

Hybrid Classes: Maximizing Institutional Resources and Student Learning

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“Hybrid instruction is the single greatest unrecognized trend in higher education today.”—Graham Spanier, President of Penn State University

Introduction

Recently, the North Carolina Community College System office released a memorandum to all the Chief Academic Officers and Distance Learning Coordinators of the state’s community colleges announcing the System’s new emphasis on Hybrid course instruction. This official statement of direction recognizes and validates the steadily increasing trend, both within the state and across the country, of integrating/adding hybrid, or blended, instructional delivery into traditional and Internet course offerings. The integration of Hybrid course instruction will benefit both the institution and the students. Institutions will be able to maximize their available physical resources, and students will be able to maximize their learning potential.

Hybrid classes are commonly defined as courses “in which a significant portion of the learning activities have been moved online,” a combination of traditional classroom and Internet instruction (Garnham and Kaleta). Instructional time traditionally spent in the classroom is reduced and replaced with online learning activities. The ultimate goal of hybrid instruction is to combine the most effective instructional aspects of the traditional classroom with the most effective instructional aspects of the virtual classroom “to promote active independent learning and reduce class seat time” (Garnham and Kaleta). Using available computer-centered technologies, instructors use the hybrid model to redesign some course content into new online learning activities, such as discussion forums, case studies, tutorials, self-testing exercises, simulations, and online group collaborations.

Maximizing Physical Resources

At the present time, record student enrollment growth and budgetary constraints are challenging institutions to effectively serve their students. With enrollment projected to continue to increase and with little hope for an improved economic climate, many institutions are facing a crisis situation. Classroom space, especially computer lab access, is at a premium. Simply put, institutions have insufficient physical resources to meet the needs of their expanding student bodies, and with the current state budget projections significant help from state government will not be forthcoming. Institutions must, therefore, look within for remedies.

While not a panacea, hybrid courses will allow institutions to maximize their available resources to meet the educational and institutional needs of their students. On a resource level, hybrid instruction reduces overcrowded classrooms. Specifically, two classes can operate in one physical space. For instance, if two classes traditionally meet two days a week, say Monday and Wednesday from 9:00-11:00, converting these classes to hybrids will allow each one to occupy the traditional classroom one day a week, one on Monday and one on Wednesday, and to hold the other class period on the Internet. This ability to operate multiple classes in one physical space is especially important when computer labs are involved. Even more than traditional classroom space, available computer lab space is in short supply. The technology-heavy environments of the academic and professional worlds demand computer literacy from our students. Hybrid instruction offers students the opportunity to gain that essential experience, both in the computer-equipped classroom and in the completion of Internet assignments and activities. Additionally, hybrids allow institutions to offer more classes at peak demand times of the day, thus maximizing the scant available resources by increasing flexibility in scheduling. According to Ron Bleed, Vice Chancellor of Information Technologies at Maricopa Community College, hybrid course offerings “may also be the only way colleges and universities can keep up with the continuing population growth and the demands for lifelong learning” (qtd. Young). On a pure cost level, hybrids reduce paper and photocopying costs. In hybrid courses, all course documents, including syllabi, lecture notes, assignment sheets, and other hard copy handouts, are easily accessible to students on the course web site.

Institutional costs decrease as students become familiar with the vast resources available on the web; institutions will be able to effectively communicate with their students electronically, thus reducing the needed number of printed schedules, bulletins, advertisements, and so on.

Furthermore, faculty compensation and professional development funds have been among the early casualties in the budget wars. Unfortunately, developing online course material is time consuming. While “faculty workload and compensation policies that take into account the effort required by distance courses can encourage faculty participation and improve the quality of instruction,” the lack of such compensation discourages an already overworked faculty from participation (“Compensating” 7). Hybrid course development can serve as a way for interested faculty to ease into distance learning formats without the burden of developing an entire course online. At Guilford Technical Community College, faculty began “with a web-supplemented site [syllabi, grades, announcements] and then add[ed] materials to develop a hybrid class...” (Cerniglia 2). This “graduated approach to course development” produced an addition benefit: “Over two semesters, materials were added, tested, and refined, resulting in higher-quality materials than might have been developed in one semester without student feedback” (3). In this way, the institution maximizes the expertise of its faculty without incurring professional development costs. Even in the midst of a budget crisis, colleges still embrace the same mission: To educate its students. In fact, state budget problems only mirror a dire larger economic picture, illustrated by rising unemployment figures. When workers find themselves out of a job and with bleak prospects for employment, they turn to the colleges for reeducation and retraining. So, the colleges face a double impact on their resources: record enrollment growth colliding with budget cuts. The integration of hybrid instruction into the college’s offerings will not solve the problem. However, hybrid instruction will allow institutions to maximize their available resources to meet their students’ educational needs.

Maximizing Student Learning

In addition to institutional benefits, hybrid instructional delivery of classes will enhance student learning in a variety of ways. Online instruction, like traditional classroom instruction, has strengths and weaknesses. However, combining the strengths of both models can lead to a highly effective delivery of instructional materials. The old fear in distance learning of pale students huddled over their computers, learning in isolation and deprived of human contact has been proven groundless. Today's students are comfortable with electronic communication and view their online activities as integral to their learning experience. The benefits to the students of hybrid instruction are manifold.

First, student participation in all aspects of the learning experience is increased in a hybrid format. Faculty who have used the hybrid model report an increased interaction of students with their fellow classmates and with the course instructor (“Hybrid”). Some students are reluctant to participate in traditional classroom discussions or direct questions to the instructor. The hybrid environment offers a less-intimidating forum for student participation. In a hybrid format, “some students who rarely take part in classroom discussions are more likely to participate online, where they get time to think before they type and aren't put on the spot” (Young). On Discussion Boards, students can freely interact with their classmates, posting paragraphs and responses and asking questions. Often, these online discussions achieve the back and forth conversational quality desired in traditional classroom discussions. Students are able to offer their classmates information, encouragement, and support. In particular, introverted students and English as second language students participate fully in the learning activities. The inclusiveness of all students leads to a richer and more diverse learning experience than the traditional classroom model. Interaction with the instructor is also increased, thus enhancing learning. Students are more likely to e-mail a question than to raise a hand in class. Research indicates that students “are more motivated [to succeed] if they are in frequent contact with the instructor” (“Guide #9”). An additional benefit of this form of communication is that the student can ask a detailed question and the instruc-

tor can respond with an appropriately detailed answer, free from the situational constraints that limit one on one communication in a traditional classroom. In a hybrid format, students are highly engaged in the course progress, both with their classmates and with their instructor. Students so engaged are less likely to withdraw from the course and more likely to seek help if difficulties arrive, either from classmates or instructor.

Another benefit is flexibility. With jobs (sometimes multiple), families, and other classes, today's students often have crushing constraints on their available time. Commuting time to campus only increases the burden. Hybrid classes will alleviate a portion of the time wasted commuting. Scheduling of classes also becomes less of a nightmare. Classes with lab components can take up an enormous amount of time, leaving less available space for additional classes. Hybrids will give students more options to develop manageable schedules.

Another benefit for students is the development of and emphasis on so-called "soft skills," necessary for successful completion of any course with a substantial online component. These skills are highly desired by today's employers. To succeed in hybrid classes, students will necessarily develop or enhance time management skills crucial to academic and professional success. Hybrids require students to meet specific deadlines for posting work to the Discussion Forums or submitting work to the instructor. Critical thinking skills and problem-solving skills are also emphasized. The text-based format of the courses enhances comprehension skills. Additionally, hybrids increase computer skills, another highly valued trait in the modern workforce, regardless of the profession. Hybrids train students in a variety of computer skills, including file management, e-mail use, and web site navigation, that will prove valuable in the workplace.

Hybrid courses, in effect, are writing-intensive courses. According to Peter Sands, "[b]ecause of the highly text-based nature of websites and e-mail, hybrid courses become de-facto writing-intensive courses when

teachers work carefully to integrate the online and classroom components.” Discussion Forum postings and responses and e-mail communication with classmates and the instructor all provide students with ample opportunities to hone their written communication skills. The format of the course also reinforces to students the importance of writing skills, regardless of the course. This understanding will then continue in the workplace. One constant complaint of today’s employers, regardless of the field, is the inability of their workers to construct effective written communication, particularly problematic in our text-driven work environment. Hybrids require students to produce coherent and effective writing. This skill inevitably leads to increased opportunities for academic and professional success. Furthermore, in contrast to traditional classroom writing activities, hybrids can realistically reflect the “real-world” writing conditions, including collaboration. Successful hybrids incorporate collaborative activities. Rachel Spilka, at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, realized that in traditional classroom assignments she “wasn’t able to simulate writing situations in workplace settings, or to expose students to the complexities of workplace writing.” Using a hybrid format, she developed assignments where students have “produced much more thoughtful, tactful, and sensitive memos, letters, and reports than have students in [her] traditional, face-to-face classes.” In collaborative activities with their hybrid classmates, her students “improved their skills and displayed such qualities as good judgment, tactfulness, empathy, patience under difficult circumstances, and the ability to negotiate. All of these qualities they will have to demonstrate when they work and write in workplace settings” (Spilka). Students in hybrids quickly discover that they are not learning in isolation; instead, they are members of a learning community, dependent on and responsible for their classmates. This learning environment more closely resembles the work place than the traditional classroom.

Hybrid classes address a variety of learning styles by offering instructional materials in a wide range of formats. As a result, every student in the course is fully engaged in at least some class activities (Young). For

instance, auditory learners benefit from traditional classroom instruction as well as online audio files. Visual learners benefit from a consistent and structured layout as well as graphics. Tactile learners benefit from “hands-on” computer use and navigation. With an appropriate organization of assignments, “teachers can have students engaged in doing, rather than just experiencing or reading” (Sands). These examples are just a sampling of benefits to diverse learners. Additionally, students have greater access to course materials and therefore are more fully engaged in a hybrid than a traditional course. They can view and review prerecorded lectures and access course notes and other materials such as course syllabus, assignment schedule, task sheets, grades, and so on. This easy accessibility of course resources serves to promote a positive learning environment for all learners.

The combination of online and traditional classroom instruction fosters a more objective-focused and more time-efficient course than the traditional classroom-only model. At the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, “instructors reported that the hybrid course model allows them to accomplish course-learning objectives more successfully than traditional courses do” (“Hybrid”). Hybrid course development requires careful scheduling of assignments, and the creation of effective distance learning components demands a “focused preparation” of course material (“Guide #2”). Therefore, instructors come to reevaluate how their course materials and instructional strategies achieve course competencies and objectives. Students then more clearly see the connections between the assignments and the objectives, making the course more purposeful for them. Furthermore, hybrids encourage integration of out-of-class activities with in-class activities to allow for more effective use of traditional class time. Students use the online component to generate material for in-class time, thus avoiding wasting valuable class time spent on learning activities students could very well do in front of their home computers.

The Research

To date, two institutions, University of Central Florida and University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, have conducted comprehensive examinations of hybrid course effectiveness. Faculty participants in hybrid course instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee “almost universally report their students learned more in the Hybrid format than they did in the traditional class sections” (“Hybrid”). In fact, instructors stated that hybrid-enrolled “students wrote better papers, performed better on exams, produced higher quality projects, and were capable of more meaningful discussions on course material” (Garnham and Kaleta). Data from the University of Central Florida indicates, “students in hybrid courses achieve better grades than students in traditional face-to-face courses or totally online courses” (Garnham and Kaleta). Furthermore, hybrid courses have lower withdrawal rates than do fully online courses, and student retention in hybrids is “equivalent” to that of traditional courses (Garnham and Kaleta).

Certainly, Hybrid course integration will not solve the complex budgetary and enrollment growth issues facing state governments and colleges and universities. However, hybrids do offer an alternative, innovative, and effective strategy for providing needed educational opportunities and avoiding cutting services. Furthermore, hybrids should not be viewed as a stopgap method for meeting student demand and offsetting budgetary constraints. Instead, hybrids should be embraced as an instructional delivery system that benefits both the educational institution and the student population it serves.

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