

Total Online vs. Hybrid

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INTRODUCTION: THE EMERGENCE OF HYBRID

Cutting-edge computer technology has been advancing the implementation of distance learning in higher education, and facilitating the preparation of a virtual learning environment for students who have difficulty participating in a traditional face-to-face classroom due to busy time schedules or untravelable distances. The educational needs from more and more non-traditional students (part-time working adults or students who are unable to attend class physically) have been growing, and the use of online learning has expanded. In an online learning environment, the instructor and students are separated in time and space; as a result, the learning is facilitated through various synchronous and asynchronous technologies (e.g., discussion board, chat room, e-mail, and video conferencing tools).

Advocates of distance education promote its advantages, such as students being able to manage time more effectively, and work at their own pace and in their best learning conditions. These advantages enable constructivist learning and can empower students with freedom of expression, especially students who are introverted or who are non-native speakers (Morphew, 2002; O'Connell, 2001; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Issues and concerns also gradually emerge from distance education. Originally, target learners in distance education have higher motivation, more self-discipline, tend to be older, and are more serious toward learning (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Even though online learning provides academic institutions the opportunities to attract non-traditional students, it also lures campus residential students. Compared to the aforementioned students, these younger students may have different characteristics, attitudes, and expectations regarding online learning. This has had a profound impact on the choice of pedagogies, especially when those populations are mixed. In addition, some subjects may not be appropriate to be taught online if signifi-

cant interaction, collaboration, hands-on activity, and demonstration are required in their disciplines. Moreover, lacking student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions in distance education may possibly harm the quality of education (Cho & Berge, 2002; Moore, Jensen & Hatch, 2001; Saunders & Weible, 1999). A 1999 Department of Education study confirmed the fact that proponents and antagonists of distance education all agree that student-faculty interaction is crucial to the learning process (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

As technology comes into greater use, faculty and students alike are grappling with the changes it brings to the educational environment. Some educators have suggested strategies to enhance the attainment of knowledge in the online learning environment, such as promoting collaborative learning (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Villalba & Romiszowski, 2000), stimulating the sense of learning community (Leonard, 1996), and encouraging the use of both asynchronous and synchronous tools to increase interaction (Gray, 1999). In addition to adopting a variety of approaches to improve online learning experiences, more and more institutions are considering incorporating face-to-face meetings and online learning in response to requests from solely online students. This strategy is known as a hybrid course.

WHAT IS A HYBRID MODEL? WHY ADOPT A HYBRID MODEL?

Hybrid courses are delivered both with distance education technology and in traditional face-to-face classrooms (Curtis & Swenson, 2003; Garnham & Kaleta, 2002). In hybrid courses, instructors use distance education technology to deliver materials and facilitate learning activities, but still meet with students in the classroom on a regular basis. There is no universally accepted format for a hybrid course.

Some educators have suggested that instructors meet with students at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester, while some believe that a course in which the instructor and students meet half time online and half time in the classroom is recognized as a hybrid course. Still others may meet in class for several weeks and schedule assignments online (Aycock, Garnham & Kaleta, 2002; Leh, 2002). No matter which format a hybrid course entails, some of the learning activities are usually accomplished through asynchronous (e.g., discussion board, e-mail) or synchronous tools (e.g., chat room, video conferencing) provided by a Web-based course management system such as Blackboard, WebCT, or Prometheus.

Meeting solely online brings about a challenge, in that students may lose the opportunity to exchange thoughts simultaneously, which is the strength of face-to-face learning environments and is difficult to replace or imitate in an online environment. In such an asynchronous learning environment, learners have to be self-disciplined and self-motivated in order to develop a high degree of interactivity occurring between instructors and students, students and the asynchronous learning environment, and among the students. It is hard for meaningful learning to occur if students feel isolated, and the lack of interactivity may result in a weak online community where students feel they are losing the sense of belonging, which is one of the most difficult challenges that instructors face when teaching online (McIntyre, 2004).

Researchers (Leonard, 1996; Palloff & Pratt, 1999) discovered that forming an online learning community is the key to a successful online learning course. The purpose of hybrid courses is to offset gaps between students and instructors caused by separation in time and space. This is done by creating and strengthening a sense of community in the face-to-face environment. Teaching in both environments provides flexibility for instructors in designing learning activities and raising awareness of individual learning performance. The hybrid enables instructors to combine several teaching strategies in order to complement each other in contributing to students' success in the online environment. In a hybrid environment, participants can enjoy the benefits of learning online, such as more flexible schedules, saving time in communicating, more freedom of expressing thoughts, and still being present for the

most rewarding aspects in a face-to-face environment: exchanging and challenging ideas simultaneously. By providing various tools and by meeting in different environments, the hybrid model may accommodate multiple learning styles.

Compared to teaching traditional courses, developing a hybrid course requires instructors to invest more time, because they have to redesign or reinvent course materials, learn the new technical skills (Garnham & Kaleta, 2002), and be available online to respond to students through e-mail or a discussion board. In terms of student satisfaction, an increasing amount of research indicates that students favor a hybrid course and are satisfied with their hybrid learning experiences (Aycock et al., 2002; Gray, 1999; Leh, 2002; Martyn, 2003). Other research also shows that learning performances in hybrid courses are equal to or higher than in traditional face-to-face courses (Aycock et al., 2002; Martyn, 2003).

STRATEGIES FOR ADOPTING A HYBRID MODEL

Adopting a hybrid model does not guarantee a successful learning experience. If the course is not carefully designed and planned, students may disconnect from learning online and from meeting in the classroom. To maximize the success of a hybrid course, instructors should be aware of, and should attempt to integrate, the following strategies while they are designing, developing, and implementing their course.

Plan Ahead

Instructors should set up a sound plan before the implementation of a hybrid course. It is necessary to review the following issues before beginning the design process:

- a) What are the goals and objectives of this course?
- b) What materials and resources are available to be transformed into the online environment?
- c) Is there a need to reinvent or redesign learning materials?
- d) What activities must the students perform when meeting face-to-face or learning online?

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