

An experiment in Hybrid Teaching: Lessons learned and implications for Policy and Practice

By Stephanie Delaney

Introduction

In the summer of 2003, I wrote a research paper on hybrid courses and proposed a method for converting face to face courses into hybrid courses. In Fall Quarter 2003, I had the opportunity to try out my research on an American Government class.

In this paper, I will explore what a hybrid course is and review the advantages for institutions, faculty, and students. Then, I will discuss the process I used, what worked and what didn't. Finally, I will review future considerations for institutions, faculty and students regarding hybrid learning.

What is a Hybrid Course ?

Hybrid courses blend the best of face-to-face classes with the best of online learning. With it, instructors can achieve their course objectives more successfully than they can in either a fully face-to-face or fully online course. Young (2002). Courses are generally considered hybrid when "a significant portion of the learning activities have been moved online and time traditionally spent in the classroom is reduced but not eliminated." Garnham & Kaleta (2003) The term "hybrid" does not apply to courses that simply use online content to compliment a face-to-face class, since online learning actually replaces some of the time in the classroom. Sudzina, Garnam & Kaleta (2003).

Advantages for institutions.

Hybrid courses offer several advantages to institutions, faculty and students. Institutions see the advantage of reduced seat time. If a Tuesday/Thursday class meets only one day a week instead of two, then two classes are able to share a classroom. One administrator notes, "this may be the only way colleges and universities can keep up with the continuing population

growth and demands for lifelong learning.” Young (2002). Also, student retention is higher in hybrid courses than in traditional or completely online courses. Garnam & Kaleta (2002). Indeed, one institution experienced a 100% retention rate in the three courses that made up the study. Martyn (2003).

Another advantage for the institution is that faculty members seem to be more open to the idea of hybrid courses. Even faculty who are very skeptical about online teaching believe that there may be some merit in hybrid courses. Young (2002). I found this to be the case in talking to faculty at Highline about hybrid teaching.

Advantages for Faculty.

Faculty members also benefit from hybrid learning. The primary benefit is improved student learning. Hybrid instructors report that students in their hybrid courses learned more, “wrote better papers, performed better on exams, produced higher quality projects and were capable of more meaningful discussions on course material.” Garnam & Kaleta (2002). The same studies showed that hybrid students get better grades than students in traditional face-to-face courses or completely online courses. Instructors admit that it does take longer to prepare a hybrid course, but note that it allows them to gain class time to delve into things they did not have time to do in class before. Because face-to-face contact is preserved, the hybrid course model is less controversial among faculty than fully online courses. Young (2002).

Advantages for Students.

Students are the biggest beneficiary of hybrid courses. In addition to improved learning and grades, students gain valuable technology and life skills. Many come into hybrid courses unable to manage their time well. Students gain time management, technology and communication skills that will serve them well outside of the classroom as well as inside. Garnam & Kaleta (2002), Spilka (2002). Some students do not learn well from the lecture model and hybrid courses offer an alternative way to learn. Young (2002). It allows quieter students to find a voice and the range of communication formats appeal to a variety of learning styles.

Hybrid courses also lead to greater engagement and interaction by students, a bonus for the student and the faculty member. Sudzina, et al. (2003). It is this increased interaction and engagement that leads to better student learning.

Questions for Redesign

Hybrid courses require that a face-to-face class be completely redesigned. Garnam & Kaleta (2002), Sudzina, et al. (2002). One institution recommends that faculty members “start early and plan very carefully; hybridization is a lot of work”. Aycock et al. (2002a). Others suggest starting start small and easing into hybrid teaching. Sands (2002). It is fine to experiment and learn along the way. Sudzina, et al. (2003). That is the approach that I took.

I began my course planning by asking the following questions:

1. **What are the course objectives?** The first step in redesigning a course is to review what the course objectives or goals are. In this way, one can insure that the course redesign is focused on pedagogy and not on technology. Aycock, et al. (2002a), Sudzina, et al. (2003), Williams & Murphy (2002). The key question here is “what do I want the students to know when they finish the class?” Sands(2002). For this American government class, I wanted to students to have a working understanding of how the government operated and to be able to evaluate the news that they heard so they could be good citizens and voters.
2. **What are you doing in the classroom to meet each of your objectives?** For each objective, there are several things that I or any instructor might do to help the student understand the topic. For this American government class, I used several of the following activities:
 - Assigned reading in the text;
 - Answering reflection questions at the end of the text;
 - Guided online research leading to discussion question for small groups
 - Small/ large group activity - for students first discuss something in small groups and then explore it as a larger group;
 - Video with a reflection paper or online discussion questions
 - Written exam or quiz.

This planning process gave me the opportunity to toss out what wasn't really working and add in those things I'd been meaning to try but have not had the time to explore. The list of activities forms the foundation of the course redesign. During this brainstorming phase, I did not worry about what will go online and what won't. That is addressed in the next question.

3. Which of those activities can best take place online? The challenge for faculty in selecting an appropriate model is to “find the optimal mix of online and face to face instruction that will leverage the major advantage of asynchronous learning (any time, any place), while still maintaining the quality of faculty-student interactions”. Martyn (2003). Thus, there is no one answer about which course activities are best online and which ones are best in the classroom.

When thinking about moving portions of a course online, it is important to have some pedagogical reason for doing so. Adopting technology for technology's sake leads to disconnectedness between the online and the face-to-face components of the course.

Activities that work well online	Activities that work well in the classroom.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussions. Williams & Murphy (2002). • Case studies. Garnham & Kaleta (2002). • Tutorials. Garnham & Kaleta (2002). • Self-testing exercises. Garnham & Kaleta (2002). • Essay writing. Sands (2002). • Simulations. Garnham & Kaleta (2002). • Online group collaboration. Garnham & Kaleta (2002). • Independent project work and peer collaboration. Spilka (2002). • Information transfer (lecture). Sands (2002). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lecture • Discussion • Presentations • Lab activities • Group collaboration • testing

4. How will the online activities integrate with the face-to-face activities?

Integration is essential. The online components of the class must be connected to the face-to-face components of the class and not simply added on. Aycok, et al. (2002a), Williams & Murphy (2002). Without integration, one ends up either having two mini-classes (one online and one on campus) or a face-to-face class with lots of extra work online. Id. Either way,

students will find the online components to simply be busy work if they are not well integrated with the face-to face class. This ended up being a problem for me.

What Worked

After following the steps suggested by the literature, I found some things is worked for me and some took a little more effort. Here are some of the things that worked right away.

Hourly Course Breakdown. One of the things that was particularly helpful was an hour by hour breakdown of what I expected to students to do with their time. On our campus, the standard expectation for a five credit class is that students spend two hours of studying for every one hour in class. Thus, I had a total of 15 hours to work with. I took my list of activities and determined how much time each would take per week after doing that, I determined which of the activities would take place online and which would take place in class. Some activities, like discussion, took place both online and in the classroom. I attached this 15 hour breakdown to the syllabus and went over it with the students. At the beginning, they did not pay any attention to it. However, I was able to go back to it over and over again with the students to help them understand what the expectations were. By mid-quarter, I think most of the students had a better understanding of how to manage their time and thus were doing better work.

Quizzing, exams and electronic submission. I used the course management software Blackboard to manage the online portion of the course. Through Blackboard, I was easily able to administer online quizzing and exams. I also had students submit all homework assignments via e-mail. The students loved these elements of the course. I polled the class at the beginning middle and end of the course, and each poll reflected these elements as being the student's favorites. It was also a favorite of mine. Once the quizzes were written (facilitated by large test banks provided by the textbook publisher), Blackboard graded the quizzes and entered the grades into the online gradebook. With the online exams, grading was also streamlined. The e-mail submission of assignments saved me from collecting stacks of paper and gave the students a sense of greater freedom. In the online polling, the majority of students expressed a preference for this method of submitting assignments.

Lessons Learned

Here were some things that ended up being a learning experience. I've broken them down into three categories: lessons for faculty and teaching, lessons for students, and lessons for the institution.

Lessons for faculty and teaching. I found that, for the most part, the planning process proposed by the literature made sense and worked well. However, one should not expect to have a perfect class on the first try. My biggest lesson was to **be flexible**.

I told this class at the beginning of the quarter that they were guinea pigs. As a result, I think they were more open to the constant changes I implemented in the class. For at least the first eight weeks of the 10 week quarter, I made some substantive change to the class. I asked the students about this and other things in weekly polling through Blackboard. When asked about the constant changes, 100% of the respondents said that they did not mind of the changes when they could see that the changes improved the course. I think that teachers feel a need to be consistent, sometimes to the point of inflexibility. I believe that, as long as students know that changes may be coming, they are very open to them. Also, the regular use of anonymous polling made the students feel like they were part of the process.

I also learned to **avoid being a Lone Ranger**. The campus is full of people with expertise that helped me immensely. For example, I worked with faculty librarians to train the students on how to do academic research on the Internet. I worked with gateway writing faculty who came to class and worked with students on how to write their assignments. I worked with gateway reading faculty on how to create useful reading guides. Also, around mid semester, I could see some problems that my foreign students had in common. So, I worked with our ESL faculty on approaches to assisting the students. All of this collaboration helped to improve the actual course and will help me design it better next time.

The **online discussions** ended up being one of the most difficult things that I did in the course. Students were very resistant to participating in the online discussion. I should note that 90% of the students in this class were "running start" students¹. In polling, I discovered that 100% of the students had computers and Internet access at home 48% had access to

¹ Running start students are able to complete the last two years of high school and two years of community college at the same time and for free. So, they graduate from high school and community college at the same time and go on to a four-year institution with significantly less college to finance.

high-speed Internet. Despite this, it took a lot of concerted effort to get them to participate and have that participation add some value to the course. I can't say that I was entirely successful. At the end of the class, 44% of the students responded that they felt like the online discussion was "a waste of time". On the other hand, 39% responded affirmatively when asked whether they felt like writing out their thoughts and reading what the other students thought made it easier to understand that the topic. 28% said that the online discussion help them to better understand people who they disagreed with. Only 22% said that the discussion worked well and that they enjoyed participating. The challenge was crafting discussion topics that were interesting and relevant. Also, the students tended to prefer controversial topics and there were several areas that did not easily lend themselves to things that the students thought were controversial.

I discovered the students made better quality postings when they had fewer posting obligations. Originally, I had them posting three times per day. This ended up being a strain on the students and on me, having to read them all. In the end, they needed to post five times per week, with each posting including a citation supporting their point of view. This produced much higher quality postings.

Also, initially, I had them in very small groups of 5 – 6 students. This made sense with the level of posting I initially required. However, since no one met their posting requirements, the few students that did regularly participate felt isolated and discouraged. The groups got bigger and bigger until I finally divided the class of 38 in half and that worked best.

The importance of **integration** was also obvious here. Towards the end of the class I became better at pulling the two halves of the class together. For example, in class we might do an activity and the following day online I would reference that activity and have a discussion activity that deep into their understanding of the topic. When we met again the following day, we'd review the substance of the online discussion as a launching point for the class work.

Constructive use of class time was also really important. Often it seemed as though I used 10 or 15 minutes of our 50 minute time slot conveying announcements and other information that would have been better conveyed online. I felt like the students took things more seriously when I told them face-to-face. However, by giving into this, I perpetuated their thoughts that the online activities were not as important as what happened in class. At the midterm, 82% of the students said that in class discussion help them to understand the

concepts of the class better. In addition, in all three polls, when asked about the disadvantages of hybrid learning, the students expressed concern about the amount of time they had to interact with peers and the instructor. Thus, in future classes I would try to better organize the face-to-face contents around activities that encouraged interaction between the students and opportunities for less formal interaction with me.

Student Lessons

Many of the lessons I learned about the students were tied into the fact that the students were very young. The students needed a lot of **handholding**. I could not rely on them to reference the syllabus or the class calendar. In order to get reliable participation, I felt compelled to post announcements about what to do three or four times a week. In my online classes, the students are very self-directed and did not need regular reminders about what to do, so I was surprised and unprepared for the amount of handholding needed by the students.

The students also require **training**. During the first week of class I took them to the library and the computer lab and had a gateway writing faculty come to my class. I trained the students on every element of the course that I expected them to participate in. I think this eventually resulted in higher quality participation. The computer lab time also reduced the amount of technical support that the students needed.

The students also needed **modeling**. When I gave them examples of high-quality homework assignments and high-quality discussion postings, the quality of their own work went up. During this quarter, I collected several examples of excellent student work to share with students next quarter.

Another important tool is a **backup plan**. I have my online students write out a plan for what they will do if their computer crashes or their e-mail becomes unavailable, as technical problems are not an excuse for turning in work late. I did not do this with my hybrid course and that was a mistake. Forcing the students to think through a worst-case scenario makes them far more responsible for their own work.

The final lesson learned about students was that they really appreciated the **flexibility** that the online component of the class gave them. In all three polls when asked what the advantages were of a hybrid course they all cited the flexibility. In written comments, many

students noted how they liked being able to turn in work online which enabled them to work when they worked best.

Institutional Lessons

The main institutional lessons that I learned was that faculty are very interested in teaching hybrid courses. Several people approached me and asked how the class was going and expressed an interest in teaching hybrid courses themselves. I know that some of them see teaching a hybrid course as a good stepping stone to teaching a completely online course. However, the lack of a process at the college for engaging in hybrid learning has left some of the faculty feeling uncertain. That lack of a process also prevents the college from realizing some of the other benefits of hybrid learning like better use of space.

Implications for Policy and Practice

I've come up with some implications for future policy based on my personal experiences and research. I divided this again into three parts, implications for faculty, implications for students, and implications for the institution.

Policy And Practice Implications for faculty. Faculty will clearly require some training in designing hybrid courses and support with the design and creation process. As more faculty begin to teach online, the institution should gather campus wide best practices for faculty to refer to in the design process.

From an assessment standpoint, there should be unique student evaluations that incorporate the elements of hybrid learning. However, the college may want to consider disregarding these evaluations during the first quarter that an instructor teaches using the hybrid format this way, faculty would not be discouraged from teaching hybrid courses because of fear of negative student evaluations when they try something new. This approach would encourage flexibility and innovation. That does not mean however that hybrid courses should not be assessed. Perhaps there could be an experienced team of hybrid faculty who observe hybrid courses and give in formal feedback to the instructor. Ideally, that informal feedback would not be incorporated into tenure or post tenure review.

Compensation is also an important consideration. Ideally, faculty would have release time for either the planning or teaching of hybrid course (or both). If that is not possible, the

college may wish to consider subsidizing high-speed Internet connections in people's homes or perhaps negotiating a reduced rate. This would help support the great amount of extra work needed to put together a hybrid course.

The faculty can also support each other. For example, department could team up to develop learning objectives and lists of ways that faculty in that department have met those objectives. That could be an excellent starting point for planning a new hybrid course. Also, there could be regular meetings of hybrid instructors to support each other and share ideas.

Policy And Practice Implications for Students

If the college decides it wants to make hybrid learning an important part of meeting student needs, it needs to fully support the students. The first thing the college needs to do is to clearly mark hybrid courses in the quarterly schedule of classes. There might also be a separate section in the quarterly that fully explains how a hybrid course works and perhaps compares it to fully online and fully face-to-face class. This would give students an opportunity to know what they were getting into, since the form of learning is new to most of them.

Another way would be to have a dedicated distance learning section in the computer lab, staffed by student workers trained in Blackboard and preferably experienced with taking hybrid or online courses. Another way to support students would be to make the computer lab freely available during the first week of the quarter. This could give students a chance to see if they want to buy a lab pass. The lab could also be free to faculty who could take their classes in for class specific Blackboard training.

The college may also wish to develop a campus wide "how-to" booklet guiding students on how to participate in a hybrid course.

Policy and Practice Implications for the Institution

Highline needs to review its institutional objectives for distance learning and determine how hybrid courses fit in to its goals. If the institution decides that it really does want to engage in this form of distance learning, it needs to make a commitment to support that.

One way the institution can support faculty could be through faculty recognition. Perhaps it could have a Faculty of the Year award for faculty who make extensive use of technology in their teaching. Another way to support faculty would be through flexible working conditions.

The college could facilitate the scheduling of classes for fully online and fully off-line days. Faculty should be allowed to work from home on fully online days when they don't have other campus commitments. If this were the case, the campus would need to explore what the flexibility would mean to shared governance and departmental obligations.

The campus would also want to have a process for scheduling hybrid courses that maximized classroom space. Some level of coordination of hybrid courses could enable the institution to more fully realize some of the benefits mentioned above.

Conclusion

When considering whether to teach using the hybrid model, it is important to keep in mind how this model benefits teaching and learning. In an end of class survey, 67% of students said that, had they known that their American Government course was going to be a hybrid course, they would still take it. 44% of the class perceived that the hybrid model made the class a little easier than it would have been otherwise. 28% believe they learned more because a portion of the class was online, while 61% felt that it made no difference in their learning. A full 44% of the class said that the class was fun. When students have fun learning, they're more likely to spend additional time on task and are more likely to successfully meet the objectives of the course.

I think we can safely conclude that hybrid learning does benefit good teaching and learning. If the college decides to pursue it, the college will need to put in place appropriate policies and practices to support students and faculty and, ultimately, the institution itself.

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