

The Lived Experiences of University Faculty: Reflections on the Use of the Hybrid Instructional Model

Udeme T. Ndon
Larry G. Martin

Abstract

This study employed a phenomenological research approach to investigate and provide reflective insight into the essence of faculty members' experiences in the use of the hybrid instructional model in postsecondary education. The research addressed several questions: How do faculty members experience hybrid instruction in postsecondary education? What meanings do they ascribe to the experience(s)? The themes that emerged are: the effectiveness of the hybrid model, significant time commitment, computer problems, issues encountered, and learner's characteristics.

The Problem, Research Purpose, and Question

For the past two and half decades, the postsecondary education community has witnessed a rapid transformation in how classes are delivered to students (i.e., from face-to-face to technology assisted on-line "virtual" classes) and thereby how classes are taught and managed by instructors. Because they tended to use different instructional media and methods to address the needs of different learners, face-to-face and online learning environments were typically taught independently of each other. For example, face-to-face instruction usually takes place in location-specific and teacher-controlled environments while the online environment is associated with the use of cyberspace, learner-centered instructional approaches, and self-paced learning efforts. Both approaches to instruction offer unique strengths and weaknesses. Since the late 1990s, many postsecondary institutions have thereby attempted to combine the best attributes of these learning environments into one model: the hybrid (blended) approach (Garnham & Kaleta, 2002). Hybrid, also referred to as blended learning (Bonk & Graham, 2004), is defined as a course where an instructor reduces face-to-face classroom meetings during the semester and replaces that instructional time with online learning activities typically through a course management tool (Garnham & Kaleta, 2002). Many hybrid courses have anywhere from 30 to 75% of the course online with the remainder offered face-to-face (Swenson & Evans, 2003). There are many variations of hybrid courses to accommodate the teacher's instructional style, course content, course size, and course goals (Skibba & Ndon, 2006).

Although the hybrid approach represents a significant trend in postsecondary instruction (Young, 2002, p. 33), we know little about how instructors make the transition from face-to-face instruction to utilizing this blended approach. We do not know what criteria are employed to determine when and how to offer such efforts, how they determine what content should be taught in the face-to-face portion of the class vs. the portion that should be taught on-line. Nor do we know how instructors take into account the objectives of the course, the effect on their personal theory of learning, and the potential impact of increased access to a rich variety of instructional tools and technologies on student learning outcomes. The purpose of this study was to investigate and provide reflective insight into the essence of faculty members' experiences in the use of the hybrid instructional model in postsecondary education. The research addressed several questions: How do faculty members experience hybrid instruction in postsecondary

education? What meanings do they ascribe to the experience(s)? What critical incident experiences provide defining moments for them as instructors utilizing the hybrid model?

Research Method

This study employed a phenomenological human science approach, which is a description of the experiential meaning of the hybrid model as lived by the participants of this study. According to van Manen (1997), this approach attempts to describe and interpret these meanings to a certain degree of depth and richness” (p. 11). This study was guided by the empirical approach (heuristic) as ascribed by Moustakas (1994). This approach seeks to obtain comprehensive descriptions of an experience through open-ended questions and conversations. Using this approach, personal stories and other personal information were obtained that pertain to the study. This led to discovering and capturing experiences which helped in describing and providing narrative descriptions that portray personal stories as told by the individuals. With this approach the participants remained visible during the examination of the data (Moustakas 1994).

Telephone and in-person interviews were used to collect the data from a purposive sample of 13 faculty members who offered undergraduate and graduate hybrid courses within two and four-year colleges and universities. All participants had hybrid teaching experiences that included formal face-to-face interactions as well as actively delivering instruction in a computer-mediated environment for a particular course for at least three or more semesters (or four quarters). The participants were selected through a pre-interview letter. The selected participants were interviewed once for information gathering mostly via telephone interviews. The interviews lasted between 35 and 75 minutes. These interviews employed open-ended (Moustaks, 1994) questions to gather information about the following: their lived experiences with the hybrid instructional model; educational and professional background; why they became involved in teaching hybrid course(s); what it means for them to teach hybrid course(s); and critical reflections on their hybrid instructional teaching experiences. Member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were done via email to clarify any missing or misunderstood information. An audit trail and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were used for quality control.

Findings: Hybrid Course Experience

The general meaning the participants ascribed to their experiences of the hybrid model is that it combines the strengths from both face-to-face and online teaching and learning to promote students’ engagement and learning; while planning and managing the two environments as well as the students require substantive amounts of time and effort on the part of the participants. The themes that emerged are: the effectiveness of the hybrid model; time commitment; computer problems, issues encountered; and learner’s characteristics.

Theme 1: Effectiveness of the Hybrid model

Participants indicated that the effectiveness of the hybrid model depends upon several interacting variables: students’ engagement and learning, linking face-to-face activities with online activities, and improvement of instruction.

Students’ Engagement and Learning

The study participants indicated that the use of the hybrid instructional model has helped students to stay engaged. Engagement comes as a result of using the course management system that allows online discussion and e-mail communication. Staying engaged means constant

communication with the students and a high level of interaction and feedback between the teachers and the students; among the students; and between the teachers, students, and the content of the course, which eventually, leads to students learning and succeeding in their courses. One method of presenting the learning materials/information is what Barb termed the “flooding method.” With this method she combined case studies and problem-based learning activities to allow for many case studies within classes. The students were expected to work on different case studies each week and she generated quizzes from them. During instruction, students were also engaged through meaningful assignments, readings and essay writing that were placed online. The essay writing allowed the students to talk back and forth on the discussion board

Linking Face-to-Face Activities with Online Activities

Actually connecting the online activities to foster students’ engagement and learning took a number of different turns and employed logical analysis. Some of the steps these participants took were: building into every hybrid course a large number of assignments that were face-to-face that led to entrance and exit assignments; making sure that what the students brought back from the online mode fed into the class activity afterwards; using excerpts from the online environment to continue the class lecture or discussion; continuing uncompleted “good discussions” from the classroom to the online environment; following up a short lecture with activities students could do outside of the classroom; providing classroom practical or written exams based on the online discussion; stimulating classroom questionings that lead the students back to the online discussion questions; adding a greater number of learning activities like reading activities, quizzes, and lab exercises that focus on the same topic for both the online and classroom simultaneously; and front-loading the lecture with what students did not do well in classroom or online discussion.

Improvement of Instruction

The study participants mentioned having seen a huge difference in the students’ performance and attitudes when they compared their present experiences to their prior hybrid experiences. They indicated that prior to their hybrid experiences, students in most instances would go to class unprepared; partly due to their busy schedules. They also noticed that students’ grades tended to improve from semester-to-semester. The participants affirmed that the students learned more because they were more engaged and this, they believe was due to the fact that students have more opportunities within the hybrid model to develop their own approach to the development of logical ideas and they [students] are thereby more likely than before to contribute to class work as a whole. When these participants compared the kinds of activities students did in the hybrid environment with the face-to-face environment, they noted that students engaging in active activities be it individually or in a group, did better than students sitting passively for long periods of time listening to a one-way lecture. The hybrid environment helps students who would otherwise not speak up in the classroom environment to make their contribution to the class. Another thing that was so welcomed by the participants is the critical thinking skills that they noticed while using the model.

Active learning was employed through out in both face-to-face and online because students were expected to turn in something day-after-day. Using the on-line piece, the study participants were able to lay the responsibility on the students to present what they were doing to the class. For example, one participant used individual homework and weekly “grade yourself

experience” approaches. This required learners to be on the computer every week in order to complete work on an individual basis and to “grade their ability to be “responsible every Friday by midnight.”

Critical Thinking. One participant noted that the hybrid environment is more effective particularly in teaching students to be meta critical, to do meta cognition, and to think about their thinking. This is achieved by building into the course several assignments where they are required to evaluate the performance, to write about what they have learned so far, and to write about what surprised them or what they already knew.

Students’ Preparation. The hybrid/blended model requires the teacher to make sure that students are prepared for classes by providing adequate and meaningful readings along with detailed instructions to the students. This starts with using the course management system for information storage, i.e., for the course syllabus, handouts, notes, grades, and to document students’ activities. On-line assignments require planning ahead. For example, detailed instructions and directions are provided ahead of time to properly guide students as to the expectations of the course. These instructions usually set the tone for the course as well as guide the students on what to expect and what is expected of them; what to do when in need; the time lines; and specific requirements for assignments.

Unlimited Access to Instructional Materials. The instructional materials and information stored on the web are always available at all times for students’ access. Participants were able to put reading materials on the web and make assignments available for download, rather than handing them out on a piece of paper in the classroom.

Teachers’ Learning. The study participants indicated that keeping abreast with the changing trends in educational technologies and instructional strategies means that they are also learning. They are thereby able to keep up with the changing generations of students. They indicated that the environment sharpened their understanding of what students know and where they are likely to fail to understand.

Time Flexibility. Hybrid, according to these participants, affords the students the flexibility in time and space of their learning. Students can really pace their own learning. The flexibility works well for students with tight working schedules, families, and other challenges that would impede their ability to follow the rigid schedule of the traditional face-to-face setting. Decatur expressed that the hybrid course “makes the best use of the student’s time. Time flexibility is also beneficial to the faculty members in that they do not have to go to the campus for all the class meetings unless it is necessary; they can use the convenience of free time to reflect on other courses or activities.

Theme 2: Time Commitment

Time commitment for this study was the amount of time spent on course development and delivery. In general terms, the participants believed that there was substantially more time spent on hybrid instruction, especially long hours on the computer.

Course Development

Time commitment was substantial especially during the course development phase because in addition to planning the course, identifying goals and objectives, dealing with textbooks issues, creating and examining the activities on a recursive weekly basis in advance; they had to also carefully develop the online portion of the course. Time was needed to successfully implement a hybrid course regarding the following: the ability to use this model to

facilitate learning; the ability to identify educational activities that work best in the face-to-face or online environments; and the ability to connect face-to-face activities with online activities.

Delivering a Hybrid Course

Delivery of instruction is particularly time consuming because it requires time to: monitor emails in case students have questions about assignments or have problems with exams; monitor the Discussion Board for questions and student participation; stay in constant communication with the students in this highly text-based, intellectually challenging environment; and assist students to resolve problems.

Learning Technology

Mastering the skills required to offer hybrid courses created a learning curve for the participant. It required them to spend additional time on their hybrid courses.

Multiple Teacher's Role

To help the students stay engaged, the participants of this study had to create room for their role to mutate to accommodate the demands of the course and the students' needs. The roles the participants played during instruction varied and were particular to their individual instructional styles. While they still conducted their classes in teacher-led fashion in most cases, they had to assume different or additional roles in order to encourage students to stay engaged. The participants generally described the environments as: learner-centered, heavy on discussion participation, and intensive method of teaching. They generally described themselves as facilitator; guide on the side; and trouble shooter/problem solver. Given this description, the participants had to compromise their traditional teacher-controlled approach to accommodate the varying positions the hybrid model calls for.

Theme 3: Computer Problems and Issues Encountered

Many of the problems and issues the participants shared occurred during the delivery of instruction. These problems centered on technology, access, and literacy issues. This apparent lack of access started as simple as students not having computers at home. For those who had computers, the concerns became software and hardware disparity both on the teachers' and students' side. The participants expressed concerns that show that in most cases, the hardware provided to them and/or owned by the students needed to be able to handle the volume of information and in the case of the school, the traffic during the peak periods when students accessed the system the most. The participants experienced situations where the students had computers at home and these computers were not compatible with the school's computer and/or had no Internet access. Some of these participants indicated they were also limited in some cases because they were unable to access office computers remotely from their home.

Theme 4: Learner's Characteristics

The study participants described their learners as students with schedule constraints, evening people who tend to be a little older students (in their thirties), working adults, mothers with children, and teachers. To succeed in the hybrid environment, they generally expected these students to be independent learners, self-motivated individuals who have the ability/desire to work independently, have the ability to learn from reading, be self-disciplined, dedicated, and students who can adapt well to on-line.

Conclusion

This study provides insight into the question of how different postsecondary faculty members describe various aspects of teaching and learning that assisted them to improve their instruction within the hybrid (blended) instructional model. Various university administrators, course designers, students, and veteran as well as novice teachers of this model will benefit from the shared experiences of the above postsecondary faculty members.

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Udeme T. Ndon, Ph.D Candidate, Department of Administrative Leadership, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, P.O. Box 413, Milwaukee, WI 53201. E-Mail: utndon@uwm.edu

Larry G. Martin, Ph.D., Department of Administrative Leadership, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, P.O. Box 413, Milwaukee, WI 53201. E-Mail: lmartin@uwm.edu

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