Lessons Learned from the Hybrid Course Project

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This article reports on the most significant observations from the Hybrid Course Project and provides "Lessons Learned" about hybrid course design and teaching for:

- Faculty interested in developing their own hybrid courses,
- Faculty developers interested in helping instructors create hybrid courses, and
- Academic administrators interested in supporting hybrid courses.

For an overview and more general information about the project and hybrid courses, see Carla Garnham and Robert Kaleta, *Introduction to Hybrid Courses*, in this issue of *TTT*.

Seventeen instructors from five University of Wisconsin (UW) campuses, representing disciplines from the humanities, social sciences, engineering, and professions, participated in the Hybrid Course Project by transforming a traditional course into a hybrid course. A 1999-2001 UW-System Curricular Redesign Grant provided funding.

Throughout the project, project coordinators developed assessment protocols to capture insights into the hybrid course design process. The following are the protocols used during the Hybrid Course Project, in the approximate order that they were employed:

- Assessment of:
  - Faculty familiarity with teaching technologies;
  - The initial Faculty Development Workshop on hybrid module design and the integration of in-class and out-of-class learning;
  - The second Faculty Development Workshop on managing students and teaching in an online environment and assessment in hybrid courses.
- Data on course hits to student ratios:
  - At mid-semester;
  - At end of semester.
- Hybrid course
Lesson #1: There is no standard approach to a hybrid course.

The first two questions everyone asks about hybrid courses are, "How much of the course should be online?" and "What part of the course should go online?" There are no pat answers!

Hybrid courses show enormous variety in how the face-to-face ratio to online time is distributed. In this Hybrid Course Project instructors reduced class time from 25% to 50%. They also scheduled their courses very differently. For example, some replaced one class per week with online assignments. Others met with their students in class for several weeks and then suspended class meetings for several weeks as the students worked independently or in teams on online assignments. One hybrid instructor simply replaced the last 30 minutes of a weekly night course with online work to ensure that students were prepared to participate in the in-class discussions.

Instructors also design hybrid courses to accommodate their own teaching styles and course content. Therefore, learning activities taking place in and out of the classroom vary greatly. For example, an instructor can redesign traditional lecture material into online modules for the students to complete prior to attending a class and emphasize discussion in the class. Or, an instructor who prefers to present in class may use out of class time for online discussion forums that direct students to think critically and discuss their views with other students and the instructor.

Lesson #2: Redesigning a traditional course into a hybrid takes time.

Hybrid instructors should allow six months lead time for course development. At the end of the project, the participants were universal in their advice to others developing hybrid courses, "Start early and plan very carefully; hybridization is a lot of work."

Because it’s often difficult to begin work on redesign, a formal faculty development program can help instructors in many ways, including getting started and pacing their progress. The majority of the project’s instructors started learning about hybrid methods and planning their courses in June 2000. By August they had developed a course plan.
which they continued to improve upon during the fall 2000 semester. They taught their first hybrid courses in spring semester 2001.

Lesson #3: Start small and keep it simple.

Several instructors overestimated what they could accomplish in their first hybrid course and overworked themselves and the students. The following are suggestions for hybrid course developers. (Also, see Peter Sands' "tips" in Inside Outside, Upside Downside in this issue of TTT.)

- Instructors should have a thorough understanding of the time commitment and consequences of active-learning pedagogies before deciding on an appropriate technology to use in a course. For example, online discussions or forums are effective and popular with students, but instructors need to learn how to moderate online discussions effectively before they use them in a course.

- Relatively high-tech activities, such as streaming video, are also relatively high-risk pedagogically at present; these technologies are not always easy to use, things do go wrong on a regular basis, and even when everything works right, bandwidth issues limit what and where learning activities take place. Students strongly prefer working from home, thus technologies should be selected with this preference in mind.

- Learning to use the technology appropriately and effectively can also be a challenge. For example, for his first hybrid course one instructor put all of his lectures online in streaming video. He learned that 50-minute lectures online were too long; "lectures on the screen aren't the same as lectures in person." When teaching his second hybrid course, he broke his content presentations into less than ten minute streaming video clips, and he interspersed his mini-lectures with student-centered problem-solving activities.

- Building upon the initial redesign, hybrid course development is an incremental process with new modules and learning activities added in subsequent semesters.

Lesson #4: Redesign is the key to effective hybrid courses to integrate the face-to-face and online learning.

An instructor’s first impulse is often to add online work in addition to traditional coursework or simply to load lecture content, such as PowerPoint slides, online. However, in order to create effective interactivity, full course redesign is essential for successful hybrid courses. As one instructor put it, "The emphasis is on pedagogy, not technology. Ask yourself what isn't working in your course that can be done differently or better online."

There is only one effective way to use online technologies in hybrid courses: it is essential to redesign the course to integrate the face-to-face and online learning. The
online learning modules are central to a hybrid course's success, and the students' work online must be relevant to the in-class activities. The project's participants emphasized this point repeatedly. When asked, "What would I do differently?" they were united in their response: "I'd devote more attention to integrating what was going on in the classroom with the online work." This was true even though the project's faculty development sessions repeatedly emphasized the importance of connecting in-class material with out-of-class assignments. One instructor responded emphatically, "Integrate online with face-to-face, so there aren't two separate courses." We found it impossible to stress integrating face-to-face and online learning too much.

Additionally, the students were quite critical if they felt the face-to-face and time-out-of-class components of the course were not well integrated. This was one of the students' chief complaints about some of the hybrid courses. The debriefing sessions with the project's instructors indicated that instructors were aware of these course integration problems, which arose more from their inexperience with the hybrid mode of instruction than from a problem with the model.

The thought and planning required for a course redesign is difficult and time-consuming. Thus, instructors need to make certain that the time and resources required to create a hybrid course are available before they commit to the process. Release time, summer contracts, and other practices for providing instructors with the time required to redesign traditional courses into hybrids are important considerations for campus administrators.

**Lesson #5: Hybrid courses facilitate interaction among students, and between students and their instructor.**

Contrary to many instructors' initial concerns, the hybrid approach invariably increases student engagement and interactivity in a course. One of the primary fears expressed by faculty about hybrid courses is that they will lose contact with their students. Just the opposite occurs. Hybrid courses encourage instructors to develop new ways to engage their students online and foster online communities. This greater online interaction will emerge in the classroom as well.

Thus, it is important for hybrid instructors to learn how to facilitate and manage online interaction. As these are critical skills for teaching hybrid courses, it is important to offer sessions in managing discussion forums and in building online community for instructors planning to teach in the hybrid model.

**Lesson #6: Students don't grasp the hybrid concept readily.**

The hybrid model is new to students, so they need a clear rationale for its use. Our instructors learned that students required repeated explanations about the model, explaining clearly what it is and why the instructor chose it. To quote from one student's observation, "There was only one real problem; it was difficult at first to understand how the course was being taught and to get the technology to work properly. After the course got rolling, it did get easier and easier to get a grip on it."
The hybrid instructors anticipated working with their students on technology skills. However, far more important were students' psychological maturity and time management skills. The instructors reported that their most significant problems were with students not taking responsibility for their courses and with students' poor time management skills. As one instructor advised, "Time management is a problem. Begin a conversation with students about time management. Spend a couple of weeks logging daily activities yourself, and your time management discussions will be rooted in your experience." Students need to have strong time management skills in hybrid courses, and many need assistance developing this skill.

Hybrid instructors should pay attention to their students' expectations and skills. Surprisingly, many of the students don't perceive time spent in lectures as "work", but they definitely see time spent online as work, even if it is time they would have spent in class in a traditional course.

**Lesson #7: Time flexibility in hybrid courses is universally popular.**

The increased time flexibility was very important, especially to students, as evidenced by this student's comment: "Yes, I would recommend this course to others. I like the flexibility in that I can work on the course work when it fits into my schedule. With working, taking care of a family and going to school, I don't always have the freedom to be to a class at a particular time." At a substantially commuter university, such as UW-Milwaukee, this is not surprising; the students have identified parking problems as the university's number one deficiency for some time.

For the students the importance of time flexibility appears to outweigh any inconvenience caused by the technologies. However, students' expectation of time flexibility is that the course work can be done at home, not merely outside the classroom. Apparently, work done in a computer lab is not perceived by the students as more convenient to work done in a classroom, no matter how many hours or how many days the computer lab is open. Thus, students strongly prefer using learning technologies that are available from home. This is an important insight for those developing hybrid courses.

**Lesson #8: Technology was not a significant obstacle.**

Technology did not prove to be a barrier for most of the instructors or their students. Most students' problems with technology occur at the start of the classes. All of the instructors agreed with their colleague who stated, "If the students got past the first couple of weeks, they were ok." For technology issues, instructors did recommend writing very complete and clear "how to" instructions for students. One faculty participant reported that he asked a friend without a lot of computer savvy to read and work through his instructions to students to ensure that they were useful and accurate.

All instructors concurred that the first week of class should be dedicated to technology orientation and class socialization (students work together online most successfully if
they’ve gotten to know each other). Some instructors objected to losing this course time to non-course content topics, but all felt it was essential.

The students liked using the technology, because they perceived they were acquiring a useful skill. Generally, students thought that Blackboard was easy to use and appreciated the opportunity to learn how to use the Web. Universally, they believed that computer skills learned in the hybrid course would help them in other courses and in the workplace.

**Lesson #9: Developing a hybrid course is a collegial process.**

All of the Hybrid Course Project instructors emphasized the importance of discussing the course redesign problems and progress with colleagues. They found the opportunity to interact with an experienced hybrid course instructor especially valuable. An instructor with experience could answer questions, share "war stories" about what to expect when teaching a hybrid course, and generally give reassurance. This was greatly appreciated by the inexperienced hybrid instructors.

Faculty learn best from each other. Instructional designers and faculty development specialists play an important role in the redesign process, but it is essential for the instructors to interact among themselves. The hybrid project participants benefited from the exchange of ideas and issues, both in person and online.

**Lesson #10: Both the instructors and the students liked the hybrid course model.**

The participating instructors were positive about the hybrid model. As one instructor remarked, "The hybrid took something I always knew was possible and let me do it." Granted, these instructors were self-nominated and interested in using instructional technology in their teaching. Nonetheless, 100% of the Hybrid Course Project faculty participants would recommend using the approach to others and plan to teach with the hybrid model again.

The primary reason for their positive assessment is that the hybrid model was valuable for student learning. They stated that the hybrid model improved their courses because

- Student interactivity increased,
- Student performance improved, and
- They could accomplish course goals that hadn’t been possible in their traditional course.

The students were extremely attracted by the hybrid course's time flexibility. This was a universal student response in every hybrid assessment protocol. The substantial majority (80%) of students said that they thought the hybrid model was worthwhile, and that they would recommend a course offered in the hybrid mode to others.
Conclusion

The power of the hybrid course model is its flexibility and its pedagogical effectiveness. Because it emphasizes active learning techniques, it increases student interaction with other students and the instructor. One of the most significant accomplishments of the Hybrid Course Project was its impact on the participating instructors. They stated that the hybrid experience would change their approach to all of their future teaching, whether in a traditional, hybrid or distance education class. Thus, hybrid courses can accomplish general faculty development goals and provide new and exciting teaching experiences for instructors and students. As one instructor put it, "Hybrid gives me the best of both worlds."