

Exploring the Hybrid Course Design for Adult Learners at the Graduate Level

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Abstract

This document shares points to consider for teaching graduate level courses in using a hybrid course design. Exercises, strategies, and tools designed for the cyber classroom that were used by the author in various counseling related masters-level courses at a comprehensive college are provided. Information pertaining to understanding the hybrid design, assisting adult learners to be successful in the cyber classroom, and ways to infuse technology into the course will be addressed. This paper is intended to serve as a point of reference for faculty who teach adult learners at the graduate level as well as faculty who teach counseling related courses. This is paper is not a persuasive argument for the use of hybrid courses, but rather meant to share the authors experiences and observations for others to consider when deciding on course design.

Keywords: hybrid courses; online learning; adult learners; student perceptions; masters-level counseling courses; self-regulated learning

Introduction

Across the United States, there has been an increase in the demand for using hybrid and online courses in graduate-level degree programs (Clifford, Earp, & Reisinger, 2004; Nemtchinova, & Bartholomew, 2004; Reynolds, 2001). Research exploring student learning outcomes, engagement, and achievements in courses incorporating the cyber classroom at the graduate level have shown mixed results; however, few seem to be focused on courses in applied programs (e.g., counseling), and many illustrate the use of 100% web-based courses rather than utilizing a hybrid course design. This paper will share this author's experiences with using a hybrid course design in counseling related graduate courses. This paper is not meant to support or deter faculty from utilizing 100% online courses, but rather to share how a hybrid course design has been successful when teaching applied courses at the graduate level.

Many graduate programs in counseling maintain a teaching philosophy built on a constructivist approach. A vital aspect of constructivism in the classroom is students' active participation and cooperative learning. The teacher acts as a facilitator whose primary job is to encourage critical thinking and channel learning through exploration and questioning (Bazillion & Braun, 1998). Some research exploring the topic of hybrid courses and on-line learning contends that courses designed from a constructivist approach are best suited to infuse into an on-line instructional format (Saleh & Lacey, 2004). More specifically, hybrid courses make the best use of physical resources and maximizing student learning by providing a variety of teaching and learning formats (Marcketti & Yurchisin, 2005). Hybrid courses also allow for more flexibility to accommodate a variety of student learning styles. Hybrid courses incorporate elements helpful for auditory learners (e.g., face-to-face lectures and discussions) as well as visual learners (e.g., reading messages posted by peers and watching streaming videos posted by the instructor). In addition, some courses may be designed to allow students to participate at any hour of the day or night, which can be an asset to their learning styles as not all students are functioning at their peak cognitive abilities at the same time of day, and some students take more time to process concepts and ideas than others. These are felt to be some of the primary reasons for the success achieved in transitioning graduate level counseling courses from a face-to-face (f2f) format to a hybrid course design. A constructivist teaching philosophy is maintained by the author, who also tends to infuse multiple modalities to engage students with the material.

A component of the constructivist approach is to stimulate an active learning process, which encourages the students to take control of their learning. This can be extremely beneficial for all students, especially for graduate students in applied courses and/or those who are seeking professional degrees. Tinnesz, Ahuna, and Kiener (2006) contend that students must be actively engaged in the entire learning process both in and out of the classroom environment. Some of the long-lasting benefits for students who engage actively in their courses are an increased level of knowledge and understanding of key concepts and course content as well as increased retention of the information (Braxton, Miller, & Sullivan, 2000; Tinnesz, et al., 2006). Gallagher, Dobrosielski-Vergona, Wingard, and Williams (2005) found adult learners who self-enrolled in a web-based course format rather than a f2f format of the same course demonstrated greater motivation and learning success based on final course grades, completion of assignments, and knowledge retention over time.

The author's courses using a hybrid design have been among the first offered through my department of Counselor Education. The courses have been a mix of core and elective courses, all related to the professional field of counseling. The students in the courses are primarily completing one of the six degree granting programs offered in my department; however, there are a small handful of students from related disciplines (e.g., clinical psychology and social work) as well as community members or students from nearby institutions who also enroll. The majority of the students in my department are adult learners, many of whom are first generation graduate students. While they are driven, focused, and dedicated to earning their masters degree in counseling, the majority of the students are also maintaining a job, a family, and have other responsibilities beyond school; a common occurrence in many graduate programs across the United States. Suggestions for assisting adult learners to be successful in a hybrid class will be discussed below.

Understanding the Hybrid Course Design at the Graduate Level

Electronic course management systems (CMS) have become common place throughout higher education in the twenty-first century (Clifford, et al., 2004). Blackboard is one example of a CMS commonly used at institutions across America, and is the CMS used by the author. Blackboard allows students to download course materials, exchange documents, submit and receive assignments, and communicate with each other and the instructor in synchronous and/or asynchronous modes (Nemtchinova & Bartholomew, 2004). Additional benefits offered with most CMS's include: downloading and exchanging documents; enrolling, adding, and removing course users; tracking course statistics; posting announcements about updates and/or emergencies; monitor students performance; creating and administering tests and quizzes; and, recording and calculating grades. This combination of dynamic interaction and freedom of time between instructor and students is one of the appealing aspects of using CMS at the collegiate level (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). An additional benefit to using Blackboard is that if you are teaching the same course, you are able to recycle it for a future semester, and do not need to start from scratch. Instructors should still reevaluate the contents before each semester and update as appropriate.

The hybrid design will utilize the CMS the institution is subscribed to as a forum for student learning in cyberspace; it is another classroom environment. A hybrid course design combines in-person and online teaching and learning. The specific combination used can vary by course, semester, and instructor, and will be determined by the instructor. The hybrid course is typically referred to by the percentage of time that instruction will be delivered in an online format and in-person format. For example, a "60/40" course means the course will be delivered 60% online and 40% in person. When selecting the specific hybrid design, it is important to first consider the course content, objectives, goals, and student population. Additional factors may be relevant based on the specific field of study. Many institutions have specific designations for hybrid and online courses to include with the course prefix in a course catalog. Instructors should consult with their department chairs and the registrar's office for appropriate notation. For faculty interested in utilizing a CMS in their class, the implementation is typically an easy process as the majority of institutions already have a subscription to at least one CMS. In many instances, the areas that would require the most amount of attention for change and development are centered on the faculty and students. An important factor to consider is that many graduate-level faculty and adult learners may not be as immersed with modern technology as some of the younger generations entering higher education. On a broader scope, it is recommended that faculty maintain technological cultural sensitivity with their students throughout all educational levels as not all students may have had similar exposure to technology.

Infusing Technology into the Classroom for Student Success

There are a variety of important areas that impact the learning process for adult learners, especially in a hybrid course. Many of these areas can be addressed when the course is being designed. Taking the time to attend to these areas prior to the class beginning will not only assist the instructor to manage the course throughout the semester, but will also play a major role in creating an environment in which adult learners can thrive.

Creating the Online Learning Environment.

In a hybrid environment, the responsibilities of the students and the instructor are altered. Lindsay (2004) stated teaching online requires a conscious pedagogical change whereby instructors will need to have a different set of skills to foster and maintain an active learning environment. For example, instructors can not rely on the immediate nonverbal messages they receive from the students, as much of that information will not be available in the on-line learning environment. Many faculty may not be prepared for this pedagogical change. A large amount of responsibility for learning is placed on the students in a hybrid format, which is not atypical for a graduate-level course. However, this increase in independent learning and initiation, especially at the beginning of the course, may be new for many adult learners. In this regard, students are expected to actively and dynamically become autonomous learners, which will hopefully carry with it a long lasting impact of success on the individual beyond the classroom environment. In a hybrid course, the accountability is increased for the student to initiate and draw connections between their existing knowledge and working knowledge; instructors will not be able to read non-verbal behaviors and other cues from students to probe, prompt, and encourage learning in the on-line environment. The student is responsible for independently bringing ideas, thoughts, and questions to the cyber classroom for further discussion. In this capacity, students are in complete control of their learning while working with their peers to build a collaborative community of shared ideas related to the course topic.

Students may enter a hybrid course with a misperception that the course is more similar to an independent study (Johnson-Curiskis, 2006) or that the course is shortened because there are fewer trips to campus. This is a critical area that should be addressed at the onset of the class, if not earlier, so that students understand that the difference is centered on learning occurring in two environments. Students should be clear that expectations that are common in the f2f classrooms (e.g., active participation and engagement, higher level critical thinking, interactions with peers) will hold strong in the cyber classroom. For example, much of the training that occurs in counseling related programs is centered on foundational needs of the students which includes, but is not limited to: clinical skill development and growth, self awareness and reflection, interpersonal interactions, communication (verbal and non-verbal), and mastery of fundamental concepts. Giving and receiving of feedback on a weekly basis at a minimum is an essential component of a student's learning and professional identity development. A hybrid course can successfully uphold these aforementioned foundational student needs in the f2f and cyber environment with the use of exercises and tasks most directly related to the training required for the intended degree.

To better assist the process, the instructor is encouraged to disseminate clear expectations and course goals to assist the students to transition from and between the f2f and cyber environments. For example, a guidelines sheet was designed that outlines the expectations and specific tasks students can perform to demonstrate active engagement and participation in the discussion board in the cyber environment. Some of the points included on this guideline sheet include: location of where students should post threads in Blackboard; directions for how to create a new thread and reply to a peers thread; information describing the expectation of higher level critical thinking skills; and, deadlines for posts that maintain the same day of the week each week (e.g., forums go live every Sunday, and first post by each student is expected by each Tuesday). The guideline sheet is meant to act as a reminder for the students; however, with the intention of consistency, it is expected that students will no longer need to refer to this sheet after the first few weeks of practice. Each student is provided with a hard-copy of this sheet on the first day of the course (typically a f2f meeting), engage the class in a brief discussion to clarify any points, and post the document to the course Blackboard site if they need to reference it electronically in the future. It is important for the instructor to clarify that while the course design may be different, similar expectations common in the classroom (giving and receiving feedback, active participation and

engagement, etc.) are still able to be performed and will continue to be expected by all students in the cyber classroom.

Hybrid designs may not be a good fit with some courses as they may compromise the overall learning goals and objectives for the course. This is a critical area that all instructors must evaluate prior to beginning the transitioning a f2f class to a hybrid design. For example, the author's role is not only as a faculty who teaches graduate level courses, but also as a gatekeeper to my related profession. She has a responsibility to be certain that the students who complete my courses (f2f or hybrid) have the fundamental concepts mastered before graduating and entering the professional world. Faculty teaching f2f courses are responsible and able to constantly monitor the progress each student is making towards their goals, and be able to assist or intervene as necessary. In the cyber classroom, faculty can monitor the quality and assess the depth of content knowledge students are demonstrating by the various posts made whether it be on a discussion board forum, or as part of a virtual chat. Just as faculty will engage students in activities and discussions in f2f classes to assess their content knowledge and areas for continuing learning, faculty can perform similar assessments via the student's engagement in the cyber classroom.

Creating and maintaining the desired cyber environment similar to that in an f2f environment may take extra effort on the part of the instructor, especially at the beginning of the course. Instructors may need to model the desired behavior they wish to see from their students. It has been found that if the instructor enrolls the students into the online site (rather than students self-enrolling), it is one easy and manageable way to demonstrate my commitment and involvement before the class has even begun. This also avoids students coming to me after the semester has started with technical difficulties, which could limit their participation and involvement in the course. If there are technical difficulties, they can be spotted prior to the class beginning. What is encountered most often are students who have not activated their e-mail account or Blackboard user account provided by the college; two necessary elements to participate in a hybrid course. This advanced assistance provides the student time to contact the appropriate resources on campus and will limit the delay incurred at the onset of the course.

Once all students listed on the roster are enrolled, they are invited to participate in various "introductory exercises" in the cyber environment within one or two weeks prior to the first day of class. These introductory exercises have been found to be successful tools for establishing behaviors, creating norms, and relieving much of the initial anxiety adult learners seem to have about this new forum for learning. Feedback from students at the end of hybrid courses taught by the author indicates that while they had taken hybrid courses earlier in their educational experience, the introductory exercises were a useful tool for them to learn more about my style and expectations as their instructor. Just as instructors in the f2f classes have very different styles and approaches to teaching, instructors have very different styles in the cyber classroom. It is helpful for the students to use these introductory exercises to learn and become familiar with my teaching style without having concerns related to their course grade in mind. Another method for clarifying expectations and for initial introductions is to have the class meet in person during the first week of the academic semester. Similarly, to conclude the class, a meeting during the last week of the semester is recommended. The frequency of meeting times in between is up to the instructor based on the specific hybrid model chosen and related to the course goals and objectives.

In addition to reducing anxiety and ambiguity for both roles (students and instructors), the introductory exercises include series of short task skills that will assist the student to become familiar with the functions and tools expected of them to use throughout the course. An example of a short task skill introductory exercise that has been found to be very helpful for students is essentially a scavenger hunt of the online course site in Blackboard. Students are informed that the directions for the assignment are located in the "Assignments" tab, and they are to locate the document and complete the exercise per the directions provided. The directions will include tasks such as creating a profile and uploading a picture, accessing the course syllabi for review and posting any questions in a designated forum on the discussion board, accessing the discussion board and posting a new thread sharing something about themselves and what they are looking forward to taking away from the class, and responding to at least one peer's post. The instructor should anticipate questions by the students and have a frequently asked questions document available to the students to review prior to the beginning of the class. An alternative to creating an FAQ document is to include the same information in the course syllabi.

A second example of a short task skill introductory exercise is related to courses that will implement tests or quizzes in the cyber classroom. As part of my *Introduction to Career Counseling* course, students are invited take a “practice quiz” prior to the first day of class. This introductory exercise is left open during the first week of classes as well for students who wish to complete the practice quiz after hearing more about it on the first day of class. Students are allowed unlimited opportunities to complete this exercise, and they are reminded that this exercise will have no bearing on their final course grade. The practice quiz (format, duration, question type, etc.) models all aspects of the quizzes that students will have to complete during the semester, with the exception of length, but will not count towards their final grade. Typically more than 90% of the students choose to complete the practice quiz. Informal feedback received at the end of semesters confirms that the students find this step to be extremely helpful to setting them up for success. The practice quiz typically includes ten questions pertaining to the course (e.g., “the author of the course text book is...,” or “this course is a hybrid design where by ___% of the course will be conducted using Blackboard”) as well as unrelated questions (e.g., “the NFL team that won the Superbowl was...”).

A requirement for successful learning in this approach is the familiarity and knowledge of using technology as a common tool of communication and class engagement rather than simply as a tool for word processing functions. This may be a potential barrier for many adult learners who may still be learning this technology. If a student does not already have this pre-existing knowledge, a hybrid model could potentially create barriers to the learning process and may negatively impact on the learning environment. This is not to say that they will not be successful, but rather that the course design may be an additional challenge for them to work through. Based on the students performance within the introductory exercises discussed above, the instructor can see students who may struggle with the technology. This could prove to be a useful preventative tool to engage the student in a conversation prior to the onset of the class, and together reassess the student’s readiness for this course design and meeting the expectations.

After the course has begun and throughout the remainder of the semester, there are still strategies for maintaining clarity for the assignments and providing direct expectations to the students. One way to implement this most easily is through the use of “weekly modules.” Typically the modules are housed in the “Course Documents” section of the course site on Blackboard. To assist with organization, a separate folder is created for each week, and is labeled accordingly. Each folder contains any handouts, exercises, activities, supplementary readings, hyperlinks to web sources, and any other pertinent materials for that week. Also created are discussion board forums associated with the specific week’s modules, and they are clearly labeled to avoid confusion. For assignments requiring multiple components (e.g., papers, article critiques) a “guideline sheet” for that particular assignment is created. The guideline sheet, as described earlier, takes a description of an assignment and breaks it down into smaller detailed tasks with corresponding deadlines to assist the student. This structure assists by keeping the student focused on a small task which potentially lessens any sense of feeling overwhelmed. A “Course Logistics” forum is also created on Blackboard that is a place to post any questions students have about any course assignment. Students are encouraged to monitor that forum and to respond to their peers rather than rely on the instructor to answer all questions. Students have found this approach to be helpful in that it is a forum that provides them with a bit more autonomy and control, and an ability to assist their peers which contributes to the increased involvement and cohesion among the students. From the perspective of the instructor, having a separate forum helps to manage student questions about assignments, and keeps posts not relevant to a content discussion out of the weekly forum.

Structure of the Course.

An important concept to review with the students is the expectation of availability and engagement. I choose to structure my hybrid courses using an asynchronous mode. This means that students enrolled in my hybrid course may access the site at anytime of the day to complete the various assignments, exercises, and tasks. There is not a scheduled time when all members of the class must be online at the same time using an asynchronous mode. It is critical that the structural mode of the course be shared with the students prior to the start of the class so that they may plan accordingly.

Hybrid courses can function in multiple modes: asynchronous, synchronous, or a combination depending on assignments. Asynchronous modes mean that when the students are expected to be participating in

the cyber classroom, they may do so at any time during the day or night. They have unlimited daily access to the site and do not need to be online at any specified time. There may be general due dates (e.g., students are asked to post at least one original thread in the discussion board by Tuesday for each weeks' module so as not to back load the discussion for the week); however, there are no times when the entire class all need to be in the cyber classroom together. Synchronous modes mean that all students and the instructor need to be logged into the course site at the same time. For example, if a class would typically meet on Mondays from 4:00pm-6:40pm for a f2f class, a synchronous mode would require that all students log into the course site every Monday from 4:00pm-6:40pm to participate. They would be able to access any computer from any location; however, they must be present and participating in the cyber classroom during the same time and date as they would in a f2f. Finally, a combination mode will be any blend of the two as decided by the course instructor.

The structure of hybrid courses found most accommodating to adult learners and counseling related graduate courses is that of an asynchronous structure. Students and the instructor are provided an opportunity for increased levels of flexibility, accessibility, and unlimited engagement in this course format. Important for counseling related classes are students responding intentionally to thoughtful self reflection throughout the entire semester. The unlimited access afforded in an asynchronous hybrid course allows students to process the content being discussed and more time for deeper reflection of the material (Benbunan-Fich & Hiltz, 1999). With flexibility often comes a corresponding increase for the students and instructor to demonstrate concretely active engagement in the course as an example of investment. Heckman and Annabi (2005) found that courses specifically using the asynchronous learning modality had shown effects of increased levels of cognitive activity, at least equal to, and in some cases superior to, the cognitive processes found in traditional f2f courses.

Active Engagement

The idea of "presence" is a key construct in the learning process that is directly associated with the formulated learning environment. The areas of social presence and teaching presence are essential in the online learning environment at any level. Teaching presence is satisfied by an active role of the instructor, and the social presence is satisfied by active roles of the students/peers (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001; Rourke, et al., 2001). In the asynchronous online environment, students need to be assured that they are not the only individuals participating. Reassurance is needed and is met through various modes in the online environment. Examples of demonstrating presence can include short response time for e-mail exchanges, postings on discussion boards, and announcements posted. Active involvement by instructor and peers can reassure students of teaching and social presence in the online environment.

A potential barrier for adult learners is the time commitment and involvement. Many adult learners access the online course site at varying times with no consistent pattern. While unlimited access to participate may contribute to the sense of social presence, adult learners with extended freedoms to participate at any time of the day or night can potentially delay and stunt the learning process if participation does not occur on a consistent basis and time elapses. To allow even two days to pass without logging onto the course site can result in an overwhelming sense when the student does attempt to join the discussion online. The author recommends that adult learners find a 30-45 minute time of each day (at least over 5 days) to log on and participate in the course site for the weeks we are in the cyber classroom. Students have found this approach to assist with making the course feel manageable, especially with participating in the discussion board. Instructors need to be monitoring participation of students throughout the course as well to ensure that no student falls behind to the point where they might feel overwhelmed upon re-engaging. A delicate balance should be maintained throughout the course so that an instructor does not need to hover over students, and the students are aware of their control of their learning process. "Status Reports" are created and shared with each student at the third and two-third marks of the semester. This is an informal source of structured feedback for the student summarizing their participation in the cyber classroom, highlighting areas in which they have been excelling, and providing constructive feedback for areas to continue to work on. These are shared privately with each student, and are used as a tool to engage the student in a conversation about their progress and offer my assistance in the learning process, if needed.

Communication

Hybrid and graduate level courses tend to rely heavily on communication as a key tool. For counseling related courses, communication is not only an important part of the learning process in the course (e.g., giving and providing feedback), but is also fundamental clinical skill in this profession. Appropriate uses of communication that will be expected in the course for both learning environments should be clarified on the first day. This is also an area where the introductory exercises may be useful to assist with clarifying and modeling desired behaviors. Communication in the cyber classroom is typically conducted via e-mail and discussion boards or public forums. Mason and Weller (2001) noted the adult learners in their technology course tended to find the number of messages overwhelming and the tone of the messages from experienced computer users very off-putting. The authors continued to state a heightened level of intimidation of the adult learners when participating in online discussions due to a perceived level of confidence and knowledge from their classmates. Many of the cues we use and rely on in communication are based on verbal (e.g., tone, intonation, inflections) and non-verbal (e.g., body language) messages; all of which are not readily available in electronic communication. Therefore, it is possible that the student's interpretation of a message (e-mail or post on a discussion board) may be different than what was originally intended by the author. Lindsay (2004) reported a noteworthy difference between student's social interaction and communication style in a f2f class compared to an online environment. Differences were seen among the process of holding a conversation (e.g., discussion board, chat forums, e-mails), and expanded to include larger issues of depersonalization and loss of student's identity (Lindsay). Building in introductory exercises to established behavior norms prior to the beginning of class is an easy way for the instructor to reduce the chances of communication barriers from developing. In addition, the author likes to provide extra feedback to the class as a whole and to send individual e-mail messages to students related to their communication performance within the first few weeks of the class. This constant and immediate feedback by me assists the students to know that I am involved and committed to the course as well as to assisting them to be successful learners in the cyber classroom.

A key benefit of a moderate hybrid course design (e.g., 50/50 or 60/40) compared to a course with an increased amount of online time is that if issues related to communication, interpersonal, or other fundamental skill development are questionable, there is still time in the traditional f2f learning environment where any such concerns may be addressed directly. This would provide an opportunity for effective constructive feedback to be delivered to the student, and may also result in more effective and productive use of course time online. The author finds the moderate hybrid designs to be most applicable to the applied counseling course that she teaches.

Perceptions of availability related to communication must also be clarified at the onset of the class. With unlimited access to the course site, students may have perceptions that the instructor is available or "on-call" all hours of a day. It can be helpful for the instructor to address this issue of availability in an FAQ (frequently asked questions) document as mentioned earlier, and/or to include the information in the course syllabus. Students are informed that during the week, they can typically expect an e-mail response from me within 24-hours, and within 48-hours on a weekend. If I know that I will be away from my computer for an extended period of time, I simply post a friendly update notice on the "Announcements" on the course Blackboard site.

Student Feedback Related to their Experiences in a Hybrid Course

Informal student feedback based on their experiences at the end of each course is sought. Students have strong reactions supporting the concept of "presence" in the online learning environment. Teaching presence was a critical aspect that had a positive impact on students' abilities to maintaining ongoing involvement and communication in the cyber classroom. Students reported having a sense of clear expectations from me in the course which was achieved primarily from the introductory exercises, the syllabi, and the guideline sheets provided. Students reported the high levels of communication and availability between the instructor and students to be important areas contributing to their success in the class. Similarly, students reported that it was important to them to have an instructor who was accessible and open to hearing concerns and/or issues related to course design or content. In addition, they felt it was important that they received prompt feedback from me, which was typically provided within a 24-or 48-hour period, as previously explained. These perspectives shared by students provide support to the

concepts of presence, communication, and active engagement discussed earlier, and how important they can be in the learning process.

Conclusion

Consideration by the instructor needs to be taken prior to transitioning or developing a course with a hybrid mode to assess if the course goals and objectives can be successfully attained by students in that blended learning environment. However, it is this author's experience that the hybrid approach seems particularly well-suited to a constructivist approach and to the unique demands of adult learners. While technology has offered many benefits in the classroom, it is important that all instructors and students remember not all courses may be suited for a hybrid or fully online design. The exercises, activities, and teaching style that have been presented here are what have assisted me to be successful in teaching hybrid courses.

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