

Faculty Experiences of HyFlex: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: *Innovations in teaching and learning led to HyFlex, a new type of hybrid teaching modality that incorporates in-person learning options along with online learning (Beatty, 2019). In May and June 2022, faculty at a regional comprehensive university were invited to participate in in-depth interviews or open-ended surveys regarding their experiences teaching HyFlex. Based on six in-depth interviews and six open-ended survey responses, this study's three main findings related to themes of interaction, technological challenges, and increased workload. We conclude that teaching innovations like HyFlex can both enrich a faculty member's sense of self-efficacy and contribute to additional stressors of work responsibilities (Leijon & Lundgren, 2019; McNaughton et al., 2014; Malczyk, 2019). These challenges will need to be addressed by institutions and faculty.*

Keywords: HyFlex, qualitative, interaction, technological challenges, increased workload

BACKGROUND, PURPOSE, AND RATIONALE

Reflective faculty continually try to design their courses to improve student access and success. Innovations in teaching and learning led to HyFlex, a new type of hybrid teaching modality that incorporates in-person learning options along with online learning (Beatty, 2019). Depending on the institution and the faculty member, students can attend a course in-person, via online streaming at the same time as the in-person students, or they can complete the course without synchronous participation. While some faculty were early adopters of HyFlex prior to Spring 2020, many others were motivated by the COVID-19 pandemic to see the benefits in flexibility offered by the innovation. It remains to be seen to what extent faculty are satisfied with this course modality. This exploratory qualitative study seeks to better understand faculty experiences of HyFlex.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Because HyFlex as a mode of teaching is relatively new, research continues to emerge that addresses it. Among the studies that have been published, most focus on the ways HyFlex can increase student participation in courses where distance limits attendance, while many other studies offer insight on how to design and deploy HyFlex courses (Beatty, 2019). However, very little research focuses on faculty satisfaction with regard to HyFlex.

Faculty satisfaction has been recognized as an integral part of a healthy university (Freeman & Bruun, 2022). Freeman and Bruun argue that too much research focuses on a deficit model of student learning. They ask: if students are not learning or achieving at levels that are appropriate, what are they failing to do? What resources need to go to those students to help improve their learning and satisfaction? The authors note that might be the wrong question to ask because we cannot keep dumping resources at students and expecting different results if we do not also look at faculty and staff morale at an institution (Freeman & Bruun, 2022). Faculty morale is correlated heavily with observable student learning experiences (Kay & Pasarica, 2019). In fact, there is emerging literature that links student perceptions of the quality of faculty interaction with other faculty with their own overall levels of satisfaction (Hebert, 2022). This observation underscores the importance of the need for more research into the role of faculty satisfaction itself, especially as it relates to online teaching formats. Additionally, there are myriad underutilized communication-related variables that factor into how much students identify with their instructors and how much their satisfaction plays into the learning experience (Geier, 2021; Young & Bruce, 2020).

Faculty report that they pursued teaching because they enjoyed the interaction with students, and it helps to form their professional identity (Kirk, 2011). Kirk (2011) looked at the correlation between teacher communication styles and teacher satisfaction. Responsiveness from students was directly correlated with instructor satisfaction in his study. Faculty dissatisfaction, especially during 2020, increased because student responsiveness to faculty instruction was expressed in a different way than from before the pandemic, when the bulk of teaching at many universities was still on-site. Kurz et al. (2021) research documented the disappointment faculty at a research university felt during COVID. Faculty there were unfamiliar with online teaching modalities, so they taught their online classes in the exact same manner as they taught their in-person classes, expecting the same results with regard to student responsiveness (Kurz et al., 2021). In large part, we think that reflects Kirk's (2011) assertion that responsiveness is understudied. Our central research question, which framed this study, was: How did faculty experience HyFlex at a regional comprehensive university?

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research provides in-depth study of topics, and unlike quantitative research, its goal is not to provide generalizable findings. Instead, the goal is to explore topics and offer possible meanings (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In-depth interviews were selected for this study due to the method's ability to investigate a topic more thoroughly than closed-ended quantitative survey questions (Berger, 2020). Full-time faculty at a regional comprehensive university were invited via email on three different occasions in May and June 2022 to participate in a study on HyFlex teaching. Faculty could either participate via open-ended questions in a Qualtrics survey or they could volunteer to be contacted for a Webex interview conducted by the researchers. Of the 384 full-time and part-time faculty emailed, 12 responded and provided their insights on the topic; six participated via Qualtrics while the other six participated via Webex interviews. Survey respondents, after consenting to participate, were presented with 13 optional questions in Qualtrics. Though respondents did not need to answer each question, most did. Interviewees were asked the same questions from the Qualtrics survey in the same order. For a full list of interview and survey questions, see Appendix A.

During the six interviews, the researchers took notes on participant's answers to the open-ended questions and any other topics discussed. After interviews concluded, the researchers

reviewed the notes taken and watched the 215 minutes of recorded interviews at least twice. Qualtrics responses totaling over 20 pages were also reviewed several times alongside the interviews to compare themes. The researchers used emergent coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) to determine the main themes faculty shared regarding navigating HyFlex courses as instructors. Emergent coding entails a researcher being alert to patterns that present themselves after the data is collected rather than a priori coding in which the researcher creates categories in advance of data collection (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Repetition became an organizing feature of our analysis and the themes that were most often expressed comprise our findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The three main findings related to themes of interaction, technological challenges, and increased workload. All faculty respondents mentioned student interaction. Depending upon the faculty member's previous teaching modality (in-person or online), they either expressed disappointment or relief regarding the in-person potential of HyFlex courses. In other words, faculty who had high expectations for full in-person classes shared their dismay at students choosing to forego participation in-person. "It was demoralizing with no one coming to class and when there were only a few students, it was hard to maintain discussions" (C1). "I was disappointed they didn't want to come to class" (D1). Conversely, faculty who had been teaching online with little or no synchronous components expressed relief to be interacting with students in real time again. "Seeing one to three students changed my whole existence last fall from being wholly online during COVID" (A1).

This underlines the reason many faculty began teaching—being edified by the in-person interaction and exchange with students. When that aspect is absent, it confounds faculty and may lead them to question their identity as a teacher. When it is present, faculty very much feel validated (Kirk, 2011). "I get to be in the classroom and talk to humans. I like to be around students and I like to see that they are working together more in the classroom" (D1).

The second finding mentioned by all respondents was technological challenges. Faculty reported audio issues for their students joining via the online synchronous option. Despite university attempts to modify existing classrooms and provide additional technological equipment like OWLs and snowball microphones, faculty still struggled to interact effectively with online students. There was a difference in faculty interviewed who embraced the technological challenges and those who saw it as an impediment to their goals of connecting with students. Faculty who were very technologically savvy said that they purchased their own equipment including microphones and video recording software and enjoyed learning how to use it. "I love playing with toys" (F1 interviewee). Faculty who struggled with the limitations of technology found it frustrating and suggested the university provide more technological support for in-class meetings. "The technology interface sucks. There is no way to look at both sets of students [in-person and online]." (C1) "We need to update the furniture in the classroom" (D1). This aligns with previous research on the disorienting effects of videoconferencing in the classroom on teaching (McNaughton et al., 2014) and the challenges of integrating in-person students and online synchronous students (Leijon & Lundgren, 2019).

The increased workload experienced by faculty using HyFlex was another common theme that emerged. "It was a challenge to do online synchronous, face-to-face, and online asynchronous, to do all of these well. It was lots of work and I really thought it would be easier than it was" (B1). From designing the course for in-person and online students to managing the different groups of students and technology in real-time, faculty often felt overwhelmed. "The time it takes was

challenging. It is more work to check in with different groups of students. The learning curve is also a big hurdle for HyFlex” (F1). Lastly, faculty commented on managing the unpredictability of HyFlex: “It was like herding cats– I didn’t know who was going to participate and how” (E1). The increased workload that faculty face from using the HyFlex modality is unsurprising and has been documented by previous researchers (Malczyk, 2019). To maintain equity in workload, faculty and administrators should have frank conversations about course preparation, course delivery, and course caps.

This shift in interaction, technological challenges, and increased workload are important aspects of faculty experiences of HyFlex. As previous scholars have found, faculty need to feel a sense of self-efficacy in their work to be most productive. They also need to feel supported by their institutions.

CONCLUSION

The themes of interaction, technological challenges, and increased workload merit discussion larger than can be shared in this brief overview. To summarize, faculty who were eager to reconnect with students after being fully online reported greater satisfaction with HyFlex and its potential. Faculty who were hoping to see full classes of in-person or even online synchronous students were disappointed when students chose not to join the synchronous class meetings. Faculty who embraced the technological challenges of HyFlex demonstrated a different way of seeing their teaching. It became not only a place to share knowledge with students enrolled in the course but also an opportunity to share knowledge with the wider online world. Some faculty reported that they were placing their videos on YouTube and considered it a way to help others learn (who were not enrolled) and part of building their teaching portfolio. The increased workload faculty experience while designing and delivering HyFlex courses will need to be reconciled by faculty and administrators. This exploratory study provides initial evidence that teaching innovations like HyFlex can both enrich a faculty member’s sense of self-efficacy and contribute to additional stressors of work responsibilities (Leijon & Lundgren, 2019; McNaughton et al., 2014; Malczyk, 2019). These challenges will need to be addressed by institutions and faculty.

This qualitative study is exploratory and therefore results cannot be generalized. Future research should be extended to faculty at other regional comprehensive universities where the mission of the university is primarily teaching. Discipline-specific studies could also be conducted for comparison.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW AND SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. When did you begin teaching HyFlex courses?
2. Did you ever receive formal training on HyFlex? If so, how long was the training (approximate hours) and which topics were covered?
3. How many HyFlex courses have you taught?
4. Why did you choose to teach HyFlex?
5. How do you teach HyFlex courses? Do you have online asynchronous and in-person synchronous? Or do you offer in-person and online synchronous options and online asynchronous?
6. Describe a typical in-person HyFlex course meeting.
7. What have you found most rewarding about teaching HyFlex courses?
8. What have you found most challenging about teaching HyFlex courses?
9. Will you continue to teach HyFlex courses? Why or why not?
10. In which discipline have you taught HyFlex courses?
11. Any ways the university could help with HyFlex?
12. Any advice you'd like to share with faculty considering teaching HyFlex?
13. Anything you'd like to add?