

The Hybrid Advantage: Graduate Student Perspectives of Hybrid Education Courses

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Hybrid courses combine online and face-to-face learning environments. To organize and teach hybrid courses, instructors must understand the uses of multiple online learning tools and face-to-face classroom activities to promote and monitor the progress of students. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perspectives of graduate students about the instructional activities of hybrid courses that motivated them and enhanced their understanding of course content. The perspectives of the students were obtained through an online survey and a focus group. The findings of the study describe the experiences of the students in hybrid courses and their suggestions to enhance the online and face-to-face components. Four overarching themes emerged from the data: organization and flexibility, online activities, interactive classes, and balance. The findings may be used to inform the planning and effective sequencing of online and face-to-face components of graduate level hybrid courses.

Hybrid courses combine instructional elements from traditional face-to-face and online course formats (El Mansour & Mupinga, 2007). They may also be referred to as web-enhanced, blended, or mixed mode learning. The provision of hybrid courses in higher education has increased rapidly because of changing student demographics and efforts to make courses more accessible to students (Blier, 2008). For example, hybrid courses decrease travel time for students who live in rural areas, thereby reducing student expense and increasing convenience (Yudko, Hirokawa, & Chi, 2008). This option also appeals to a range of students who manage busy schedules and have multiple home and work responsibilities. As universities seek to reach more diverse student populations, it is likely that hybrid courses will continue to grow and stem the rising costs of higher education (Woodworth & Applin, 2007).

Instructors have developed hybrid courses using multiple combinations of online and face-to-face instruction. In a molecular symmetry course, the instructor delivered lectures in person and dedicated part of each class session to introduce the online activities that students were required to complete between classes (Antonoglou, Charistos, & Sigalas, 2011). In an introductory Information Technology course, online and face-to-face activities were balanced differently: students engaged in team-based problem-solving activities in class and completed self-paced activities online (Woodworth & Applin, 2007). Instructors have also designed courses that merge face-to-face and online components. As an example, Bonakdarian, Whittaker, and Yang (2010) described their undergraduate hybrid computer courses as “the mixed mode of instruction that combines both face-to-face and online students *in the same class* by incorporating synchronous technologies to facilitate the learning process” (p. 99). Similarly, Dal Bello,

Knowlton, and Chaffin (2007) described an introductory Special Education course where the instructor used interactive videoconferencing for off-campus students in order to participate in face-to-face classes. Though there are many ways to design a hybrid course, the inclusion of both online and face-to-face activities provides the common thread. In the present study, the university definition of hybrid course was utilized: “Up to 74% of the course meetings are conducted online. Online course meetings may be synchronous or asynchronous. Students access the course content and engage in instructional activities to facilitate learning through the University’s Learning Management System” (Ashland University, 2014).

The effectiveness of hybrid courses, measured by student attitudes and performance, varies across the literature. O’Brien, Hartshorne, Beattie, and Jordan (2011) found little difference in the attitudes expressed by students who participated in a traditional face-to-face course compared with students in the parallel hybrid version of the introductory Special Education course. Riffell and Sibley (2010) found polarized student responses to questions that rated the quality of instructor and classmate interactions in a large undergraduate Biology course. In terms of content mastery, an experimental study found that students in both a traditional and a hybrid computer course attained comparable achievement and knowledge retention scores (Delialioglu & Yildirim, 2008). Additional studies have associated hybrid courses with improved student performance (Brunner, 2006), as well as increased student involvement, positive perceptions, and student achievement (Antonoglou, Charistos, & Sigalas, 2011). The mixed results reflect the diversity of delivery formats, students’ experience and comfort level with technology, and the selection of instructional activities.

Student satisfaction with hybrid courses has been documented in multiple research studies. In one study, undergraduate students favored the convenience, engagement, ability to work at their own pace and comfort in expressing themselves in a hybrid course (Kenny & Newcombe, 2011). Paechter and Maier (2010) identified five factors that enhanced undergraduate student satisfaction with a hybrid course: clarity and structure, knowledge acquisition, the instructor's online expertise, support from the instructor, and support for cooperative learning. The hybrid courses that did not maintain motivation and required inordinate amounts of time to organize and manage activities received negative student satisfaction ratings. To improve hybrid courses, undergraduate students suggested more training in the use of technology as well as recording synchronous sessions for later review (Bonakdarian, Whittaker, & Bell, 2009; Wood, 2010).

There is a need to identify the best use of online instruction and how to implement the tools of online learning management systems (Sauers & Walker, 2004). Though a growing number of faculty are teaching courses with online components, there remain challenges and questions about using technology in a pedagogically effective manner (Lee & Dashew, 2011). Instructors should carefully consider the goals of each course to determine whether new technology would better prepare students to meet those outcomes (Zhou, Simpson, & Domizi, 2012). They should also know how to integrate the best features of online instruction to enhance traditional classroom instruction (Antonoglou, Charistos, & Sigalas, 2011).

Research points toward hybrid course designs in which the advantages of both online and face-to-face learning are combined. There is a need to determine the elements of hybrid learning that increase student satisfaction and performance, as well as how these elements combine to create a balanced course (Paechter & Maier, 2010). There is also a need to better understand the particular perspectives of graduate students, a population with a wide range of profiles and purposes for advanced study, to create courses to fit their unique needs. Therefore, the purpose of the present phenomenological study was to explore the perspectives of graduate students about the instructional activities of hybrid courses that motivated them and enhanced their understanding of course content.

Methods

Qualitative methods were selected as the best approach to understand the perspectives and experiences of graduate students in hybrid courses (Creswell, 2008; Richards & Morse, 2007). These

methods support an advocacy/participatory paradigm that relies upon the voices of participants and leads to change in practice (Creswell, 2007). A phenomenological methodology was used to describe the lived experiences of the participants (Van Manen, 1990); it is an interpretive process that arrives at the essence of their experience through a detailed description of the phenomenon. This method provided opportunities to see the larger picture and to identify the complex interactions in a hybrid course.

Purposeful Sampling

Purposeful sampling was used to select information-rich cases to develop an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). Criterion sampling was used to select participants who were graduate students enrolled in hybrid courses at a private mid-sized university in the Midwest. Thirty students completed the online survey, and six students participated in the focus group. The students who completed the online survey ranged from 22 to 56 years of age and had taken between one and eight hybrid courses. Hybrid courses were defined by university policy as courses in which up to 75% of the class meetings were conducted using synchronous and/or asynchronous tools found on the University Learning Management System. At the time of the study, the design of graduate courses at the university varied by instructor, with the majority of hybrid courses offered using asynchronous components.

Participants were recruited from graduate-level teacher education hybrid courses. The researchers introduced the study to the students in person and provided them with the informed consent forms for both the survey and focus group. Because the survey was completely anonymous, the researchers had no way to know who did or did not complete the survey. Students who were interested in participating in the focus group signed and returned the focus group consent form. Each potential participant who returned the consent form was contacted via email to schedule a convenient time for the group to meet.

Data Collection

Data were collected through an anonymous online survey and focus group. The online survey was used to gather the experiences and perspectives of graduate students. According to Van Manen (1990), "the most straightforward way to go about our research is to ask selected individuals to write their experiences down" (p. 63). Students accessed the survey from the researchers' course site on the university's online learning management system. The printable consent form was the first page on the survey, which consisted

of three demographic questions, a checklist, and six open-ended questions. The participants indicated on the checklist which online components they had used during their hybrid courses. The open-ended questions consisted of the following:

1. Which online components do you like the most? Why?
2. Which online components help you understand the content the most? Why?
3. Which face-to-face components do you like the most? Why?
4. Which face-to-face components help you understand the content the most? Why?
5. How do online and face-to-face classes compliment or impact each other?
6. What additional thoughts do you have about your interest or understanding of hybrid course content?

The focus group included six graduate students and was facilitated by both researchers. The purpose of the focus group was to explore the participants' experiences and the meanings of their experiences to form a deeper understanding (Creswell, 2007; Van Manen, 1990). The interview protocol of this study included general questions that aligned with the online survey and probing questions to follow up on participants' responses. The general questions were flexible to allow new inquiry to emerge during the data collection (Creswell, 2008), and the probing questions solicited more in-depth information to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences of hybrid courses (Merriam, 1998).

Data Analysis

Phenomenological data analysis is a process that establishes patterns or themes that emerge from the data. To analyze the data, we selected significant statements from the transcripts. We then reduced the statements into meaning units and further reduced the meaning units into themes (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Both researchers read through the survey and focus group transcripts independently. Open coding and notes about emerging patterns were used to identify initial codes. We compared codes and combined those that were the same for both researchers. We then arranged and rearranged the codes into groups of similar concepts. Through this recursive process, we examined and regrouped the codes until 14 meaning units emerged. The meaning units were then reduced into four themes (see Table 1). The themes and meaning units were checked for accuracy by comparing examples of the codes and contexts within the transcripts for each theme.

Validation Procedures

Validation in qualitative research is the attempt to increase the accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2007). To increase the accuracy, or credibility, of the findings, we used triangulation, member checking, and peer review (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We triangulated sources of data by collecting and analyzing online surveys, a focus group, and our field notes. The focus group provided an opportunity for member checking where we summarized the survey findings for the participants to solicit feedback on their accuracy and to check for needed additions or corrections (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). A draft of the focus group discussion was sent to the participants to inquire whether and to what extent they correctly reflected their thoughts and experiences. Three participants responded and confirmed the accuracy of the findings. We also used a process of peer review with each other and our colleagues (Creswell, 2007).

Findings

The findings of the present study describe the experiences and perspectives of graduate students about hybrid courses. Their perspectives reflect the aspects that not only motivated them, but also helped them to understand the content of the course. Four themes emerged from the data: organization and flexibility, online activities, interactive classes, and balance. Organization and flexibility included views about scheduling, pacing, opportunities for practice, and access to materials. The online activities highlighted comprised of lectures, assignments for diverse learning styles, discussion forums, and assessments. Interactive classes included multiple ways of learning, discussions and collaboration on real life scenarios in the physical classroom. The balance between online and face-to-face classes was developed through the understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, student support options, purposeful placement of activities, and the connections between classes.

Organization and Flexibility

In the busy lives of students who managed full-time family and work responsibilities, the online components of hybrid courses provided independence with which to pace their learning process. As one mother explained, "I can do it when it works for my family life." One of the teachers also found that "they are definitely easier to fit into a working teacher's schedule." The focus group discussion converged upon the insistence that hybrid courses should be "flexible so that the work could be completed...as it best fits my schedule." For some students, the benefits of online

Table 1
Themes and Meaning Units

Themes	Meaning Units
Organization and Flexibility	Convenience and Flexibility Scheduling Organization and Access Technology
Online Activities	Presenting Materials Learning Styles Discussion Forums Tests and Quizzes
Interactive Classes	"Interactive Classes" "Real Life" Deeper Understanding Instructors
Balance	Balance Placement of Activities Connecting Classes

components in hybrid classes related to working in a preferred environment, such as their home. In addition, students wanted to be able to slow down or speed up the pace of class activities: "I had to take my time to read online articles...I could read an article two or three times and still not have the gist of it. I had to have my time to sit down, break it apart." Thus, flexibility in pacing was an important benefit of hybrid courses:

In the classroom, you don't always have the replay. Yes, you could always ask questions, but [online] you could push pause, regain what you needed, you know, and go back—see it over and over again. I have to say that was probably the best part for me as a more visual learner.

The online quizzes that allowed several attempts provided extra practice and encouraged students to explore concepts. Some students suggested that repeating online assessments was a way to reduce anxiety: "I'm not always the best test-taker. I also like the online quizzes because you can take them at your own pace, there's no time limit, and you get several tries."

During the focus group discussion, students also valued being able to work ahead of schedule: "I liked being able to advance at my own pace...you could have finished the class in four weeks...not waiting for the next assignments." When scheduling course assignments, there were instructors who controlled the presentation (access) of online course elements to promote regular review of content and better course management. One student preferred such pacing: "I liked to know that this is what starts on Sunday and it has to be done by Saturday." On the other hand, one

student disliked restricted access to online components, preferring that all assignments be available from the beginning of the course. Thus, while some students valued the flexibility of having access to online components, others questioned the pedagogical value from the instructor's perspective: "Do you let them cram it all at the end...or do you have to create those deadlines that this assignment has to be done?" The scheduling of face-to-face meetings served to keep students on track and to better manage their time spent on online assignments: "When there are too many weeks between face-to-face meetings, I tend to get behind on assignments." Developing organizational skills was necessary to function successfully in hybrid environments: "I'm a procrastinator, so I had to become a person that was on a schedule [in a hybrid class]."

Flexibility in scheduling did not necessarily translate positively to all aspects of a hybrid course. Some students did not like working online with peers to prepare group projects: "You had to meet online at a certain time with the group and put your presentation together. And I'm like, it's hard enough to meet face-to-face, let alone online!" Meeting online with new classmates was described as more difficult than meeting face-to-face. One participant noted, "You don't have to be agreeable [online]; it's different if you know people." This comment suggested that meeting online does not import the same social standards, expectations, and consequences as meeting face-to-face or having already established a relationship.

The idea of access was emphasized in respect to accessibility to course materials and assignments, outside references and resources, classmates and instructors, course updates, and reminders. Technology was viewed as beneficial to provide last-minute

information: "Posting changes to class material and assignments is very helpful." Students noted that the way the online learning environment was organized could improve their access to needed materials, assignments, and grades: "You've got it there without having to e-mail the teacher. You know that it's there in the folder." Another student appreciated that all of the PowerPoint presentations were posted and added, "I liked being able to see the grades, too." Several students expressed preferences for folders being organized according to weeks or sessions instead of by activities or topics: "It was mind-boggling to figure out where you had been [online]. So I had no other choice but to make a to-do list and mark it all off myself."

The benefits of using technology were sometimes overshadowed by frustration, annoyance, and confusion caused by technology problems. A student who was having difficulties using the online system noted, "Sometimes uploading assignments [when there are technological difficulties] can become frustrating." The enthusiasm for technology, and the online components in general, decreased whenever there were technology problems.

Online Activities

Course content was often presented in online environments through lectures using PowerPoint and Prezi presentations. Students perceived that the online presentations of instructors were of varied quality. They preferred shorter online presentations with attention-grabbing audio and visual components. When online presentations were not interesting, students admitted to simply turning off or away from the presentation: "I'd be there for five minutes and then I'd click on something else." Students also reacted favorably to the inclusion of professionally-developed series and interactive modules within the online course environment.

In describing the online activities that were most helpful, students tended to reference learning preferences: "I'm a visual/tactile learner...you have to show me." Videos were promoted because "that is how I learn best. Videos usually always help me understand because I am a visual learner." The special education teacher candidates' comments signaled individual differences among the participants. Statements such as, "There was a great variety to the presentation of material," were countered by, "I felt lost as to where I was and what I was doing." The students, who were pre-service intervention specialists, wanted to engage in clear, well-organized activities that corresponded to their learning preferences (e.g., auditory, visual, kinesthetic).

Students stated that they enjoyed sharing their ideas via discussion board activities and reading the

responses of classmates. Online discussion boards involved a prompt, usually provided by the instructor, to generate responses from students. Strong discussion board activities built social presence in the class as students communicated with their peers and the instructor. They capitalized on student experiences, allowed storytelling, and included the application of concepts learned in class. Students indicated that good discussion boards had motivating outcomes: "We read the case scenario...and we had a discussion board as to how you were going to decide the case. You gotta come up with an answer. The cliffhanger forces you to come up with an answer." In this case, a good discussion board compelled students to explain, clarify and support a decision.

Within the focus group, it appeared that the very strengths of discussion boards, to promote extended thought and discussion, could lead to "burn out" among students: "I liked the discussion boards, but sometimes they are more of a nuisance than an authentic learning tool." While some discussion boards could take time and effort to complete, others could just as well be completed superficially, with little effort: "You would read something and someone would just write, 'Yeah, I thought what you said was right.'" Students noted that weak discussion boards did not provide clear instructions to encourage meaningful responses. More than one participant disliked discussion board contingencies that encouraged responses by awarding points for replies to their classmates' posts. Yet participants also disliked not receiving replies from classmates as this left them wondering whether their post had been read or understood. Another aspect of the online experience was completing weekly assessments, which generally included multiple choice quizzes and tests. The online assessments provided students with immediate feedback. Weekly online quizzes were used by some students to outline readings and to "draw out the main concepts of each chapter." In some courses, students were given the opportunity to retake quizzes until they reached a minimum score set by the instructor: "That's what I like the most about it [online quizzes]...knowing your grade." In addition to immediate feedback, students viewed the online quizzes as practice for similar formats used by required state assessments for teacher licensure.

Interactive Classes

The graduate students emphasized the importance of active participation and having opportunities to interact with the instructor and their classmates during face-to-face class sessions. The classroom created a unique and authentic environment where multiple perspectives were shared: "Everyone came with different backgrounds, and it was interesting to learn

about other people's experiences and how they related to the class." The students found that informal conversations and class discussions allowed a deeper understanding of the content. One student noted it was "easier to share experiences and knowledge when face-to-face," and she enjoyed opportunities to work in groups. Meeting face-to-face also allowed students to "interact with the content on a deeper level." One student commented that "a lot of concepts get broken down and restated as a result of class questions. It ends up being more flexible than a pre-videod lecture." Another confirmed that the instructor "can explain things in a different way to help you understand." The freedom to elaborate and ask questions spontaneously during face-to-face discussions provided clarification not always available online.

The instant feedback from their instructor and classmates during face-to-face classes was important for students. Instead of waiting for an email or online discussion response, one student found that "the conversation is more active when spontaneous responses are possible." The students also valued spending time with peers to share ideas and make connections. As one student explained, "Having the opportunity to ask questions and speak openly to other professionals in the same field is beneficial." Social connections were also developed during the face-to-face classes. For example, one student reflected upon the multiple levels of communication that occur in face-to-face interactions, noting, "If you're a name on a discussion board they're not going to say, 'Hey, there's a job at my school!'"

Face-to-face classes were important for students who favor learning through personal interactions: "I need to see people. I need to hear what other people have to say and to be able to look at somebody." Discussions led by the instructor as a whole class or in small groups helped students connect the content to previous knowledge, real life experiences, and possible future scenarios. One student explained, "I've always learned best through discussions, especially in a small class setting." A challenge of class discussions was that students needed to demonstrate behaviors associated with waiting and turn-taking: "I liked having examples, but some people in class went on forever and lost the concept of what we were talking about, and there was no way of cutting them off." Though most of the participants in the focus group voiced that lectures may be more efficient online, one student admitted, "I learn the most in the face-to-face components from the lecture from the professor."

Survey responses indicated that students appreciated when instructors included more interactive components during lectures: "Having a dialog along with the presentation is the most helpful to me." As a "visual/tactile learner," one student emphasized

including links to websites or videos in presentations to initiate discussion and increase involvement. The students expressed how ineffective the presentations were without interactive elements: "You would just come into class every other week, and she would go over the slide show for the chapter and that was it." Students also expressed frustration when an instructor read directly from a PowerPoint presentation: "I learned to read a long time ago. You're not benefitting me." The students in the focus group suggested that the presentation be created as a guide where the instructor could add ideas and involve the students in discussion.

Collaboration with classmates was important to enhance learning during face-to-face classes. As one student stated, other students "are a great source for helping me understand what's going on and vice-versa." There were examples and ideas students did not feel comfortable writing during the online activities, but they were able to discuss them in class. Students enjoyed participating in discussions and interactive activities with guidance from the instructor: "They are the most authentic times we experience as students." Another student in the focus group explained how her instructor divided students into small groups for activities and discussions. The professor "asked us questions the first week of class, and then he assigned us based on our experience and knowledge level." She added, "You felt comfortable because there were other people who knew the material really well, and you didn't let one person dominate your table when you're having a discussion." Being active was especially important for students who learned kinetically: "I prefer to get up and do something...you remember and retain better even it was a silly case study." Role playing exercises allowed students to practice their roles as future educators: "It puts you in the position...you are going to be the expert in these meetings." They were also able to practice their teaching and presentation skills with their classmates. Integration of technology, guest speakers and discussions in face-to-face classes assisted students, who had diverse learning preferences, to understand the content.

Face-to-face classes were seen by students as an opportunity to apply what they had learned. For example, one student in the focus group shared, "We had to be really creative and kind of teach our final." Students appreciated having time to practice strategies and test what they had created. Students provided examples such as role playing peer tutoring strategies, creating performance evaluations, participating in jigsaw groups, and playing a game they had developed. The group activities allowed students "to obtain a broader and more complete understanding of how people take one situation and have completely different approaches." The creativity of the activities helped students to "think outside the box."

Connecting to real life examples and scenarios was important for students to develop a better understanding of the content as well as increase their interest in class activities. One student who had little teaching experience appreciated the stories provided by the more experienced teachers:

I love the examples and the experiences and often just the different teaching methods they have used and the different teaching experiences they may have encountered and how they overcame them, and that happens from the back and forth discussions.

For the students in the present study, writing individualized education programs for children receiving special education services will be an important part of their future career. Students found it beneficial to practice writing an individualized education program with the support of their instructor and classmates. Students also emphasized the importance of videos that illustrated real life situations: “The videos allowed for the material to be presented by a person who had actually experienced the content being taught in the course, which I think made the material more powerful and more relevant.”

The passion and communication style of the instructor were important components of face-to-face classes. Classes could be inspiring to students when they saw the engagement of the instructor. During the focus group, the students commented about the body language and animation of the instructors. One student mentioned how “you always have instructors who are very passionate about what they believe in,” and another student replied, “You can’t get that on a computer.” A different student shared an example from her literacy course:

She starts her literacy class, and she’s reading stories to you like you’re eight years old, and she’s sitting there and she’s moving, moving, moving. And she’s reading and she’s talking and you’re like, ‘I want to be a literacy teacher too!’

Students made repeated statements regarding the value of face-to-face classes to receive immediate instructor feedback such as clarification of projects, expectations, and content. One student noted that “oftentimes someone else has a similar question.” This was especially important for “the feedback that is hard to explain in an email.” It was easier for students to ask questions to the instructor in person and have a chance to clarify their questions as well as include follow-up questions they might not ask online. Receiving feedback from the instructor allowed students to make progress on their projects: “I like being able to ask

questions as soon as I have one and get immediate feedback. That way I do not have to wait to finish my projects.” One instructor began each face-to-face class with a question and answer session. Students liked this approach because it “allows time for any confusion to be cleared up before assignments are to be completed.” As one student shared, “Getting feedback from the professor and hearing other classmates’ experiences are very helpful. It gives you ideas on how to proceed with assignments and field experiences.” The explanation of projects and assignments was important to cover in person because “it can be hard to understand clearly the expectations in an online format.”

Balance

Students found that a balance between online and face-to-face classes was essential to the design of a hybrid course. They emphasized the placement of specific activities and how online and face-to-face classes should connect. The students appreciated having the multiple elements of a hybrid course: “I feel both online or in person classes are helpful in different ways.” As one student stated, “It’s the best of both worlds.” Students understood the strengths and weaknesses of exclusively online or face-to-face classes: “They both feature different benefits and drawbacks. Having both makes for a very balanced class.” The combination of online and face-to-face classes provided students with information in multiple formats to address multiple learning preferences. As one student shared, “It is nice to have both face to face and online because you can get the information from two different sources.” The balance between classes was more time efficient as students “were able to go in and learn from the instructor and interact with each other and still completed most of the work on our own time.”

Online and face-to-face classes provided different types of support and convenience for students. Students appreciated opportunities to obtain guidance and clarify questions in person, as well as the convenience of completing online assignments at their own pace: “They compliment each other because when we don’t have face-to-face class, I have time to work on assignments at my own pace, but if questions arise I am able to ask them at our next gathering.” Another student described how the online classes were “a definite convenience factor” as students only had to be in class a few times a semester, “yet even those few meetings give a real sense of support and camaraderie.” The face-to-face classes provided time to “touch base” and clarify the “what if” questions. One student observed that the “interaction with our peers and possible future colleagues is only benefitting us.”

The purposeful placement of activities in either the online classes or face-to-face classes emerged as an

important consideration. Simply stated, “The bookwork we can do on our own but the authentic experiences you can bring [to class].” Students perceived online asynchronous classes as useful to prepare for face-to-face classes, reinforce concepts, give assessments, and explore additional resources. For example, “The online components usually reinforce a concept that we have read about or discussed in class. It provides another mode of receiving the information.” One instructor posted additional resources related to the content of the course using online weekly folders. Students in the focus group found such resources and links to websites beneficial to learning class content and completing projects: “It’s helpful to have access to support materials online, work on projects independently and then present in class.”

Students recommended that the activities of the face-to-face classes be carefully selected. One student explained that in the brick and mortar classroom, “You can spend your face-time focusing on those things that don’t translate well online,” and the student suggested assigning lengthier readings and assignments online “to keep your actual meetings from being too cumbersome.” A few of the students in the focus group mentioned that they had instructors who wanted to “fill every minute” by adding activities that students could have just as easily completed at home. In the focus group, students suggested that instructors post presentations online for viewing outside of class and implement more interactive activities during the face-to-face classes. The students identified specific purposes for face-to-face classes such as developing relationships, giving presentations, sharing multiple perspectives, and receiving support from their instructor and classmates. The interactions help students develop relationships and build on discussions: “Sometimes a face-to-face conversation is more supportive of an understandable dialogue. The delays in response and lack of a tone of voice can hinder communication [online].” The face-to-face classes “often help clarify online content” and “put online components into perspective.”

The ways in which instructors connected the face-to-face and online classes were as important as the types of learning activities they employed. Smooth transitions from one class to the next maintained the flow of the class: “There needs to be a well-structured ‘bridge’ to link the topics addressed in online ‘sessions’ and face-to-face meetings.” The connection between classes was especially important when new content was introduced: “If there is actual new content introduced in a chapter or document, then the transition into the next class with that information needs to be smooth and functional.” Participants described a range of experiences, from no connections to seamless transitions between classes. One student commented

that online and face-to-face classes “can be useful but must complement each other to be truly effective.” The major connections that emerged were using the online class as an introduction, clarifying information during the face-to-face class, and subsequently using online classes to reinforce or apply what was learned.

Students enjoyed using online classes and activities as an introduction to their face-to-face classes. They prepared themselves for class by reading, watching videos, and gathering background information: “I kind of use the online as an introduction...I’m able to have input in the discussions and ask for clarifications.” Students became more active in preparing for class when they saw the connection from the material presented online and class activities: “I think I can bring more to a face-to-face class when I have the time and material provided online for background information/research.” One student described how her instructor assigned chapter quizzes to make sure students had a good understanding of the content before they met in class: “everybody had something to discuss.” When students were provided online videos to watch, they were able to discuss and apply what they learned in their next face-to-face class. As one student shared,

I like watching the videos online at home and then discussing the videos during class to draw out the major points and encourage the class to think about things in a way that they may not have while watching the video at home.

The class sessions complimented each other by allowing students to build on ideas that were presented online.

The face-to-face classes were useful for students to clarify information about the content of the course by allowing them to prepare and bring questions to class. This was very helpful for one student in the focus group: “I got more out of the class that way ‘cause I was able to prep myself on my own and then come into the class and discuss.” One student emphasized that during a face-to-face class, “the instructor has a clearer opportunity to check for understanding and clarify or reteach the material, correct any misunderstandings, or add to any presentations.” Instructors checked student progress through activities and informal discussions including answering questions about assessments completed throughout the semester.

After content was presented in a face-to-face class, students tended to view the next online class as an opportunity to reinforce their understanding and apply what they had learned. One student emphasized the benefit of reinforcement: “Online components are a great way to revisit what is discussed in class to keep the material fresh.” Online discussions and modules

were also used to review face-to-face lessons and allowed students to extend classroom learning. Another student shared, “some things you can talk about in class with others and then implement them by yourself.” Smooth transitions linking balanced online and face-to-face classes was perceived by students as best supporting their understanding of the course content.

Discussion and Implications

The findings of the present study reveal a distinctive approach to designing and teaching hybrid courses. The organization of online materials, instructional activities, and the schedule of face-to-face classes provide students with the convenience and flexibility to fully plan for and participate in the course. The students identified benefits and weaknesses of both online and face-to-face instruction, which led to the delineation of specific purposes for online and face-to-face classes. Creating a balance between classes enhanced the learning of students and provided multiple ways of receiving and expressing their understanding of content. Making deliberate connections between online and face-to-face classes created increased student engagement opportunities for relevant review. These connections emerged as an important aspect in the development of hybrid courses.

The hybrid course instructor’s role is formed by a unique combination of responsibilities. In the classroom, the instructor must be able to lead as well as facilitate discussions and authentic interactions (Blier, 2008). Students in the present study valued specific and timely feedback from the instructor as well as individualized responses to online assignments (Paechter & Maier, 2010; Reupert, Maybery, Patrick, & Chittleborough, 2009). According to Lee and Dashew (2011), acknowledgement of student work and descriptive feedback is essential to engage students and to create an online presence. Students also benefit from a clearly arranged structure of online components, where activities, links, and resources are readily accessible. The instructors’ role includes creating a clear, organized structure, and selecting user-friendly tools (Gray & Tobin, 2010). They may also support students by providing detailed demonstrations about how to use online tools during face-to-face classes (Zhou, Simpson, & Domizi, 2012). Instructors need to be available to meet with students or answer questions both online and in person.

The general purposes students assigned to online classes were to introduce and reinforce content as well as provide instructions and resources in a convenient location. Students preferred that instructors maintain information online (Paechter & Maier, 2010); the flexibility and convenience of accessing instructional activities at any time from any place was important to

the students (Gray & Tobin, 2010). When information was provided online, they felt more prepared for the discussion and activities in the next face-to-face class (Kenney & Newcombe, 2011). Providing online recordings and notes of previous sessions was also deemed useful (Yudko, Hirokawa, & Chi, 2008). Students appreciated the potential of immediate feedback through online communication. In line with Xu, Meyer, and Morgan (2009), students valued online assessments that provide instant feedback. In the online environment, students have the opportunity to apply their knowledge to complete projects, engage in real-world scenarios, and deepen their understanding through discussion forums.

The purposes of face-to-face classes were to receive clarification and answers to questions as well as participate in discussions and group activities. Allocating time at the beginning of a face-to-face class to discuss and answer questions about the content covered online and providing time at the end to introduce the next online assignment were deemed helpful (Antonoglou, Charistos, & Sigalas, 2011). In line with Houts and Taylor’s (2008) findings, students were able to obtain a more complete understanding of the content when they analyzed case studies, viewed and discussed videos, or interacted with knowledgeable guest speakers. The face-to-face classes allowed students to share personal experiences and work with peers to apply knowledge to relevant, real life situations.

Self-regulation was an important skill needed to complete the online components of a hybrid course. Students must have the ability to learn material on their own, structure their time, and meet deadlines (Blier, 2008). Though it was difficult for some students, the successful completion of a hybrid course may promote improvement in time management, organization, and self-management skills (Kenney & Newcombe, 2011). Instructors may support and promote students’ self-regulation skills by providing reminders and use face-to-face classes to prompt students to monitor their progress. Motivation was another important factor regarding the extent to which students engaged in online activities (Gray & Tobin, 2010). Students reduced the amount of time they spent reading or reviewing material if they thought it was going to be repeated in the lecture presentation. On the other hand, students reported more active online participation when provided with real life videos, scenarios, and resources. The required use of online resources and assignments to participate meaningfully in face-to-face classes also increased student completion and engagement in the online activities of a hybrid course.

The graduate students in the present study had a wide range of technology skills and experience in college courses. Instructors may need to provide

additional guidance and support for students with novice technology skills to better participate in the course. According to Brotton (2005), students who had an initial introduction to the online components within the face-to-face classroom gained confidence and trust in the online management system used by the instructor. Blier (2008) also noted that online discussions and participation are learned skills that should be taught to students in hybrid courses. Students may benefit from consistent support throughout the semester via technology workshops, a tutoring center, and faculty office hours (Napier, Dekhane, & Smith, 2011). Instructors could also create student resource guides using short videos or documents with screen shots that show steps to use new technology. When instructors are able to organize and effectively teach needed technology skills to their students, they are better able to provide the structured environment that enables authentic learning experiences, flexibility, and convenience for students.

Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of the present study include the location, sampling criteria, and sample size. The participants lived in the Midwest and attended the same university. All were pre-service graduate students working towards an Intervention Specialist licensure and/or a Master's of Education degree. Thirty students completed the survey and six students participated in the focus group. Because of the small sample size and specific location of the research, the findings may not reflect the perspectives of students in other locations. Students in different academic areas may also express alternative perspectives of hybrid courses that are specific to their interactions with the content of their professional fields. Though limitations exist in generalizability, the specific focus of the present study allowed us to obtain an in-depth understanding of the students' perspectives. The age range of the students, from 22 to 56 years old, is a positive aspect of this study. From the online survey and focus group, we were able to include the individual and group-mediated perspectives of students who had various technology skill levels and represented multiple developmental life stages.

Conclusion

The present study identified instructional activities of hybrid courses that were engaging, motivating, and allowed students to develop a greater understanding of the content. When the strengths of online tools and face-to-face interactions were present, students perceived the support of instructors as well as the convenience of being able to work at their own pace on

their own time. Varied opportunities for interacting with the content, and the recognition of diverse learning preferences, were very important for the graduate intervention specialist education students of this study. Students also described how the placement of instructional activities in an online or face-to-face class was significant and impacted largely students' engagement with course content. The purpose of an online class was to provide information, prepare students for face-to-face activities, and review or practice what was learned. The purpose of a face-to-face class was to ask questions, receive immediate feedback, share experiences and perspectives, collaborate with classmates, and network with classmates. The graduate students emphasized the need to have dynamic connections between face-to-face and online classes. This occurred when the students received information online through readings and lectures, asked questions and applied what they learned in the next face-to-face class, and reviewed the content through activities or assessments online. The emphasis on purposeful placement and flow of activities was a significant and unique finding of this study and may be employed to enhance the instruction of learners in hybrid courses.

An important collateral result of the present study was the increased sensitivity developed by the researchers as they organized and interacted within the qualitative process. The use of online and face-to-face assessment measures paralleled the use of the online and face-to-face instructional environments of a hybrid course. The online survey set the stage for rich face-to-face conversations in the focus group that allowed students to share comments that later served to guide the researcher-instructors' course improvement efforts. The inquiry, procedures, and findings show a durable approach to guide hybrid course improvement processes using online and face-to-face sources of data.

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