The HyFlex Course Model

Scenario

As a person who has had a migraine disorder ever since a car crash in her teens, Barbara needs some latitude in academic settings. Because the frequency and severity of her symptoms are irregular, she isn't able to consistently attend class sessions or schedule time for studying. When a migraine strikes, it can sap her for hours or even days before it subsides. As an undergraduate in sociology, she sometimes struggled. Her condition caused her to miss classes from time to time, and other times she attended class with mild symptoms, only to discover later that her notes were unclear and her memory jumbled. Still, she persevered and is pursuing a master's degree in criminal justice. The program she chose attracted her in large part because it provides all of its courses in the HyFlex model. In that model, every class session and learning activity is offered in a classroom on campus and synchronously online, and each class is also recorded so that students can participate asynchronously as well.

For every class session, Barbara can decide whether to go to the classroom or participate online from her apartment. An important aspect of the HyFlex design is that remote students fully participate—they are expected to contribute to discussions, activities, and assignments in the same manner as the face-to-face students, and the resources and tools of the course are set up to enable this kind of equitable participation. If she is unable to attend a class during its scheduled time, Barbara can access the session asynchronously. This format includes features and supports that allow students to fully engage in the learning experience. Although Barbara attends most class sessions synchronously, either on campus or online, she finds the asynchronous option to be a valuable way to review difficult material from a class she did attend. And it's a lifesaver when she is forced to miss a scheduled class entirely. Other students similarly benefit from the flexibility that the HyFlex model provides, and the program has expanded outreach and enrollment to distant students who never set foot on campus. When one of her instructors was called away from campus for nearly a month for a family emergency, that faculty member was able to teach online, even as some students still met on campus and others joined online, allowing the course to proceed without interruption to the end of the term.

1 What is it?

The hybrid flexible, or HyFlex, course format is an instructional approach that combines face-to-face (F2F) and online learning. Each class session and learning activity is offered in-person, synchronously online, and asynchronously online. Students can decide—for each class or activity—how to participate. As Brian Beatty notes in *Hybrid-Flexible Course Design*, the result is "a student-directed, multi-modal learning experience." The HyFlex approach provides students autonomy, flexibility, and seamless engagement, no matter where, how, or when they engage in the course. Central to this model is the principle that the learning is equivalent, regardless of the mode. The approach was developed with a focus on student flexibility, but the benefits also extend to faculty. For example, an instructor, along with some students, could "attend" class remotely, while other students join physically from a room on campus.

2 How does it work?

The HyFlex approach requires faculty to reconceptualize the learning experience and rethink how students engage with the instructor, content, and peers. The instructor develops the course, tools, and channels and organizes the curriculum to reflect that structure. All participants—irrespective of how they choose to join—must have equitable access to the learning resources, the instructor, and one another. Effective use of classroom strategies and/or technology is vital so that all participants can hear verbal interactions. All of the educational resources must be online, and students typically participate in a chat space along with the live video of the session. Participants need persistent access to the chat, which might require a separate screen in the physical classroom or a fixed URL for the chat stream. Sometimes a teaching assistant or a student in the class helps moderate the chat or other backchannels. Some students will need guidance about the HyFlex approach, including course protocols, technologies needed, supports required, and choosing how to best engage. Instructors and students often must adjust their habits to ensure that online participants are included in discussions and other activities. A key differentiator of HyFlex is the asynchronous option, which often requires significant

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faculty preparation to be equivalent to the other learning paths. Simply streaming all F2F classes, for instance, does not meet the definition of HyFlex. At many institutions, the response to COVID-19 has included course modifications that reflect some of the principles of HyFlex, though in most cases, "emergency remote teaching" fails to provide the range of flexibility that HyFlex can offer.

3 Who's doing it?

Since it was developed at San Francisco State University, the HyFlex model has been adopted at institutions around the world. Cambrian College in Ontario offers HyFlex courses for graduate programs in business analytics, crime analytics, and community and health services navigation. The University of Michigan offers courses including a statistics course in the HyFlex format. Delgado Community College in New Orleans has been working to incorporate HyFlex into its curriculum.

4 Why is it significant?

Normal operations on college and university campuses can be threatened by the effects of climate change, natural disasters (including hurricanes, wildfires, and earthquakes), health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and other disruptions. Instructors using HyFlex could maintain instructional continuity during such disturbances. When campuses reopen, they can face a range of uncertainties surrounding health and safety, financial concerns, and travel issues, among others. The flexibility of the HyFlex model could enable institutions to maintain educational and research activities—including for students with disabilities—as the circumstances of a given disruption unfold. Different learning modalities work better or worse for students depending on disability, proximity to campus, work and family commitments, and other factors. By providing multiple pathways for students to access and participate in learning, HyFlex can support a diverse student community.

5 What are the downsides?

HyFlex courses can be deceptively difficult to do well. The technology and the curriculum must align, and the technology needs to work consistently for everyone, which requires testing and possibly new installations or upgrades. The learning must be equivalent for all students, guaranteeing that no student is at a disadvantage due to the learning pathway chosen. Instructors must be comfortable and effective with asynchronous teaching; those who are not can easily underestimate the amount of effort and interaction necessary to engage with online students. Meanwhile, some faculty are uncomfortable teaching in a synchronous live-stream environment with a backchannel. Ensuring that all course material is accessible can be challenging and can require investments in video captions and other services. The logistics of a HyFlex course must work with the learning space where it is held, and the model is sometimes at odds with, for example, policies and practices that limit enrollment to the number of seats in a classroom, as well as with student privacy expectations if sessions are recorded. Modality bias—on the part of faculty, students, institutional leaders, and others—can compromise the effectiveness of HyFlex courses if the online mode is seen as inferior. HyFlex places more responsibility for learning on students, and some lack the skills, maturity, and self-motivation to succeed in such an environment.

6 Where is it going?

HyFlex can facilitate instructional continuity during campus closures, and it also demonstrates a commitment to student success. Students who take HyFlex courses might start to demand the model (or similar flexibility) for other courses. For these and other reasons, more institutions might start to support HyFlex as an optional course-delivery model. The HyFlex model can increase demand for courses, enabling larger numbers of distant students to enroll. Campuses that choose to offer HyFlex courses will need to invest in additional support and training for faculty, students, and teaching assistants. Meanwhile, renewed interest in the HyFlex model is giving rise to variations, such as one that allows students to attend in-person classes at satellite locations closer to home.

7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?

As Brian Beatty observed in a May 2020 blog post, "A well-designed HyFlex class, with effective alternative participation modes that all lead to the same learning outcomes, can provide meaningful learning opportunities for all students." By offering equitable access and experiences, HyFlex can reduce barriers to enrollment and enable more students to achieve their educational goals. Students who must work and/or take care of family can benefit from true HyFlex course designs because the asynchronous pathway can enable them to maintain progress toward their academic goals. The model requires students and faculty alike to rethink their approach to learning and teaching and the role that technology can play. Meanwhile, HyFlex might not be the best fit for lab classes, programs that require synchronous participation, or certain disciplines, such as theater or ceramics. As more institutions implement HyFlex courses, these and other questions will be explored and answered.