

Students' Roles in Exposing Growing Pains: Using the "Dean's Concerns" to Refine Hybrid Instruction

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This study was instigated when 12 teacher education students expressed four concerns about their hybrid courses (part online, part face-to-face) to the college dean. In an effort gain the perspective of the broader population of students so instructors could improve this delivery method in the college, faculty-researchers sought input related to the "Dean's Concerns" from all students enrolled in hybrid courses. A broadly distributed questionnaire revealed that attitudes towards hybrid courses were positive, but that some problems existed related to student abilities to access course content, relevance, social communications, and their instructors' ability to use technology. Faculty-researchers were not able to determine the effect of any pedagogical changes imposed by technology on student perceptions. Researchers conclude that significant innovations in education can create growing pains for students, but these kinds of pains should be anticipated and accounted for, and that students have an important role in exposing growing pains and can support efforts to improve distance learning.

After much conversation regarding distance education literature and a university-wide push to increase online learning, our college of education agreed that a 50/50 hybrid model would be adopted, whereby one face-to-face meeting per week would be replaced with online learning. To provide a mechanism for systematically examining the instructional design and pedagogy used, a two-part, two-year research study was initiated (see Amrein-Beardsley, Foulger & Toth, 2007; Toth, Amrein-Beardsley, & Foulger, 2010) to help the college advance the delivery model to the point where hybrid instruction could take hold in the college (Rogers, 2003).

But, during the second phase of the research study the college's incoming dean held a meeting with a group of 12 invited students who were recommended by their instructors as some of the college's outstanding students. During this meeting a number of concerns were raised about the teacher preparation program, including the quality of their internships in local schools, course workload, and course content.

Most poignantly, students broached concerns about the hybrid courses being offered, specifically noting their perceptions that: (1) professors unnecessarily assigned students more "busy work" and "tedious tasks" (defined as active work of little value to course objectives) just to keep students occupied online within hybrid courses; (2) the online activities in which students were required to engage were confusing, disorganized, and complicated by the use of technology and other online resources which hindered student learning; (3) students missed coming to their face-to-face classes; and (4) professors incorporated online components for reasons other than improving their teaching, e.g., to miss class for personal/professional reasons, to support the college mandate. This list of complaints from students became referred to as "The

Dean's Concerns" and became the topic of much conversation in the college.

The Dean's Concerns divided faculty into two camps. Faculty leery of the hybrid delivery model used the information to confirm and defend their position that this delivery method compromised effective delivery of curricula and promotion of student learning. Others defended the hybrid model based on anecdotal evidence of their positive experiences. The authors of this study, two faculty members who had recently adopted hybrid methods in their certification courses and the instructional designer who provided professional development to faculty in the area of technology integration in the college, questioned whether anecdotal, informal feedback from the 12 students should be used to inform the college's thinking without more thorough, empirical investigation.

The faculty-researchers knew that the hybrid movement was in its early stages and was vulnerable. But they were quick to realize that using complaints from some students would not be a sound way to make programmatic decisions. They knew any large-scale undertaking would cause actions, and some reactions, but they wanted to more thoroughly understand the reality by "combining the aggregate knowledge of individual situations with an understanding of organization and institutional factors that influence the process of change. . ." (Fullan, 2007, p. viii).

The faculty-researchers and others in the college agreed that the student perspective and experience should be taken into consideration when designing and implementing innovative learning experiences. In wanting the hybrid courses to meet the needs of the broad spectrum of students they decided to seek the students' points of view regarding courses that blend face-to-face instruction and technology mediation. With the focus to gain broad and in-depth understanding of

hybrid students' perspectives, plans were made to administer an online questionnaire that would solicit their perceptions. The goal of the study would be used to inform instructional practices related to hybrid courses in the college.

Orienting the Study

For the first time in history, college students in this 21st century have “spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age” (Prensky, 2001, p. 1). Administrators in higher education call them “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001), defined by their interest in seeking “value added” programs that are “challenging, fun, exciting and worthwhile” (Langan, 1997, Conclusion para. 1). With their clients in mind, some universities have come to realize that the needs of these students can be addressed by “online education (which is) at least as valuable as site-based classes, and in some ways, even more” (Conclusion para. 1). To address a clear need, higher education has moved to create institution-wide cultures with identities that remain competitive through innovative instruction (Adams & Seagren, 2004) by offering online opportunities to students. But some instructors not interested in teaching fully online courses have combined face-to-face processes with the thoughtful use of online technology to create a unique learning experience for students (Bonk & Graham, 2006). Hybrid, also referred to as blended learning, couples face-to-face with online instruction, and it has attracted interest among instructors and students for its ability to provide a learner-centered experience (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). But, given the variety of ways to combine face-to-face and online learning, pedagogical perspectives, and programmatic variables, best practices for hybrid instructors are still being uncovered (Amrein-Beardsley, Foulger, & Toth, 2007; Hoffman, 2006).

Literature Review

Embracing the Student Perspective in the Adoption of Distance Teaching Techniques

Traditional higher education teaching practices were established in a prior era and have proven very difficult to change (e.g., Fullan, 2007; Sarrason, 1996; Windschitl, 2002). The history of educational reform predicts that systemic changes such as the move to hybrid instruction will be difficult at best. Although advancements in web-based tools have instigated a visionary and innovative response to exploring new ways of teaching, the diffusion of such tools into teaching and learning processes must be embraced by

instructors as well as the institution (Hall & Hord, 2006) in order to allow large-scale initiatives such as these to take hold. Before satisfaction with the integration of technology can occur for hybrid courses that still rely on some face-to-face processes, instructors must first explore hybrid delivery and be satisfied with (1) online interactions, (2) technical support, (3) their learning experience in developing and teaching the course, and (4) the discipline area in which they teach (Shea, Pickett, & Li, 2005).

Even though technology provides opportunities for less directed forms of instruction, when faculty members move from face-to-face instruction and incorporate distance technologies into their courses, their reliance on directed instruction techniques persists. Many instructors replicate their existing instructional methods (Bonk & Dennen, 2003; Naidu, 2003), resulting in audio capture (e.g., LaRose, Gregg, & Eastin, 1998), video capture (e.g., Berner & Adams, 2004; Campbell & Swift, 2006), or reliance on computer conferencing or online discussions as the primary method of interaction (e.g., Cheng, Lehman, & Armstrong, 1991; Hollandsworth, 2007).

Others, however, perceive online learning as an opportunity to focus attention on pedagogical approaches rather than the use of technology tools to deliver content (Bennett & Green, 2001; Buckley, 2002; Reeves, Herrington, & Oliver, 2004; Twigg, 2001). Changes of this caliber demand a close look at what Clark (1994) claims to be the most significant effect of moving toward online learning—that of instructional methods—and less emphasis on instructional media. In fact, recent discourse on distance education shows that technology itself has taken a back seat to discussions about the pedagogical interventions that are made possible because of online tools (Dillenbourg, 2008). But even well-intended developers cannot always second-guess the actual perceptions of students, especially when constructivist e-learning environments are concerned (Martens, Bastianes, & Kirschner, 2007).

A reform process that involves changes in instructional design and pedagogy may be smoother if a wide variety of perspectives are sought to inform the movement (Hall & Hord, 2006). Institutions that thoughtfully examine more than the influence of the innovation on their profit or cost savings may be able to move more smoothly through the reform process. The move to hybrid instruction can and should be leveraged as a way to provide major shifts in instructional design and pedagogy; students can provide a valuable first-hand perspective to that initiative—one that can be very candid and insightful if they are invited to “engage in debate, decision making, new knowledge creation and action for change” (Ashton & Newman, 2006, p. 825).

Unfortunately, the learning curve is steep for instructors who endeavor to craft complex environments where multi-faceted and technology-reliant learning connect face-to-face and online worlds as if they were one (Motteram & Forrester, 2005). Due to the complexities, students are quick to notice flaws (Lin, 2008). But, with first-hand experience, it is appropriate to call upon students to become involved in the reform process, as they can offer a great deal of insight and relevant recommendations for improvements (Bonk, Olson, Wisner, & Orvis, 2002). Yet soliciting and making use of students' perspectives can be overwhelming for instructors unless done in a methodical and objective way, as there are many factors that can influence students' opinions and perceptions.

Students' Perceptions of Hybrid Learning

Studies that compare traditional, hybrid, and online learning show that from the student perspective hybrid outranks other methods. For example, Biggs (2006) found that in comparison to distance and traditional students, hybrid students felt instructors met or exceeded their expectations, including their instructor's ability to respond more promptly, give more valuable feedback, and provide an easy method of contact. Students in the Biggs (2006) study also realized how supportive their instructor was in helping them to identify problem areas in their learning.

In another study by Swan et al. (2000), students and instructors cited increased communication as a benefit of hybrid courses where the face-to-face meetings reinforced their online interactions. Other hybrid students point out that they enjoy online activities, while still holding a preference for in-class activities, suggesting a partiality for methods that effectively combine both face-to-face and online techniques (Yurchisin, 2005).

Indeed, instructor adoption of best practices for blending online and face-to-face delivery proves to be a critical factor in student satisfaction. But confounding variables have made it difficult for instructors to make improvements in this teaching model. For example, regardless of age or gender, students who are experienced with the Internet report they are more satisfied with the quality of the web-based components of instruction if factors such as collaboration, real-world problems, evaluation of viewpoints, and the use of students' inference and critical thinking skills are used in ways that advance their learning (Holmes & Gardner, 2006; Koohang & Durante, 2003). Similarly, students grant preferential status to hybrid instruction if they feel a complex learning environment is created that considers how their individual needs can be supported by online technologies (Smart & Cappel, 2006).

Researchers evaluating hybrid instruction recognize the need for informing instructional design practices as well as the need for determining teaching practices that will advance the use of online technology tools for teaching and learning in higher education (e.g., Bennett & Green, 2001; Buckley, 2002; Reeves, Herrington, & Oliver, 2004; Twigg, 2001). This study is an attempt to further this research agenda.

Methods

Faculty-researchers used the concerns expressed by the 12 students during their meeting with the dean to create a Student Hybrid Questionnaire (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was developed to gather perceptions from all students enrolled in hybrid courses. Results would help faculty-researchers find out if the aforementioned concerns brought to the dean's attention by a handful of students could be generalized to the larger population of hybrid students in the college.

Student Hybrid Questionnaire

Part I of the questionnaire was used to collect general demographic information needed for disaggregated data analyses. Part II prompted student participants to respond to 16 questions about hybrid course delivery derived from primary concerns the 12 students expressed to the dean (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$). Part III asked student participants to respond to two open-ended questions and to provide any additional comments.

Sample

Researchers administered the online Student Hybrid Questionnaire to all students taking the 22 courses in which hybrid instructors replaced one or more face-to-face class sessions with online activities. This sample represented the college's hybrid state during the semester of study. For example, the Dean's concerns were drawn from students of instructors who were charged with ineffective instruction when they released students from face-to-face classes using hybrid days as free days, and from students of instructors who taught courses half online and half face-to-face. In other words, as the Dean's concerns ranged across the college's hybrid formulas, so did the selection of instructors and their students requested to participate in this study. The purpose was to cast as wide a net as possible to best capture the college's hybrid state.

Students of these instructors were asked to complete separate evaluations for each course, identifying their responses by course number and

instructor name. Students enrolled in more than one course that incorporated hybrid instruction were asked to complete separate evaluations for each course. To distribute the survey, hybrid instructors posted a link to the Student Hybrid Questionnaire in their online course area (Blackboard, version 7.0) and/or directly e-mailed the link to their students. Although problematic, this sampling technique caused the least amount of error or noise of the two sampling options: (1) faculty-researchers could have e-mailed all students in the college directly and allowed the students to self select into the study based on their personal interpretations of whether each of the courses in which they were enrolled should be considered hybrid, or (2) faculty-researchers could have asked instructors to determine if each course they taught should be considered hybrid or had hybrid components and solicit participation from their students. Arguably, the second option made traditional threats to reliability (inconsistent classification of which classes were hybrid) and internal validity (student self selection) less worrisome, though still ubiquitous. With these considerations in mind and under the advisement of the dean, faculty-researchers selected the second sampling strategy as the preferable of the two imperfect techniques.

Faculty-researchers sent an e-mail to hybrid instructors that included a statement about the purpose of the study, a link to the online Student Hybrid Questionnaire, and directions on how to solicit student participation. Also included was a note informing all instructors that the study was being conducted under the dean's directive and advisement. The informed consent process embedded in the first page of the survey allowed students to opt out without any repercussions.

Methods of Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated using student participant responses to the Part I demographic questions and the Part II Likert-type items (see Appendix B, Tables 1-4) in the Student Hybrid Questionnaire. Students' aggregate responses to the items included in Part II were rank ordered to discover general themes. For the paired items included in Part II of the survey instrument (see Student Hybrid Questionnaire in Appendix A, Items 1-2, 3-4, and 13-14), paired samples t-tests were conducted to test for significant differences between the opinions of students within items. For example, two items capturing whether student participants felt that the time they spent in class would have been better spent online and vice versa were tested against each other to cross validate whether student respondents actually preferred one delivery method over the other at a statistically significant level. Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) are noted.

One-way ANOVAs were conducted to explore whether students responded differently for each course they evaluated. These analyses helped faculty-researchers determine which instructors might need additional support and professional development to more effectively integrate technology into their courses, develop online components, or strategically implement hybrid instruction. One-way ANOVAs were also run to investigate whether students responded differently by (1) type of class, e.g., students in technology courses had significantly different opinions about items forthcoming, and (2) type of instructor, e.g., tenure-track faculty, lecturer, or faculty associate.

Next, student responses from the open-ended questions in Part III of the survey were organized into a spreadsheet. Student responses per question were read, major and minor themes were noted, and responses were re-read again and coded into the major and minor themes. These themes morphed and changed as student responses helped to better define each theme. Once each major and minor theme was developed, student responses were categorized into bins (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Once final bins became focused and mutually exclusive in nature, student responses were quantified and labeled.

Results

Overall, student participants evaluated 18 of the 22 instructors who incorporated a combination of face-to-face and at least one day of online learning during the semester. In total, 364 students (of 540 solicited) taught by 18 different instructors completed the Student Hybrid Questionnaire, yielding an overall student response rate = 67.4%.

Part I: Demographics

The courses that integrated online learning spanned four departments and five degree programs. Eighty-six percent of student respondents were enrolled in an undergraduate program, 12% were in a graduate program, and 2% were pursuing post baccalaureates. A plurality of student respondents (48%) was elementary education majors, followed by students majoring in special education (23%), secondary education (18%), graduate studies (6%), and early childhood education (5%). Seventy percent of student respondents were enrolled in their first semester in the professional teaching program, 7% were enrolled in their second semester, 10% were enrolled in their third semester, and the rest (13%) were enrolled in a graduate program. These statistics reflect the interim dean's initial charge to implement hybrid courses in the first semester of the undergraduate elementary education program, after which it was hoped that the lessons learned would help

hybrid instruction progressively take hold across semesters and throughout other college programs.

In the college, face-to-face classes traditionally meet 45 hours per semester. Student participants were asked approximately how many hours of face-to-face class time were replaced with online, out-of-class learning. Because student respondents calculated this figure individually and occasionally made inaccurate estimates and mathematical errors, faculty-researchers calculated the means for each instructor to better estimate how many face-to-face hours were replaced with online activities in each course. Extreme outliers, e.g., students who stated that they spent all 45 hours online, were eliminated from the dataset to obtain a higher level of reliability.

Students responded that an average of 15 hours, or one-third of traditional face-to-face seat time, was replaced with online, out-of-class learning activities. The total amount of in-class time replaced with online instruction ranged from a low of 3 hours (7% of the course) to a high of 22.5 hours (50% of the course). These statistics aligned with the expected figures and verified the representativeness of the respondent sample.

Part II: Hybrid Evaluation Items

To investigate Concern 1: Professors unnecessarily assigned students more “busy work” and “tedious tasks” just to keep students occupied online; students responded to a set of six questions intended to capture the perceived worth of in-class and online activities, relevancy of activities delivered in class and online, integration of online and in-class activities, and accountability for online work (see Student Hybrid Questionnaire in Appendix A, Items 1-6, Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.92$; see also Table 1 in Appendix B for descriptive statistics).

Students responded that their effort on both in-class and online activities was worthwhile. Students also reported that in-class activities were not significantly more relevant than activities presented online. In fact, students in courses officially labeled as hybrid in the course catalog and in which instructors strategically replaced 50% of in-class time with online activities scored both environments comparably.

A small yet statistically significant number of student participants preferred face-to-face activities over those conducted online, particularly in technology-related courses. Students in the Educational Technology in K-12 Curriculum classes most significantly ($p < 0.05$) favored face-to-face delivery over online work. After exploring the contextual data, researchers noted that basic technology skills were a prerequisite for this required undergraduate course, and instructors of the hybrid version of the course designed activities with

this expectation in mind. Activities were demanding in terms of technology skills and frequently required students to apply basic technology skills to learning new online tools. Although the prerequisite technology skills were clearly communicated to hybrid students, those who were not adequately skilled became easily frustrated, especially when instructors promoted independent learning through the use of online tutorials or when they asked students to learn new tools through exploration (discussion forthcoming).

Students agreed that overall, instructors appropriately integrated online activities with in-class activities, contradicting the concern that professors added assignments of little relevance or substance in order to keep students busy during out-of-class time. Students also agreed that instructors held them accountable for completing online work. Whether instructors assigned “busy work” was negatively and moderately related ($r = -0.29$) to whether instructors held students accountable for their online learning and ($r = -0.35$) to whether students perceived activities to be relevant. In other words, if students perceived assignments as relevant and were held accountable for the work, they were less likely to perceive the assignments as “busy work.” Inversely, if instructors assigned readings and did not hold students accountable or connect the readings to course activities, students were more likely to perceive that the activities were assigned simply to keep them occupied.

In response to Concern 2: The online activities in which students were required to engage were confusing, disorganized, and complicated by the use of technology and other online resources which hindered student learning; students responded to a set of five items (Items 7-11, Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.90$; see also Table B2). Students agreed that it was easy to understand the requirements of the online components of their courses if their instructors organized online materials and processes to support their learning. Students agreed most that the online resources available through the university-sponsored course management system (Blackboard, version 7.0) and/or the college-sponsored accountability and management tool (TaskStream) supported their learning. They most disagreed that their instructors helped them learn how to use the necessary technology tools and complete online tasks, as mentioned earlier. Indeed, the technology course instructors received significantly lower ratings ($p < 0.05$) on this item.

To investigate Concern 3: Students missed coming to their face-to-face classes; student participants responded to two, inversely related items that asked about their experiences during face-to-face and online time (Items 12 and 13; see also Table B3). These items were included to capture whether students felt the time they spent in class would have better been spent online or vice versa.

Contrary to what the 12 students expressed to the dean, at a statistically significant level ($p < 0.05$) students agreed that the time they spent in class would have been better spent online more than they agreed that the time they spent online would have been better spent in class. The Pearson correlation coefficient between the two items was negative, but also closer to zero than what might have been expected ($r = -0.09$). If students indicated a preference for the online mode of course delivery, then theoretically they should have marked a decreased interest in the traditional, face-to-face mode of delivery, especially if responses were polarized in reference to student reactions to face-to-face and online delivery. Such symmetrical thinking should have yielded an almost perfect negative Pearson correlation coefficient, illustrating students wanted to learn in either a face-to-face or an online environment, not a combination of the two.

But students were unsure of which delivery method they preferred, although the online method won out overall. Because most of the student respondents indicated they liked the blended components of their courses, they might not have felt that either mode of delivery was superior and did not know how to respond when asked to choose between the two. Because hybrid delivery blends both face-to-face and online learning, and because students were equally satisfied with both presentation methods, respondents might not have wanted to rank one over the other, so they ranked them equally.

To investigate Concern 4: Professors incorporated online components for reasons other than improving their teaching, e.g., to miss class for personal/professional reasons, to support the college mandate, students were asked to indicate why they thought their instructors incorporated online activities. In response to the question “My instructor incorporated online time because (s)he believed online time would . . .” students marked their level of agreement with each of eight reasons provided (Items 14a-h, Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.85$; see also Table C4). Purposefully embedded were two reasons intended to capture concern 4 (Items 14e and 14h). Results, ranked in order of highest agreement, are included in Figure 1.

Students mostly strongly believed that instructors incorporated online activities to provide students with more flexibility and better support student learning, followed by the beliefs that online time was incorporated to provide the instructor with more flexibility and to support the instructor’s quality of teaching. Students perceived that instructors who integrated online learning activities into their courses put students’ needs above theirs.

However, students also agreed that they felt instructors were integrating hybrid components into

their courses to meet college mandates. Arguably, the college does not want students to think that class sessions are being replaced with online activities for reasons other than to enhance student learning, but because the college is responding to university requests to maximize facilities use by increasing distance learning opportunities, diminishing such perceptions is difficult.

Students agreed least with the notion that their instructors were integrating hybrid components into their courses as a means to miss class. Analyses revealed that if anything, students believed instructors who used online days did not do so to “blow off” class, but rather used the flexible time to help them meet other commitments. The college was, however, aware of some faculty (predominantly lecturers and faculty associates, and a few tenure-line faculty) doing this. These instructors did not go through the hybrid professional development opportunities in which many other instructors participated, and they likely did use the term “hybrid days” for days they were absent and required students to complete some online projects.

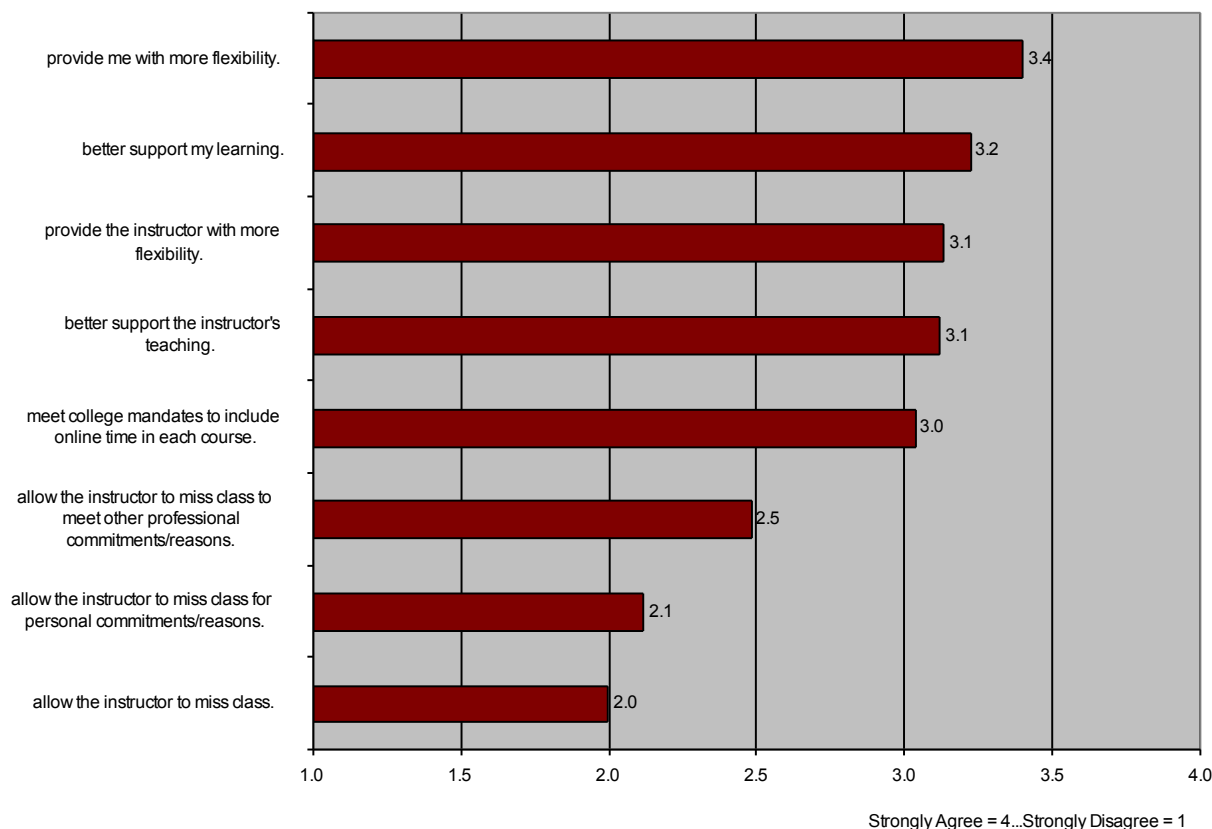
Accordingly additional analyses revealed that students preferred ($p < 0.05$) the online components of courses taught by tenure-line faculty members more than those taught by lecturers or faculty associates; only one participated in the hybrid professional development training sessions, so this result made sense. But overall, students were pleased with the hybrid components of the courses in which they were enrolled and expressed their belief that online components of their courses enhanced their learning (Items 15 and 16; see also Table C5).

Part III: Open-ended responses – What students liked most

On the final section of the Student Hybrid Questionnaire, student participants responded to three open-ended questions. First, they listed the things they liked most about the online components of each course they evaluated. Although many benefits were listed, the three mentioned most often were flexibility and freedom, an increased depth of learning about course content and technology, and more and higher quality communications (see Figure 2).

Over half (53%) of student respondents wrote that they appreciated the flexibility and freedom afforded by the addition of online learning. Students liked being able to work at their own pace and focus on coursework while still meeting personal and/or professional responsibilities (such as internships). Since out-of-state

Figure 1
Student Ranking of the Eight Possible Reasons Why Instructors Incorporated Online Activities into their Courses



class activities that integrated online technology did not require them to come to school as often, students complete course assignments at home, on campus, or at another location. Flexibility of location was mentioned most often by students who had long commutes, as well as by students who had limited budgets and appreciated saving money on gas. Some students also perceived that this flexibility and freedom helped them become more responsible learners, learn how to manage their time more efficiently, and ultimately alleviate personal levels of stress.

Next, students (23.9%) expressed that they appreciated the increased levels of learning about course content and technology tools. They perceived that this “depth” of learning was facilitated by instructors who used online delivery methods effectively; provided students with additional, up-to-date, research-based resources; diversified course activities; provided individualized learning experiences; situated course content and activities within students’ professional contexts; and held students accountable for their online learning. Students also expressed an appreciation for

technology tools and skills they thought would help them become innovative teachers in the future.

Last, students (15.5%) noted that they valued the increased levels of support, interactions, collaborations, and communications promoted by the online components of their courses. Some students noticed better connections to the instructor via e-mail; more access to the instructor for individualized assistance; and increased ability to communicate with other students about personal and professional matters, to collaborate on assignments and activities, and to peer review, edit, and revise each other’s work.

Part III: Open-ended responses – What students liked least

Students also listed the things they liked least about the online components of each course they evaluated. The top four drawbacks to online learning mentioned most often were: instructor and technology issues, too much work, communication barriers, and personal concerns (see Figure 3).

Just over 41% of student respondents wrote that they had major issues with the ways in which their

Figure 2
The Top Attributes Student Participants Liked Most About Learning Online

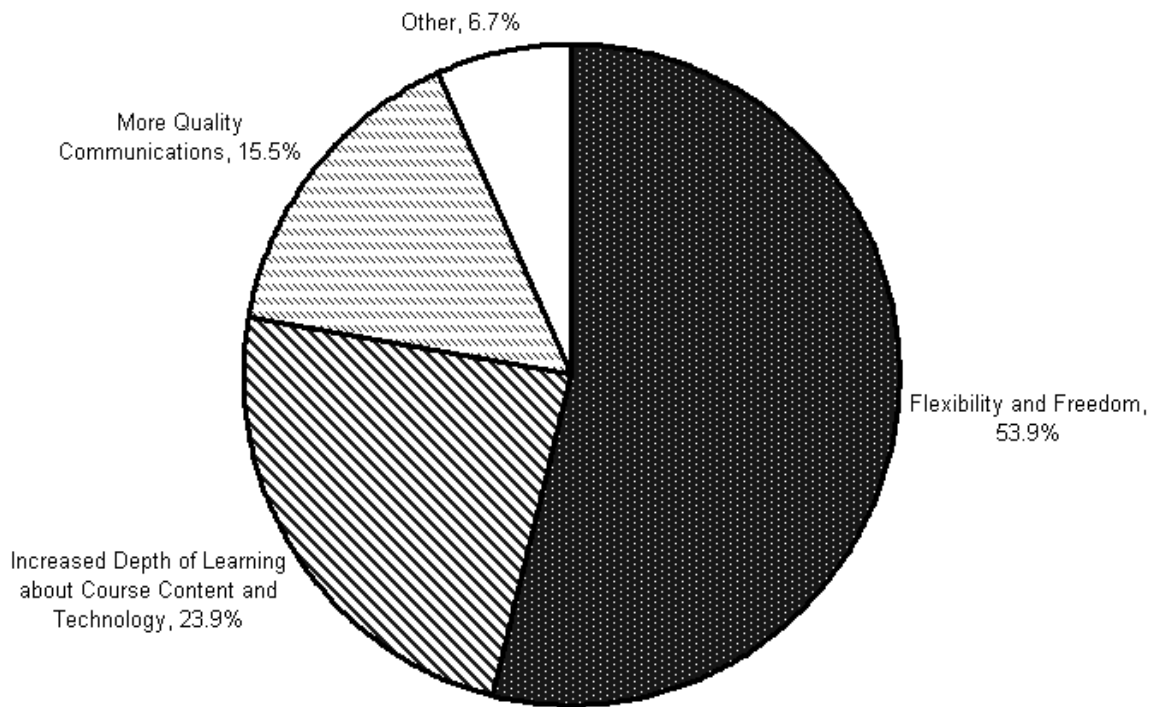
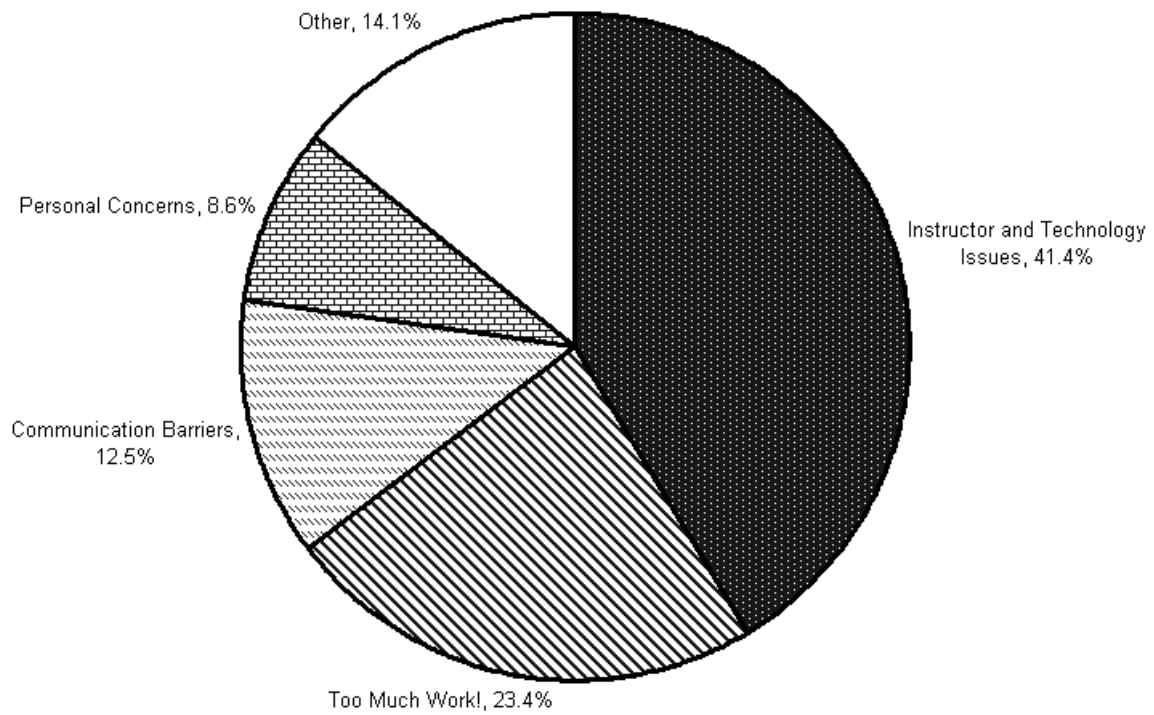


Figure 3
The Top Drawbacks Student Participants Liked Least About Learning Online



instructors delivered course content online. Of primary concern were technical issues that impeded student learning, followed by a general lack of organization. Instructors who displeased students most were unclear in their expectations for course activities and assignments; communicated unsuccessfully in class, by e-mail, and in other written documents; and employed awkward deadlines and grading procedures. Technology issues also caused confusion in terms of general logistics. Students expressed troubles finding materials in BlackBoard, TaskStream, and elsewhere online; completing assignments in Blackboard, e.g., quizzes and tests which disconnected midway through assessment completion; accessing the Internet, e.g., slow connection speeds, pop-ups; and dealing with other miscellaneous technology nuisances.

Second, student respondents (23.4%) noted that having online components in traditional, face-to-face classes, created “Too much work!” These students complained that online course components required more time, and some expressed that they would rather attend a traditional, face-to-face course that they felt required fewer expectations outside of class. Other students complained about extensive online readings, lengthy reflections, and other demanding assignments that were given to keep them busy and would have been more worthwhile had they been relevant to the course or had students been held accountable for assignment completion.

Third, student respondents (12.5%) wrote that online activities caused problems when they needed clarification or instructional support and instructors were non-responsive within “reasonable” time parameters. Some students also expressed that they missed communicating and socializing with their instructors and peers in a face-to-face environment.

Fourth, student respondents (8.6%) relayed that the most difficult challenge about participating in a non-traditional, hybrid course was making necessary personal adjustments. These students expressed that their academic success was complicated by issues of managing time, becoming self-directed learners, not procrastinating, and remembering when things were due.

The final section of the survey questionnaire solicited general comments. Almost half (49.1%) of the students expressed that overall they valued hybrid learning. These students stated that they planned to enroll in hybrid courses in the future and hoped the college would offer additional classes in this format. About one-third of these students (16.4%) also thanked their instructor(s) for enhancing their learning with online experiences and wished they could enroll in courses with the same instructors in the future. Another third (16.4%) of student respondents added that they appreciated the

flexibility and time afforded by online course components.

About fifteen percent of the students had apprehensions with the online components of their hybrid courses and advised the college to proceed with caution. These students also expressed frustrations with paying full tuition for classes conducted partially online and paying steep parking fees when not required to come to campus as often. In general, they were disappointed that the hybrid components did not meet their academic expectations

Discussion

Contrary to the first rumblings from a handful of students who complained about their hybrid courses to the dean, the opinions solicited from the larger population of students enrolled in courses incorporating face-to-face and online learning revealed that in general, attitudes towards the hybrid initiative were positive. Without prompting (in the open-ended comment area on the questionnaire), almost half of the students (49.1%) communicated that the college should expand the number of hybrid courses offered. On the other hand, students also realized the addition of online technology was “causing consequences” for them (Rogers, 2003, p. 167). Faculty-researchers, faced with the difficult job of making sense of these data and determining its relevance in the college, noted three areas of particular interest.

Access to Content is Crucial

One concern of students worth discussing was students’ feelings about their capabilities and limitations to access and learn about the course content. This concern was established through complaints of instructors (mostly faculty-associates and lecturers) who were ill-prepared to teach the content, or who lacked technology skills and experience with creating and managing online activities, or a combination of the two. In some cases the online experiences promoted and enhanced students’ abilities to gain content knowledge; but at other times frustrations of various sorts cost students valuable learning time. On a positive note, students praised instructors who embedded technology to the point that working online enhanced their capabilities to learn.

Communications Matter

Students noticed a positive difference in individualized attention from their instructor, and more social and course-relevant communications with their peers; however, communication barriers appeared to be a problem in some cases. Instances of communication

problems that were of particular interest to faculty-researchers included: when students were ill-informed of the increased flexibility with resulting increase in responsibilities provided when working online, when students did not get proper technology training or take note of the technology skills they needed, when the relevance of activities created by instructors was not clear to students, and when unorganized online materials or directions prohibited them from completing the task to their satisfaction.

The Role of Technology

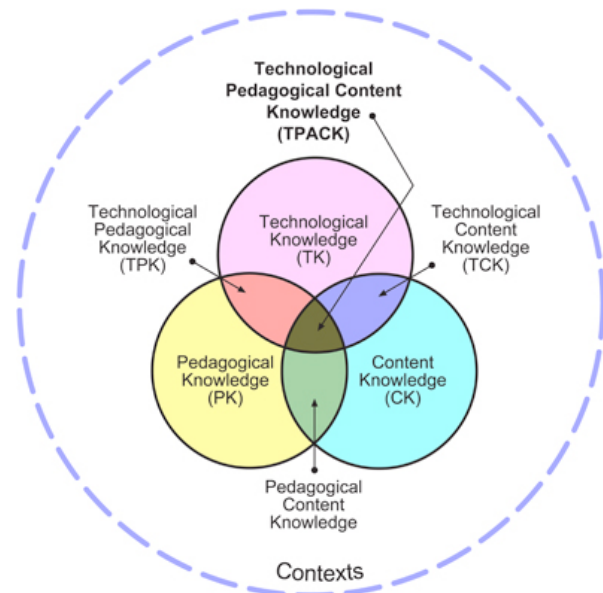
It was evident that the technology skills of instructors during online activities affected student satisfaction. What was not discerned was any pedagogical change imposed by adding a layer of technology to the teaching and learning process. The factors related to how technology changed or did not change the landscape of teaching when online activities were integrated may have influenced students' perceptions of hybrid. This finding may be explained through the recent development in the understanding of the complexities involved when integrating technology. According to Mishra and Koehler (2006), technological knowledge, content knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge (TPACK) are of equal importance when instructors learn to leverage the power of technology, and these must be equally represented in professional development endeavors (see Figure 4). In other words, when one area of the TPACK framework is transformed, it is likely that the other two areas will be affected.

Conclusion

In essence, faculty-researchers took on the position that “for distance education to play a key role in the future provision of educational opportunities, sustained attention needs to be given to those who are most involved in distance education—the learners” (White, 2005, p. 177). Our interest in listening to students ultimately helped us gain the ability to cause change and promote progress (Hall & Hord, 2006) in distance education in the college. This was made possible because the concerns of a few vocal students were not enough for us to draw conclusions and instigate action. Instead, we sought to gain a clear perspective of the hybrid movement by asking *all* students about their experience. The practice of gaining a comprehensive picture of teaching experiences, including those most directly affected, the students, was useful, and this practice may be the most relevant finding in this study.

Our experience with improving hybrid learning opportunities was systematic, yet non-linear, and it

Figure 4
Graphic Representation of Technical Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK)



required communication exchanges and reflective responses as necessary components to expanding our capacity for hybrid delivery. We found that our efforts to change instructional practice was just as educational change experts claim (e.g., Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983; Senge, 2006) that individuals within organizations must engage in processes that lead to collective learning. We learned that program administrators must adapt their practice to accommodate the need to learn while in action by gaining insight and then feeding that insight back into the system. This task is essential for program administrators undertaking any new teaching formula. We also learned that students *do* have an important role in exposing growing pains, and that students *can* support efforts to improve distance learning—we just need to include them in the process. In the process of change, the kind of growing pains experienced in this study should be anticipated and accounted for when possible, and embraced when they unexpectedly arise. As other institutions instigate change, they may experience a state of disequilibrium similar to this one. We must remember that disequilibrium can be harnessed and used in positive ways to contribute to the change effort (Wheatley, 1999), and that complaints can instigate organizational learning—but only if they are fully heard.

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Appendix A
Student Hybrid Questionnaire

PART I – DEMOGRAPHIC ITEMS

What is your degree?

Undergraduate	Graduate	Post-Baccalaureate	Non-degree seeking
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What is your major?

Early Childhood Education	Elementary Education	Graduate Studies	Secondary Education	Special Education
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In what semester are you currently enrolled?

1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th or more
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For the individual course you are evaluating, what is the:

Course Prefix/Number (e.g. ED 314): _____

Course Title (e.g. History of Education): _____

LAST Name of Your Instructor (e.g. Smith): _____

For this class, approximately how many hours (there are 45 hours in a 3 credit class) were you released from face-to-face class time to participate in online, out-of-class learning? _____

PART II – SURVEY ITEMS

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. In-class activities were worth my effort.				
2. Online activities were worth my effort.				
3. In-class activities were relevant to the course.				
4. Online activities were relevant to the course.				
5. Online activities were appropriately integrated with in-class activities.				
6. I feel I was appropriately held accountable for online work.				
7. My instructor helped me learn how to use the technology tools in this course.				
8. The resources available online, in BlackBoard, and/or TaskStream supported my learning.				
9. It was easy to understand the requirements of the online components of this course.				
10. My instructor's organization of online materials and processes supported my learning.				

11. My instructor's use of technology increased my ability to learn.				
12. The time I spent in class would have better been spent online.				
13. The time I spent online would have better been spent in class.				
14. My instructor incorporated online time because (s)he believed online time would . . .				
a. better support the instructor's teaching.				
b. better support my learning.				
c. provide the instructor with more flexibility.				
d. provide me with more flexibility.				
e. meet college mandates to include online time in each course.				
f. allow the instructor to miss class to meet other professional commitments/reasons.				
g. allow the instructor to miss class for personal commitments/reasons.				
h. allow the instructor to miss class.				
15. Overall, I enjoyed online components of this course.				
16. Overall, my online experiences in this course increased my ability to learn.				

PART III – OPEN-ENDED ITEMS

17. The THREE things I liked most about the online components of this course were:

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18. The THREE things I liked least about the online components of this course were:

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General Comments:

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Appendix B
Statistical Analysis

Table 1

Descriptive statistics derived from the six items used to examine Concern 1: Professors unnecessarily assigned students more “busy work” and “tedious tasks” just to keep students occupied online

Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. In-class activities were worth my effort.	364	3.29	.77
2. Online activities were worth my effort.		3.23	.80
3. In-class activities were relevant to the course.		3.47	.62
4. Online activities were relevant to the course.		3.40	.66
5. Online activities were appropriately integrated with in-class activities.		3.33	.74
6. I feel I was appropriately held accountable for online work.		3.41	.69

Table 2

Descriptive statistics derived from the five items used to examine Concern 2: The online activities in which students were required to engage were confusing, disorganized, and complicated by the use of technology and other online resources which hindered student learning

Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
7. My instructor helped me learn how to use the technology tools in this course.	364	2.99	.89
8. The resources available online, in BlackBoard, and/or TaskStream supported my learning.		3.46	.66
9. It was easy to understand the requirements of the online components of this course.		3.26	.85
10. My instructor's organization of online materials and processes supported my learning.		3.29	.79
11. My instructor's use of technology increased my ability to learn.		3.20	.83

Table 3

Descriptive statistics derived from the two items used to examine Concern 3: Students simply missed coming to their face-to-face classes. Student participants were asked to reflect on their experiences during face-to-face and online time and respond to whether they felt the time they spent in class would have better been spent online and vice versa

Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
12. The time I spent in class would have better been spent online.	364	2.35	.93
13. The time I spent online would have better been spent in class.		2.14	.94

* 0.21 difference significant at $p < 0.05$ level

Appendix C
Statistical Analysis

Table 4

Descriptive statistics derived from the two items used to examine Concern 4: Professors incorporated online components for reasons other than improving their teaching (e.g., to miss class for personal/professional reasons, to support the college mandate).

Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
14a. better support the instructor's teaching.	364	3.12	.78
14b. better support my learning.		3.22	.73
14c. provide the instructor with more flexibility.		3.13	.78
14d. provide me with more flexibility.		3.40	.65
14e. meet college mandates to include online time in each course.		3.03	.79
14f. allow the instructor to miss class to meet other professional commitments/reasons.		2.48	.96
14g. allow the instructor to miss class for personal commitments/reasons.		2.12	.94
14h. allow the instructor to miss class.		1.99	.91

Table 5

Descriptive statistics derived from the two items used to examine online course components overall

Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
15. Overall, I enjoyed online components of this course.	364	3.27	.84
16. Overall, my online experiences in this course increased my ability to learn.		3.19	.81