

Engagement Challenges in a Hybrid Classroom: Reflections of a Higher Education Tutor

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Abstract: The Covid-19 pandemic required a shift that brought many hybrid classrooms to the doors of tutors. Online video tools were one method utilised in a way to keep classrooms safe due to the need for social distancing. This paper explores the term hybrid learning and how previous studies have implemented online tools within this mode of teaching. The paper will explore some of the common challenges a hybrid learning environment presents when considering student engagement and belonging. A clearer understanding of good practice in using online tools such as chat boxes to encourage student participation is discussed. The challenge of working with students both physically and remote is explored and reflected on. The benefits of a hybrid classroom environment are examined from previous studies and how utilising positive teaching methods can encourage students to stay connected. A holistic reflection on the quick movement towards hybrid is considered. The challenges of hybrid have been considered including how to keep students engaged as lockdowns were eased due to the pandemic.

Keywords: hybrid, engagement, participation, belonging, connectedness, online tools

1. Introduction

As the world started to ease Covid-19 lockdown restrictions it was important to consider the new ways of working in an academic context (Bashir et al., 2021). It was considered a time where major changes could be made to the education sector as we dealt with the norms post pandemic (Guppy et al., 2022). The education system was required to adapt its methods to deal with social distancing and although lockdown restrictions were in place higher education institutions were hesitant to relax its own restrictions (Kinash, Jones and Crawford, 2021, Masamilova et al., 2022). The recent pandemic meant that students had been learning either via distance learning or blended learning as a speedily shift was required to move away from face-to-face teaching to protect people from the virus (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2020).

Various institutions which had already taken a digital first approach pre-pandemic was able to make the shift to online teaching with ease (QAA, 2020). Bashir et al. (2021) found that many universities were already attempting to make their courses more flexible. By acknowledging the changes in society and needs of the students some universities had made the decision already to have some courses via blended learning. It is further highlighted by the fact that universities were starting to build campuses without traditional lecture theatres as these were seen to be outdated (Kinash, Jones and Crawford, 2021). This creates the added requirement of educators having knowledge of the technology they are using. Tutors need to look at other professionals to explore current practices which may improve student learning and engagement in what has been described as 'university 4.0' (Morgan, 2020, Cesco et al, 2021, p.290). Guppy et al. (2022) foresees a large educational technology growth post pandemic with the use of different modes such as blended and hybrid learning modes. However, this does not promise that student engagement and satisfaction will be any better, with QAA (2022a) reporting that there was a higher level of dissatisfaction from students who were taught during 2020-21 academic year. This paper sets out to examine the use of hybrid learning post the pandemic and includes reflections of the authors own experience of hybrid teaching post pandemic. The most recent benefits and challenges to supporting student engagement will be reviewed and to conclude future steps for hybrid learning will be recommended as we continue to shift to pre pandemic teaching and learning.

2. Literature review

In this section, the term hybrid will be discussed in an academic setting. A short exploration of recent research will be carried out as hybrid learning has gathered increased attention post the Covid-19 pandemic. A key aspect of hybrid learning is understanding how to maintain a sense of belonging and community for students which will be discussed in the last section.

2.1 Defining hybrid learning

Hybrid learning is a term that can be traced back to Pittman in 1840, who originally identified distance learning as a method to correspond via mail to various students (Tyagi et al., 2021). Since then, there has been many iterations of what a hybrid classroom is. What makes the term confusing is that it was originally used interchangeably with blended learning (Smith and Hill, 2018). Raes et al. (2020) state that a 'hybrid virtual classroom' is where students can participate in a classroom synchronously both on campus and remotely. In addition, Bashir et al. (2021) refers to the model as a 'hyflex model' where lessons can be accessed in person, both synchronously and asynchronously online. It was Beatty in 2007 who created the term hyflex (Bashir et al., 2021). Although hyflex is best described by Beatty (2019, p.30) as "Without meaningful choice, there is no flexibility ... and therefore no HyFlex". Both blended learning and hybrid learning definitions demonstrate a non-universal terminology with two variations of overlapping teaching methods. Caution must be taken as pre-pandemic papers used both terms interchangeably, yet it is assumed there will be a shift from this due to pandemic ways of learning. One definition would support understanding and bring clarity to the term. Therefore, this paper will use the term hybrid learning as the standard term which encompasses the similar definitions above of teaching students both face-to-face and online synchronously.

2.1.1 A hybrid environment

Sharma and Fiedler (2004) state that a hybrid environment simultaneously supports individuals and groups to build on learning and knowledge in both structured and unstructured ways. It should involve social and formal learning opportunities to complete complex tasks (Norgard, 2021) A regular classroom environment for a hybrid setting would expect a facilitator to be based physically in the classroom as well as being able to run video software and online virtual learning environments for students to access.

Poskitt et al., (2021) had classrooms which would only ever be allowed to be at 50% capacity and students were expected to wear a face covering with tutors to stay behind a Perspex screen for safety. As UK restrictions eased so did the institutes as they replicated government guidance. The UK government looked at methods to ease out of lockdown which started with the use of 'bubbles', face coverings and regular testing to minimise the spread of the virus (gov.uk, 2021). Smaller classes such as allowing 50% capacity helped to support these measures and enabled the uptake of Hybrid modes of delivery (Bulow, 2022). Hybrid environments promotes inclusivity as students can access learning from any location (Jansen and Rother, 2021; Raes et al., 2020). This provides a wider option to students as they can learn in an environment that they prefer and also gives added benefits such as saving time and money for travel (Tyagi et al., 2021).

2.1.2 A hybrid community

Creating a sense of belonging and community is seen as important. A group of students that can have interactions across both online systems as well as in a traditional environment can stay connected (Rausch and Crawford, 2012). It is understood that balancing both students online and in the class is a difficult task. A natural conferencing system is considered a crucial factor to creating an inclusive environment (Flynn-Wilson and Reynolds, 2020). Lamanauskas and Makarskaitė-Petkevičienė (2021) state that students with access to a device can easily engage, even if ill at home. Vandenberg and Magnuson (2021) study on attitudes of Zoom found that both students and tutors preferred face to face teaching. An implication may have been due to their students being nurses and are typically more practical in nature. Vandenberg and Magnuson (2021) build on work by Serhan (2020) study as 61% disagreed when asked if Zoom helped to participate in class. This does emphasise the fact that tutors need to be highly skilled to give students an even learning experience (Jansen & Rother, 2021). Although studies (Raes, 2022; Serhan, 2020) suggest that conferencing systems may lessen a student learning experience these systems still provide opportunities for students to engage with their class in a flexible manner.

The positives of using a conferencing system are demonstrated by recent studies (Guppy et al, 2021, Manea, Macavei and Pribeanu, 2021; Raes, 2022). The United Kingdom's Higher education regulatory board (QAA, 2022a) states that a virtual conference system has made it easier for students to access their tutors. Stiles, (2007) argued that virtual learning environments do not meet their original functions, with tools like Microsoft Teams and Zoom potentially being better solutions. Conferencing systems build on traditional online management systems, for example with Microsoft Teams offering a video system and chat function that can be accessed at any time. The wider access to lesson material, chat box transcripts and recordings of live sessions creates a

smooth learning experience for students (Lamanauskas and Makarskaitė-Petkevičienė, 2021; QAA, 2022a). The ability to then refer to the material outside of lessons is again a useful clarification tool (Manea, Macavei and Pribeanu, 2021).

Some tutors have been required to deal with dramatic shifts from distance learning to a hybrid model. The speed of transferring from one mode of study to another could create stress which was highlighted by Vandenberg and Magnuson (2021) with 54% of students and 47% of tutors reporting stress and anxiety when working on Zoom.

2.2 Engaging students with online tools

The following two sections will investigate how the use of online tools can help to create a supportive environment. The section will identify some of the challenges that have been found when delivering in a hybrid mode.

Zoom has been seen to have advantages including the flexibility, ease of interaction and being able to use online tools (Serhan, 2020). The learning atmosphere can however have a positive or negative impact on the students' experience (MacLeod, Yang and Shi, 2019). The activities a tutor embeds is expected to help students feel connected with their peers, whichever format they have decided to study in.

The use of items such as microphone and chat boxes need to be enabled so to encourage synchronous conversations that flow (Serhan, 2020). Bashir et al. (2021) support this as student participants claimed that they felt more involved in lessons as they were able to have a better focus and use the chat box function to ask questions. Lamanauskas and Makarskaitė-Petkevičienė (2021) support this as their students were able to access live lectures and confer with tutors and peers instantly via the MS Teams chat function. Effective use of a chat box may potentially help students feel they belong (Flynn-Wilson and Reynolds, 2021). However, it is suggested that non-verbal cues are a constraint when participants are remote (Kepler, 2020). Students could become passive as they lack an understanding as they are not present in the physical environment (Jansen & Rother, 2021). This could create a complex environment, in particular a class with remote students who decline to speak. This may restrict learning and the feeling of being connected with the group if students maintain silence. Serhan (2020) claims that smaller classes allow for students to be able to ask more questions to the tutor.

The use of cameras in the class could reduce the perception of 'distance' in a virtual environment (Miller, Sellnow and Strawser, 2020). The use of cameras may give a sense of facetime that students can get similar access to when in a traditional environment. For some institutions it is possible that a policy for the use of cameras was implemented to encourage participation in class. Those that did use their cameras reported a higher engagement score when they made themselves visible (Raes, 2022). This could lower attendance and a sense of belonging however as those that do not feel comfortable on screen (Bashir et al., 2021) may decide not to attend sessions. The need for tutors to create a positive and comfortable environment is required for students to be able to freely express themselves. Although students with contrasting views of their peers rarely express them due to a fear of being isolated by the group as well as the lack of understanding of when to speak (Flynn-Wilson and Reynolds, 2020; Jansen and Rother, 2021). This is a significant barrier to overcome as a common mistake may be to fill the gap of silence with further input rather than being considerate to those online who could need further time to respond. Overall, it is considered dependent on the type of students in a class that will reflect the experience (Guppy et al., 2022).

2.2.1 The importance of interaction in an online space

Encouraging a sense of belonging for students is a difficult task. Group work may give students a feel of belonging if they are provided with sufficient activities which encourage discussion (Tyagi et al., 2021; MacLeod et al, 2019). With a hybrid environment the feeling of being with their peers can not only be restricted to a physical environment. The use of virtual learning environments to add another layer of communication has found to be useful as collaboration can happen on these types of online platforms (Alexander, Lynch, Rabinovich and Kuntel, 2014). The more a student interacts with a virtual platform the more they prefer that format (MacLeod et al, 2019). This is unsurprising as it would be expected that online learning would become common ground. Gonzalez et al., (2020) found that those students that have been confined are able to carry out more continuous and efficient study. Online tasks can be an issue as those that lack communication skills will suffer. Those unsure how to use the online tools, make friends or attempt to get involved with collaborative activities will no doubt decrease their social interactions (Lamanauskas and Makarskaitė-Petkevičienė, 2021). The use of breakout

rooms or separate channels gives smaller sub-groups ownership whilst working in a hybrid environment. Active discussion can take place as those with devices can communicate. With conference systems such as Microsoft Teams it encourages asynchronous engagement as students can work on a project outside of the classroom. Tutors can then have a wider remit as they can communicate important announcements to students when not delivering live (Lamanauskas and Makarskaitė-Petkevičienė, 2021). Using these methods are potentially key to keeping students engaged and connected with their studies.

As students can see the benefits of continuous interaction this will further their interest. Encouraging early engagement and being a social presence is stated as a key factor to creating a community (Trespacios et al., 2021). As Masalimova et al. (2022) states that socialisation difficulties are common occurrences in a distance learning environment those similar difficulties are expected to be found in a hybrid environment. It is undeniable that those students that decide to learn in a remote location miss out from the smaller conversations that potentially happen during break periods. This is expected to cause a significant impact when considering how those remote students feel about their belonging and subsequently impact their engagement in the sessions. QAAs' (2022b) report agrees as their findings showed that it was the lack of informal conversations that would increase the feeling of disconnection and impact on their experience. This requires a wider institution approach for frequent informal conversations that the learning environment does not always produce. Items such as virtual quizzes may be useful and could support students that prefer or are required to work off-campus.

3. Experiences in HL

This section will apply this authors experiences in a hybrid learning environment and reflect on the tools used to attempt to heighten student engagement. It will discuss challenges as well as elements of good practice used in a hybrid learning environment post pandemic.

This author found that being in a blended learning university the shift from distance during the pandemic to hybrid as lockdown restrictions eased was swift as communication had been made clear from the institute. This was an important start as the shift to a different mode of teaching required tutors to understand the new mode of teaching (Raes, Detienne, Windey, Depaepe, 2019).

A change from Adobe Connect to Zoom may have presented a technological challenge for some tutors who lack IT skills as it had been decided this would be a better conferencing system to support students. The use of these online conferencing systems has been crucial to continue learning and help groups of students stay connected when the world was at its most fractured point. The need for well-equipped learning practitioners that can guide tutors who have little expertise with conferencing functions becomes increasingly important. Understanding how to simply slide share or make use of the interactive whiteboard was all functions tutors were required to learn so to be able to replicate some of the systems used in a traditional classroom setting.

Communication was sent to students who were given the option to book a table in the classroom (max 50% capacity) or have the choice to engage via Zoom as each classroom was fitted with cameras. This then gave students the freedom and flexibility as they are able to be in class and then re-watch the session if they need further support with their studies. For this author, mature students regularly worked remotely due to other commitments such as work or family. As the easing of lockdown occurred it was still common for there to be more students online due to the fear of transmitting covid-19. For those students who had started their studies during the pandemic class participants were largely online as this was the norm. This environment can be difficult for even skilled tutors when there is a large disparity between those in class and those online. The challenge being to not focus on one mode of learning over the other. Having well-timed interactions was highly important (Raes, Detienne, Windey, Depaepe, 2019). Understanding if particular students online had disengaged required timely intervention as it is easier for them to socially loaf and let those who attend physically to discuss the sessions topics. Use of names and understanding the type of student could help the approach taken with particular students.

For example, students that were generally quiet would have been prompted and encouraged to use the chat box to ensure they were present and on task compared to more confident students who would be happy to use the microphone. The use of cameras helped class engagement and found when majority of students had their camera on, other students would follow suit. It is thought that potentially a camera policy when first rolling out hybrid may have helped which is also suggested by Castelli and Sarvary (2020) when attempting to understand

students' perceptions of camera use in remote classes. This would have improved interactions and helped to engage and stay connected in what was an unfamiliar environment. Yet, this author found that small groups with students that have little to say or choose to not turn on their cameras can create an isolating experience for all involved. Other students can turn this into a positive as those who may be timid may ask more questions when their group is physically smaller.

A hybrid classroom can create an opportunity where tutors and students can have frequent 1-1 sessions without worrying about convenient and quiet spaces. The ability to mute the physical classroom creates opportunity to speak to those in class only and support with any issues. This can help build a rapport with students as you build on those 1-1 sessions (Tyagi et al., 2021). Those online do not get this benefit but there are chances where breakout rooms can be used as safe spaces to support those students learning remotely. Regular 1-1 time is important to ensure remote students are staying engaged and that they are confident in their studies.

Having a hybrid system did have other advantages as sharing files was simply done through Zoom rather than requiring students to log in to VLE's. For those in class, utilising QR codes could ensure students were able to access the same materials that were shared via Zoom. Use of other online software such as Padlet and Mentimeter was found to be easier as those students who only had a desktop computer would be able to collaborate with their peers. Tools like Padlet gives students the opportunity to share opinions and resources they have found engaging. Students can create digital resources which the class can revisit and continue to add to outside of the classroom. These features are then useful to be added to discussion forums as students can easily re-find resources used in class time. Incorporating these tools does take time and can be difficult to demonstrate to those remote students struggling with the different components. Compared to those in class where the ability to direct students on their own devices was beneficial to see what they were doing from their perspective.

Zooms own online polling feature was another method to gain quick feedback on the understanding of students. These tools enabled the use of mobile phones which encouraged engagement (Keengwe, Schnellert and Jonas, 2012) and helped those students in class to enjoy the online activities presented to them as well as those online. Tools such as polls were found to have a higher uptake with those students with little IT knowledge able to access. This could then be a starting point of discussions and help to open or re-engage students after breaks within the sessions. Managing these discussions via virtual hand raising and the chat box (Raes, 2022) was required to ensure those online were able to discuss topics with those physically in class. It can be difficult as a tutor to not automatically question those students physically in class and that can be seen. Managing expectations for students from the first session can help to promote the expectations of the group. A HL system can become strong pillars of future courses, but a holistic level of thinking is required to both support educators and students.

4. Conclusion

A model of HL could be seen as a new opportunity to overcome rather than a new barrier for delivering a quality education. It can also support our students as we take positive applications from the pandemic and add these employability skills to our students. The ability to work in a flexible environment has been a key attribute for employers and the need to manage and work asynchronously has become increasingly important. The idea of a synchronous hybrid delivery has been suggested to now be a top demand of tutors (Kepler 2020; Bulow, 2022).

An expectation is that educational technology will provide the biggest area of progress to improve the learning experience. A HL environment needs to be delicately managed to ensure students feel connected. The context of Hybrid learning is of interest as society returns to a pre-covid way of working. There will continue to be a need for a flexible education, but one which provides an engaging experience and welcomes students in both a physical and online space. As software develops tutors should continue to equip themselves with a wider variety of teaching strategies. The way institutes manage this will be crucial to ensure its success. Yet, it will take some time to truly see if a hybrid environment can support students with a feeling of belonging equally in a synchronous mode of hybrid learning.

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