Chapter 15

Case Study of HyFlex Course Design: Benefits and Challenges for Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative comparative multiple-case study was to explore students’ perspectives regarding implementation of HyFlex course design in a graduate level course. The main feature of HyFlex is related to hybrid and flexible student attendance: students choose how and when they achieve attendance. The data collection sources in this case study included interviews of six graduate students, class observations, recordings of class meetings, and related online course artifacts. Results indicated that participants perceived both benefits and challenges related to HyFlex implementation. Benefits included (1) accommodating for students’ needs and life circumstances, (2) differentiating instruction, (3) increasing access to course content and instruction, and (4) encouraging student choice and control. Challenges included (1) students taking advantage of the flexibility and (2) technical difficulties. Additionally, for this chapter, the instructor in this study provides an update of HyFlex implementation.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of the “traditional student,” is becoming obsolete. The idea of the young adult student, living on campus, financially free to pursue an education and then transitioning into the workforce is quickly fading. A variety of demographic changes including, increased minority enrollment, an increased gender gap with more women in attendance, and shifts in age, are impacting the current college student body (Williams, 2014; McPherson, 2017). The shifting changes in the age of college students means
that today’s adult students are juggling multiple life roles while attending school, including the roles of worker, spouse or partner, parent, and caregiver. The commitments held by these students outside of the academic world of college, lead to the need for flexibility in their learning environments to support their needs, address their challenges, and strengthen their educational independence.

Wade (2013) proposes that one solution that addresses the challenge of this diversity of students is an approach to teaching and learning that encourages flexibility at all stages, from the design of courses to forms of course delivery. Adult students need flexibility related to time and to the learning environment, so that they can coordinate work and family responsibilities with challenging course schedules. They need flexible learning so they can choose a mix of traditional and new approaches along with the requisite technologies for learning; they may want to study at the time and place they choose and at their own speed (Khan, 2007). This capacity for access to learning anytime, anywhere (Axelson, 1997) is a means for the potential of increased flexibility and is illustrated in the HyFlex Model. HyFlex blends synchronous online (e.g. web conferencing) and face-to-face components in a single course and allows students to choose when and how they attend. HyFlex incorporates blended learning characteristics wherein the instruction and instructional materials are provided both face-to-face and online within a more flexible framework.

Using HyFlex in adult and higher education has been noted as a means of supporting adult students’ educational opportunities through better access, greater convenience, and flexibility (Beatty, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014; Miller, Risser & Griffiths, 2013). An example of what this might look like is to imagine the instructor sitting in a class meeting with face-to-face students and with a laptop computer that has a web conferencing program open allowing online students to attend virtually. Further, note that the class meeting is recorded and if a student must miss either face-to-face or online attendance, said student simply watches the recording.

Recently, HyFlex course design has received further attention but remains a subject in need of further empirical research. Previous studies in HyFlex explored the extent to which students’ needs and expectations are met along with instructor perspectives regarding participation and performance in hyflex classes in comparison to previous face-to-face classes (Kyei-Blankson & Godwyll, 2010; Kyei-Blankson, Godwyll, Nur-Awaleh & Keengwe, 2011). Miller et al. (2013) examined the effectiveness of HyFlex for student learning within large higher education courses. Previous studies also investigated student satisfaction in a HyFlex course (Lakhal, Khechine, & Pascot, 2014; Kyei-Blankson, Godwyll, & Nur-Awaleh, 2014; Wright, 2016). Continued application of the HyFlex model and sharing of results are needed to provide replicable examples of what can be done with this model and to provide insight into the student experience with this model.

The purpose of the case study addressed in this chapter was to investigate benefits and challenges of implementing the HyFlex model in a graduate course from students’ perspectives. The following research questions were addressed: (1) what were the benefits of implementing the HyFlex model in graduate courses; and (2) what were the challenges of implementing the HyFlex model in graduate courses? The objectives of this chapter include providing definitions and discussions of the related key concepts of flexible learning and HyFlex Course Design; providing the context for the study of a graduate level HyFlex course; discussion of the research methods and findings; and final discussion including an update from the HyFlex instructor who continues using HyFlex course design.
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