Chapter 2

Engaging College Students Through Hybrid Learning: Perspectives From Four Instructors

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, four instructors share their perspectives transforming three existing face-to-face courses into hybrid models at a public, urban university in an effort to improve learner engagement with course content and provide flexibility for students to meet out of school life demands. The authors will provide insight into their decisions to transition to this model, experiences developing and implementing the model for the first time, and the outcomes and impact the approach has had in their work with university students.

INTRODUCTION

To align teaching approaches with student needs, many colleges and universities are increasingly offering online learning options. According to Hurlbut (2018) and Allen and Seaman (2016), 28% of students in higher education participate in at least one online course in their respective fields of study and 14% of students are enrolled exclusively in online programs. Online courses help keep overhead costs down,
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attract a wider range of students, including working adults and students with disabilities, by reducing or eliminating personal and logistical barriers when required to attend exclusively face-to-face classes, and broaden the pool of highly qualified instructors, who might otherwise be unable to teach for the same reasons (Drago, 2004; Mason, 2009; Lao & Gonzalez, 2005).

While increasing numbers of college instructors seem to be embracing the format (Roehl, Reddy & Shannon, 2013), others question the potential impact on the quality of educational programs, citing limitations in depth of content and student engagement. Gilboy, Heinerichs, and Pazzaglia (2015) define student engagement as learners constructing or reconstructing knowledge through the use of active learning strategies, such as problem-based learning, simulation, and collaborative discussion. In the field of teacher education, face-to-face courses are often seen as necessary to immerse future teachers in contexts representative of what they will later lead themselves. Despite Shachar and Neumann’s (2010) research, in which they found 20 studies showing preservice teachers taking online courses outperformed their counterparts in traditional formatted courses, many education faculty remain reluctant to change formats, particularly for methods courses. They argue modeling and in-person direct exposure to strategies are essential to engaging students in the content and approaches to be used in their future classrooms.

To explore the possibilities for online in teacher education, the authors of this chapter — four instructors of methods courses at a northeast, urban, public university — engaged in a practitioner researcher project using their own courses. Campbell and McNamara (2009) define practitioner research as research done by practitioners themselves, typical for evaluation and improvement. To this end, for two academic semesters, the four practitioner researchers documented and reflected on their experiences as they developed and piloted a course structure that maximizes the benefits of online learning, and, at the same time, address the challenges they, like many college instructors, have experienced in engaging our students deeply with the content of the courses. Their model draws from the “flipped” classroom and the hybrid teaching model, which Babb, Stewart, and Johnson (2010) have identified as the fastest-growing format. Hybrid models employ online lectures and learning tasks using “easy-to-use, readily accessible technology” which complement in-person activities (Roehl, et al., 2013, p. 44). In flipped classrooms, the introduction to new content happens outside of the classroom, which frees class time from lectures and allows for more active, hands-on learning in its place.

The following sections describe what led to the decision to make these changes to their courses. The practitioner researchers will detail the design structure created, as well as reflect upon their own individual, ideological processes, and direct experiences with students. To test this model, the practitioner researchers applied the designed structure to their own courses during the 2018-2019 academic year. After sharing what the practitioner researchers learned as well as students’ perspectives on their levels of engagement, the authors will offer suggestions and implications for theirs and others’ future practice.

BACKGROUND

This project began near the end of the Spring 2018 semester. Over the prior semester, three of the practitioner researchers, Tamara, Ann and Tal, met regularly to discuss and maintain coherence and consistency across two courses that Ann and Tal taught, and Tamara supervised. The two courses aimed to prepare future teachers to differentiate instruction to address the needs of English language learners in their classes. At the time, Tamara, mid-40s, was a full-time, Associate Professor of Instruction at the