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NAVIGATING THE HYBRID PH.D. EXPERIENCE: NEW INSIGHTS FROM STUDENT VOICES

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored graduate students' experiences in a hybrid instructional technology Ph.D. program. Seventeen current and former students completed an open-ended survey informed by the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework. Content analysis revealed four themes, each linked to a CoI element: (1) a flexible, accessible program supporting degree completion (Teaching Presence); (2) self-direction as crucial for the rigorous curriculum (Cognitive Presence); (3) a collaborative peer community enhancing motivation and progress (Social Presence); and (4) consistent faculty guidance as critical for meeting demands (Teaching Presence). Findings suggest prioritizing CoI elements in hybrid doctoral program design can effectively support learning, motivation, and success. Recommendations include developing a flexible curriculum, fostering community, supporting self-directed learning, and ensuring timely faculty guidance.

Keywords: *Hybrid learning, online learning, doctoral education, graduate students, student experience*.

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1. Introduction

Hybrid programs, with 30-79% online content (Müller & Mildenberger, 2021), have grown as a flexible alternative (Allen et al., 2007; Nuruddin, 2024). However, in-depth qualitative studies on students' perceptions of hybrid Ph.D.s are needed. This study used the CoI framework (Garrison et al., 2001) to evaluate a hybrid Ph.D.'s challenges and benefits. The research question was: "What are students' experiences and opinions about a hybrid Ph.D. program?"

2. Methods

A qualitative approach captured 17 current and former hybrid Ph.D. students' subjective experiences through an open-ended CoI-based survey. Content analysis followed Creswell and Poth's (2018) process: preparing data, defining analysis units, reading responses, initial coding, refining codes into themes, evaluating theme coherence, and presenting findings with supporting excerpts. The CoI guided analysis.

3. Findings

Four themes emerged, each tied to a CoI element (Table 1). Flexibility and accessibility supported degree completion (Teaching Presence). Self-direction was key for the rigorous curriculum (Cognitive Presence). A collaborative peer community enhanced motivation and progress (Social Presence). Consistent faculty guidance was critical for meeting demands (Teaching Presence). Limited peer interaction could hinder engagement.

Table 1. Themes and Related CoI Elements.

Theme	**CoI Element**
A Flexible, Accessible Program Supports Degree Completion	Teaching Presence
Self-Direction is Necessary for Rigorous Hybrid Curriculum	Cognitive Presence
A Collaborative Peer Community Enhances Motivation and Academic Progress	Social Presence
Consistent Faculty Guidance is Critical for Meeting Program Demands	Teaching Presence

4. Discussion

Findings showed the CoI's Teaching, Cognitive, and Social Presence contributed to students' hybrid Ph.D. experiences, aligning with prior research on their benefits (Garrison, 2009; Henriksen et al., 2014; Rovai & Jordan, 2004).

The flexible, accessible design exemplified Teaching Presence, considering learner needs (Anderson et al., 2001). Self-direction, tied to Cognitive Presence, was crucial for constructing meaning (Garrison et al., 2001). The importance of peer community reflected Social Presence, enabling collaboration (Stavredes, 2011). Consistent faculty guidance and responsiveness supported Teaching Presence.

However, challenges emerged, like unclear expectations and limited peer interaction, potentially impeding Cognitive and Social Presence. Future research should explore faculty and administrator perspectives and compare formats.

5. Conclusion

This study found a hybrid Ph.D. program's Teaching, Cognitive, and Social Presence elements supported student learning, motivation, and success. Key benefits were flexibility, self-directed learning, peer collaboration, and faculty guidance. Challenges included expectation clarity and peer interaction.

6. Recommendations

1. Provide orientation and training
2. Regularly assess the program
3. Invest in technology infrastructure
4. Foster cross-departmental collaboration
5. Address equity and accessibility
6. Prepare students for diverse careers

With thoughtful CoI-based design, hybrid Ph.D. programs can effectively support student growth and success.

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