

Hybrid and flexible learning

Overview

Hybrid learning refers to educational arrangements in which student cohort members can attend some of their sessions online and others in situ while being co-located. Other forms of such flexible learning arrangements include blended learning (where a student cohort has access to some of the teaching activities online and others offline and in situ), and HyFlex learning (where hybrid and blended learning approaches are combined in educational arrangements that afford learners a much wider range and a greater level of flexibility. Flexible learning, therefore, in itself is not a mode of learning. It is a value proposition – much like we see equity or equality that all learning and teaching arrangements aspire to, because flexibility enables learners to customise their learning to their own individual needs and circumstances in relation to when, where and how they may choose to study. As such, flexibility in learning and teaching operations sits on a continuum and may extend to choices learners may have in relation to their engagement and interaction with the subject matter content, teachers and their peers, the learning environment and the educational institution, their assessment activities and feedback on them (Lodge et al., 2022; Naidu & Roberts, 2018).

Hybrid and flexible learning are, therefore, not one and the same. A hybrid learning experience can be designed that provides the learner with choices about the mode in which they interact with the learning materials, their peers and their teacher, although the overall structure of the course or unit may not be flexible. And the institution may not be flexible in allowing the learner to shift between modes (online or on-campus, synchronous or asynchronous). The parameters that are in place may be a result of institutional orientations that are beyond the control of the teachers and the learning experience designers. However, there has been a shift towards greater acceptance from both learners and teachers in working across modes due in part to the experience with emergency response to teaching required during the pandemic lockdowns. Socially and culturally, there has been an increased acceptance and a desire for new ways of working (e.g., flexible and hybrid), and these are translating into the expectations of staff and students in higher education.

Regional impacts and relevance for teaching and learning

There is a widespread assumption that practical learning can only occur in the classroom and not online, so HyFlex learning design is irrelevant. However, the pandemic prompted a re-evaluation of practical learning activities and outcomes by questioning the privilege given to face-to-face practical learning classes, such as laboratories, studios and clinics. A common misconception is that face-to-face classes with hands-on learning are where students are most likely to form a sense of community. However, when deliberate focus is placed on ensuring the equivalency of the experience any mode can be designed to foster socialisation and community building. Apart from non-negotiable hands-on skills and related assessment, practical learning activities can be delivered in a HyFlex mode. Online access to practical learning requires selecting appropriate tools (e.g., clinical simulation, telehealth) and supporting student familiarity with the technology.

In the Australasian region, the impact of geographical remoteness on a student's capacity to engage in practical activities can be overcome through the effective use of HyFlex learning design. For example, the University of Sydney midwifery programme uses a mix of online simulations and a network of clinical training sites to facilitate hands-on clinical skills training.

Flexible learning approaches have the potential to enable learners to access learning modes and environments unique to their needs. This therefore engages and ultimately empowers learners to choose how they learn and who they learn with. Above all, every learner should have equitable opportunity and experience across all modes and environments. Some options include providing learners with digitised resources and choices to present their knowledge and understanding. These include utilising educational

technologies beyond the written word, such as the work being done at the University of Southern Queensland using VoiceThread (Jacka, 2023), video presentations, vivas and portfolios in which assignments can be asynchronously completed.

Providing flexibility is arguably the hardest to achieve due to institutional constraints. Implementation entails costs and relies on flexible design and a vision for planning, infrastructure, adequate resourcing and institutional support. Physical learning environments may need installation and support of specialised equipment, while virtual environments need educational technology tools to support the distribution of learning artefacts and the socialisation of learning. Teaching staff need development opportunities and support to adapt to new pedagogical approaches. Despite resources being available and money spent on refurbishing on-campus learning spaces, institutions still struggle with providing an equivalent experience for the hybrid student, such as those described by Wong et al., (2023).

Enabling flexible and HyFlex (Beatty, 2006) approaches is a shift in mindset from content delivery to learning facilitation supporting increased flexibility, student equity and autonomy within the learning process. In addition, finding and using appropriate technologies is vital for the transformation to HyFlex. For example, moving from hybrid to HyFlex may require the in-class students to utilise mobile devices and be online at the same time as the online students for equivalent interaction via a backchannel and joint online spaces to collaborate polysynchronously, which is a way to embrace a range of modes that the student is already utilising in their everyday lives (Dalgarno, 2014).

For students to fully engage and use contemporary technology in a flexible way, there needs to be an awareness of the whole range of students and their expectations for different learning environments.

One enabler is institutional readiness through finding a shared understanding of what flexible and hybrid learning means and the mindset and knowledge to achieve it. This includes infrastructure, policies and educator capacity. Another is identifying technological drivers to enable fluid learning experiences by seamlessly merging physical and virtual learning environments. Appropriate collaboration tools such as Engageli, Padlet and VoiceThread are vital for synchronous and asynchronous interaction. Personal enablement implies a flexible mindset where the student is at the centre of the learning experience. Encouraging students to learn in a choice-driven, flexible mode may be a barrier at first, as many will want to “sit and get” because that is all they know. For students to fully engage and use contemporary technology in a flexible way, there needs to be an awareness of the whole range of students and their expectations for different learning environments.

Institutional approaches to flexibility

James Cook University (JCU) and the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) have tried institutional models for flexible learning. [JCU Flex](#) invites learners to decide how they attend scheduled classes, regardless of their enrolment. [USQ’s HyFlex Learning and Teaching](#) leverages Engageli, Padlet and VoiceThread to support learner choice of mode, time and place.

A staged approach to Hyflex

Despite high connectivity, Singapore was taken by surprise when the pandemic forced remote learning and teaching. The [School of Applied Sciences at Temasek Polytechnic in Singapore](#) implemented HyFlex principles in their pandemic response and have continued to scale up their HyFlex approaches. The result minimised costs and has resulted in staff and student satisfaction.

A staged approach to Hyflex

The Ara Institute of Canterbury recognised a need to support students to enter the profession of midwifery despite their physical location or personal circumstances. They developed [a networked distributed approach](#) that incorporated aspects of Kaupapa Māori and Pasifika values, eportfolios, simulation and VR.