many institutions opted to have at least some instruction in person, with health protocols such as mask-wearing and social distancing in place. One key teaching modality that has come to the forefront through this challenging time is referred to as Hybrid-Flexible (HyFlex), in which

students are typically given full control over their decisions to participate online or in the classroom. This provides them with the ability to make participation choices based on convenience, learning progress, social interaction preferences, or other factors important to them at the time. Faculty, on the other hand, do not have choices about participation mode, since they have to provide both an online and a classroom experience supporting student learning. This bi-modal approach with student freedom to choose mode is an essential (and perhaps defining) character of a HyFlex design. (Beatty, 2019, sec. 2.1)

In brief, HyFlex requires the instructor to primarily remain face-to-face (F2F) in teaching but offers learners the flexibility of attending class either F2F or online (synchronously or asynchronously). According to data on how higher education institutions are responding to the Covid-19 pandemic provided by the College Crisis Initiative at Davidson College (C2i), over one-fifth of national four-year institutions adopted the Hybrid/HyFlex class delivery mode, with

approximately 22% (320 out of 1,442) in Fall 2020 and 20% (293 out of 1448) in Spring 2021; Most of the remaining institutions were either primarily/fully F2F or primarily/fully online (Marsicano & Petty, 2020). It should be pointed out that the primarily F2F modality often demonstrates the characteristics of HyFlex described above. The C2i's data analytics give a quantitative character to the importance of HyFlex and show that it is being consistently utilized as a viable teaching modality across four-year institutions. Fast-forwarding to the imminent start of the Fall 2021 semester, numerous institutions are pushing to "return to normal" (meaning a return to primarily F2F classes with no social distancing) or as close to it as possible, against the concerning backdrop of increasing Covid-19 cases due to the prevalence of new variants (Gluckman & Diep, 2021). In this unpredictable environment, HyFlex is still playing a central role in many higher education institutions due to its adaptable characteristics and learner-centered educational strategy (Huang et al., 2020, p.2), regardless of how it is named by different institutions. In the remainder of this article, we share our reflections on HyFlex teaching experiences (those of the main author) and instructional design ideas and perspectives (those of both authors), as university instructors.

After being fully online for the remainder of the semester in Spring 2020, my teaching transitioned to the HyFlex modality in Fall 2020. To follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's guidelines on social distancing, some instructors (including myself) at my university were required to divide regular-size classes into smaller subsections due to classroom space limitations. Sub-sectioned students were able to take their F2F classes in turn following an assigned schedule. Students who were not able to physically attend their scheduled F2F classes were encouraged to join the class synchronously via Zoom (a video conferencing tool). Classes were also recorded for students to review or catch up with the content. Masks were required

inside university facilities. Overall, student feedback showed they felt well supported by the HyFlex learning environment.

As the national vaccination plan is progressing, many institutions including some in the University System of Georgia (USG) have announced their return-to-normal plan this fall (*Coronavirus Disease 2019 Updates for USG, 2021*). However, due to waves of Covid-19 surges (e.g., the recent Delta variant might affect young adults more) (Rabin, 2021), lack of campus mask mandates and social distancing, and low vaccination rates in some areas (Thomason & O’Leary, 2021), it is expected that some students will miss F2F classes due to Covid-19 quarantine or related absences. Although many universities have been striving to resume a “normal” F2F learning environment for students, the above factors have the potential to make teaching and learning experiences different from normal. Instructors will continue to face the challenge of accommodating students’ various learning needs, and the HyFlex teaching modality seems to again be a major pedagogical option for the fall and even future semesters. The benefits of adopting HyFlex teaching are obvious. First, many classrooms have been equipped with the devices and tools necessary for both synchronous/asynchronous online and F2F classes, and this makes it convenient for instructors to establish a HyFlex environment. Second, after a full year of practice and development, both instructors and students are familiar with HyFlex techniques and can make flexible transitions among different teaching and learning modes as needed. The most important advantage of a HyFlex environment is that it is learner-centered, personalized, and can maximize student learning opportunities in an uncertain situation like this fall.

However, instructors need to be aware of some of the drawbacks of the HyFlex teaching modality and plan to minimize the negative effects. As a learner-centered environment, it aims for keeping “all students engaged” in learning (*Hybrid-Flexible (or HyFlex) Implementation*

Guide, 2020, sec. 4), and therefore, requires extra effort from the instructor in instructional design and class management. For example, to facilitate in-class group activities involving both F2F and online students, the instructor might need to coordinate complex technology settings, such as adjusting the camera/screen angle back and forth for different groups of students and juggling between text and verbal responses. Some instructors are fortunate enough to receive extra-institutional support such as teaching assistants or funding. Another practical solution worth considering is to reduce the portion of synchronous online instruction and substitute it with asynchronous online instruction to ease the complexity of hybrid classroom teaching. However, asynchronous online instruction could add more work to the instructor in engaging students via discussion boards and other collaborative tools provided through the university learning management system (Maloney & Kim, 2020). In my case, an additional task to work on is to revise the course again from its Spring 2021 sub-sectioned HyFlex form to the regular (non-sub-sectioned) HyFlex form for the Fall 2021 semester. For example, in a sub-sectioned HyFlex class, students who were not scheduled to attend their F2F classes were asked to study online asynchronously and thus needed more detailed lecture notes to guide them through the learning process. By contrast, in a regular HyFlex class this fall, students will be asked to take a class in person if possible and will have more direct interactions with me in class. To adapt to this change, I need to modify some of the lecture notes and in-class activity designs.

HyFlex should be considered as an ongoing trend in teaching and learning. Even after this pandemic, it can still be useful in various academic settings. Higher education institutions can continue to adopt HyFlex to accommodate students' various learning needs and maximize their access to equal learning opportunities. In doing this, they should ensure that instructional support for and training on HyFlex teaching and learning are implemented for both instructors

and students. If introducing HyFlex to K-12 educational settings, careful planning should be done to consider children's unique developmental needs that differ from adults. Conferences and other scholarly events can also benefit from HyFlex collaborations, especially given that many of them have successfully applied such an approach during the pandemic. There is still much to learn. However, as globalization continues and more frequent disruptive incidents such as this pandemic could occur in the future, we need a flexible and efficient approach to adapt to the resulting challenges posed to teaching, learning, and collaborating. The HyFlex modality has the potential to take on a crucial role in this context as a continuously evolving technological/pedagogical tool that can better fulfill the diverse needs of those who use it.

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