THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING METHODOLOGIES, POST-COVID; HYBRID VS. HI-FLEX MODELS

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Abstract

COVID-19 has changed the world in so many ways, including how health, science, and politics interface; how global finances are influenced by a pandemic; and how education is delivered. Many challenges were faced when traditional brick-and-mortar colleges and universities shifted abruptly from face-to-face teaching delivery methods to online teaching. Some of those challenges were based on social inequities, including access to laptops and to internet service, as well as access to childcare or eldercare services. As instructors from these institutions have been returning to the classroom, a fresh round of challenges are being faced, including an unwillingness of many students to return to campus, and a student demand for online access, even for face-to-face courses. The motivation for this paper came from my experiences as department head, fielding ongoing questions from full time and adjunct faculty as well as students about the benefits of hybrid vs. hi-flex teaching models. My objective was to explore the research in order to provide a more definitive response, and to smooth the class modality/scheduling process. A literature review was conducted, as were interviews with online education experts. The benefits and drawbacks of hybrid vs. hi-flex teaching methods have been defined and articulated.

Keywords: *Hybrid, face-to-face, hi-flex, teaching methodologies.*

Glossary of Terms

Asynchronous Online: Classes are delivered 100% online with no required scheduled meeting times.
Face to face: Classes are delivered in-person at scheduled times, either on-campus or at other physical locations. Also referred to as *in-class*.
Hi-flex: A face-to-face course that can also be attended virtually; ideally, students can hear and see each other, the instructor, and the instructional content using technology.
Hybrid: Classes are delivered face-to-face some weeks, and online (either synchronous or asynchronous) other weeks.
Synchronous Online: Classes are delivered 100% online at scheduled times through live virtual meeting technology.

1. Introduction

On a weekday evening in February, a faculty member made her way from work, through rush hour traffic, to campus. She paid for parking and fought the bitterly cold wind to enter the classroom. There, she was greeted by an empty classroom. Every one of her students had elected to attend class remotely that evening because of the cold, and she found herself in the awkward position of teaching her face-to-face class online from the empty classroom. This scenario is becoming more common as instructors struggle to teach in a format that best meets the changing needs and demands of students. We first abruptly changed our teaching methods from on-campus/face-to-face, to online in mid-March, 2020, due to the pandemic. Now we are returning to the classroom – kind of.

2. Objectives

There has been a paradigm shift in the availability of virtual learning which has affected all teaching methodologies, including in-person classes. As a department chair, I found myself fielding a lot of questions from full-time and part-time faculty, as well as students, about the best way to teach classes;

should in-person courses have a virtual option, how many on-campus meetings is preferable, etc. The objective of this research was to gain a clearer understanding of the efficacy of in-person, online, hybrid, and hi-flex classes. A recent study, for example, found that while 72% of undergraduate students preferred returning to the classroom post pandemic, most of them wanted the classes to still offer some online learning components (Bebbington, 2020). It should not be overlooked that nearly 30% of students in this study did *not* want to return to the classroom. It is in this rapidly changing environment that we explore the challenges, benefits, and recommendations accompanying various teaching methodologies.

3. Methods

The research for this paper was conducted through a mix of a literature review and interviewing faculty members and personnel from Metropolitan State University of Denver's Center for Teaching, Learning, and Design. These individuals are responsible for providing training and support for all online teaching, as well instructional design and teaching methodology. The information gathered was synthesized with the goal of articulating the problems and challenges, as well as providing possible solutions and suggestions for the inherent issues brought on by changes in teaching methodologies.

4. Discussion

Teaching a hi-flex course, where students can attend either in the classroom or remotely, offers students the flexibility of participating in the way that is most convenient for them. Some students appreciate not having to fight traffic, pay to park, lug their backpacks to campus and arrange for childcare, and find the remote option alluring. Other students prefer the energy and intimacy of the in-class learning environment. Some instructors referred to this as a 'flipped classroom', where students do some of the work at home, such as reading, online quizzes, watching videos and video-recorded lectures, and then participate in hands-on learning in the classroom (Screencastify, 2021). To teach using a hi-flex methodology effectively, however, instructors need access to the appropriate technology, training, and support (Bebbington, 2020). Some instructors have access to classrooms with an interactive platform with a visual-monitoring system that follows the instructor as the move around the classroom, and has adequate audio systems so that virtual learners and face-to-face learners can all hear both the instructor and each other (Raes et al., 2019). For universities with more limited budgets, it may be appropriate to provide adequate technology in several classrooms and then schedule those rooms only for classes using the hi-flex model.

Some instructors have attempted to meet the new demands of students by offering a face-to-face class with a virtual (online synchronous) component. For example, let's say you offer an Intro class on Tuesday night at 5:00. You meet online synchronous on specific evenings during the semester, and on campus for others (a hybrid delivery method). Some research suggests that this flexible delivery method may help to increase recruitment, as barriers to attendance are eliminated for students via the virtual option (Raes, 2019). This use of technology also prepares students for the use of same in their future work environment. The challenge comes when students ask for exceptions. For example, perhaps on one of your face-to-face (on campus) evenings, you get an email from a student saying they have been exposed to COVID and would like to attend the class virtually. You send them a link and connect audio/visual so they can 'attend' remotely. The next time you have class face-to-face you have several more requests-students are feeling sick, or are home with their children and have no childcare, or are caring for an imuno-compromised parent and feel uncomfortable attending class. They each get a link.

What are the consequences of diluting instruction in this manner? Some experts report that mixed methods classrooms (those with some learners attending in the classroom and others attending virtually) creates an environment that is less interactive, and encourages a more passive learning style. While this option is 'better than nothing', experts argue that when these teaching methods are mixed without the necessary support referenced in Bebbington, 2020, everyone suffers (Griswold & Loats, 2022, Personal Interview). In these instances, faculty must focus not only on teaching, but ensuring that the wifi works in the classroom, that online students can hear the lecture and see the instructional materials, and they must monitor questions and comments in the Chatbox. The in-class students can have a degraded experience when the instructor has to repeat their questions to the virtual learners (who couldn't hear), and breaking the class into small groups for discussion or projects can become a logistical nightmare. Additionally, students attending virtually often report feeling excluded, and students in the classroom may feel neglected when their instructor is distracted by trying to solve problems with technology (Raes, 2019).

Some studies indicate that some of these challenges may be overcome by having a person (such as a graduate level Teaching Assistant, or TA) dedicated to focusing on the technology portion of the class. For example, they might monitor polls, online quizzes, and the chatbox, as well as problem solve technological issues. They might also assist with transitions such as starting videos and assigning virtual learners to break outs rooms. This second person can also be on the lookout for any virtual students who may have a question, to ensure no students are being neglected. Having a TA with knowledge of the class material is of extra benefit, as they may be able to answer questions or engage the virtual groups in the subject matter, but this is not a requirement. Having a second person in the classroom is preferred by both students and faculty (Barnes et al., 2021).

There are other potential solutions. Offering a course in multiple sections, some offered exclusively online (whether synchronous or asynchronous) and others exclusively face-to-face may help to solve this dilemma. For lower-enrolled programs that do not offer multiple sections, offering the face-to-face version only in fall semester, for example, and a spring semester online (of the same class) may be a solution. These courses can utilize the same online learning platform (on Canvas or Blackboard, for example) for minimal work for the faculty member (Griswold & Loats, 2022, Personal Interview). Instructors may choose to blend their teaching by using a mixture of physical (paper) and online textbooks as well as electronic resources and teaching platforms accessible through the use of QR codes (Hua & Liu, 2021).

When teaching online, whether as a 100% online course or as part of a hybrid teaching model, it is recommended the instructors establish an online presence. This can be accomplished by posting your contact information, a photo, and some information to help students get to know the instructor as a person. It is helpful to have a video posted, welcoming students to the class and introducing them to what they will be learning over the term. Additionally, instructors may want to send out an email (and the syllabus, if possible), before the class starts so students feel welcomed and have an idea of what the expectations are of them. It is recommended that instructors actively participate in online chats and discussion forums, as this encourages student participation and models appropriate online behavior (Alverno College, n.d.). Some teachers post an article or guidelines about online etiquette so that students are informed upfront about the behavior expected of them in the online learning environment.

5. Conclusions

Regardless of whether you teach online, face-to-face, hybrid, or hi-flex, it is important to be intentional in the ways in which we engage students. Some studies indicate that it is less successful when instructors teach a non-traditional course (hiflex) using traditional teaching methods, and recommend offering small stakes assignments and active engagement in learning materials (Linne, 2021). Having a mix of learning methods such as watching a video or recorded lecture and then posting a blog, taking a brief quiz, or sharing a discussion post, can keep students interested and engaged in the material. Having students give an individual or group presentation (whether virtually or in person) on a topic of their choosing, selected from a list of options the instructor offered, can enhance passion for the subject. Inviting guest speakers is a great way to bring real-life to the course material, whether they are presenting in-person, virtually, or are video-recorded. Learning games are a hit and can be modified to work in a virtual or in-class scenario, and can be a fun, interactive way to review material or serve as a review for an upcoming exam.

While the learning environment continues to evolve, it is imperative that instructors remain engaged and intentional. There are challenges and benefits to each of the various modes of instruction-perhaps the most important element is the level of confidence and competency demonstrated by the instructor.

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