Hybrid Teaching: a futurist model or a realist model for the future?

Executive summary

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www.qaa.ac.uk/membership/collaborative-enhancement-projects/learning-and-teaching/hybrid-teaching-a-futurist-model-or-a-realist-model-for-the-future

Executive Summary

Definition

In this report, the term 'hybrid teaching' is used to refer to lectures/seminars/classes in which some students are physically present in a classroom and others join online simultaneously from remote locations.

Background and aim

When the Covid-19 lockdowns were lifted in the UK in mid-2020, some students returned to campus, but others were not able to do so due to travel restrictions or self-isolation requirements. To enable all students to continue studying, many institutions rapidly revised their teaching delivery modes to include hybrid teaching. The aim of this study was to learn from the key stakeholders of this hybrid teaching experiment – students, academics, and IT/Audio-Visual (IT/AV) staff – about the challenges and successes of the approach, and to gain insights into the future potential for post-pandemic hybrid teaching. The study was guided by the following research question:

What pedagogical rationales for, and models of, hybrid teaching can be identified to inform the development of inclusive and sustainable education for the future?

Institutional landscape

The two case study institutions are the University of Nottingham (UoN) and the University of Birmingham (UoB). At UoN, there were no prescribed ways to implement hybrid teaching. At UoB, several teaching spaces were converted into hybrid teaching rooms using Zoom Rooms. There were two room configurations: large hybrid teaching rooms with a capacity of over 100, and small hybrid teaching rooms with a capacity of less than 25. Training and support were available to teaching staff in both institutions.

Contextualisation

To inform this study, selected publications from the recent literature on hybrid teaching in higher education were reviewed. According to the systematic review by Raes et al. (2020), existing research suggests optimism about synchronous hybrid learning, as it creates a more flexible, engaging learning environment when compared to fully online or fully on-site instruction. Hybrid teaching is generally regarded as a practice that fosters equality, diversity and inclusivity (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2021; Nørgård, 2021; Singh et al., 2021; Thomas & Bryson, 2021), although concerns have been raised about the capabilities of the most disadvantaged students to participate equally (QAA, 2022b). Raes et al. (2020) argue that synchronous hybrid education needs more empirical investigation; the current report responds to that call.

Methodology

Ethical approval was obtained from both universities to conduct the research. Data were gathered via surveys and focus groups. Across both institutions, the student survey attracted 564 valid responses; 40 academics responded to surveys or participated in focus groups; and nine IT/AV staff participated in focus groups. All survey data were analysed using descriptive statistical analysis on the quantitative questions and inductive thematic analysis on the qualitative questions. The focus group data were analysed using a combination of deductive and inductive thematic analysis. The project team conducted manual coding of the data, collaborating via MS Teams and other Microsoft tools. To facilitate information sharing and smooth collaboration, weekly synchronous team meetings were held, as well as frequent smaller meetings between different team members. The study was conducted between May and July 2022.

Key findings

The following five themes emerged from the student data:

1. Flexibility and convenience were appreciated by students:
    - Choice was universally viewed as positive
    - The possibility for "flipped" learning: some students read the lecture materials on the VLE before the lecture and come prepared with questions
    - Attendance and time management: some students appreciated the extra time gained by not commuting, but some struggled to manage their time
2. Technical considerations
    - Teacher's digital skills were perceived to be lacking in some instances
    - Issues with technology: there were many reports of technical problems, particularly audio
3. Differences between the online and the in-person experience
    - Engagement, motivation and focus: attendance in-person was generally seen to be more engaging
4. Sense of community, social engagement, collaboration
    - Interaction and communication: interaction between on-site and online students was often limited or non-existent
    - Social activity and collaboration: online students often felt isolated
5. Accessibility and inclusivity
    - Live captions, transcripts and recording were valued by students
    - Government guidelines and Covid restrictions affected whether students attended in-person or online
    - Transport/commuting: the option to attend online allowed reduction in travel
    - Financial: some students saved money by not commuting to campus
    - Physical disability, health issues, learning difficulties, anxiety and neurodiversity: students who raised these issues generally appreciated the hybrid format
    - Parents and carers: the option to attend online was more inclusive

Five major themes arose in the data from academics:

1. Student behaviours and expectations are changing: in many cases, total attendance at online lectures increased, while on-site attendance decreased
2. Hybrid teaching can increase inclusivity, but needs to be implemented with care
3. Hybrid teaching can increase inequality if not carefully managed
4. Maintaining teaching quality requires sound infrastructure and ongoing technical support
5. New pedagogical approaches are needed to foster student engagement in hybrid teaching; particularly important is the need to manage two groups simultaneously

Four priority themes emerged from the IT/AV staff:

1. Room equipment: consistency of quality of equipment is needed across teaching venues
2. Technology and its use by the academics: the rapid implementation of hybrid teaching was challenging for many teachers, who had to learn new skills quickly
3. Communication: more communication is needed between academics and IT/AV staff
4. Future requirements: more discussion/consultation is needed around strategy, infrastructure and resourcing

Conclusion and recommendations

The study provides evidence that hybrid teaching can be more inclusive in terms of catering for students with diverse personal-life related circumstances such as caring for others, commuting, visa requirements, etc., as well as in terms of accessibility, i.e., enabling and facilitating the participation of neurodiverse students as well as those with physical disabilities, mental health issues and anxiety. In addition, access to live captions, transcripts and the ability to control the viewing of lecture recordings all arose as prominent inclusivity themes. Students valued the flexibility and choice of hybrid teaching, and there was evidence of increased attendance at teaching sessions. The sustainability of hybrid teaching is unclear, with a major concern being the added workload for academics involved in preparing for and delivering hybrid teaching, which many academics said was overwhelming and personally unsustainable for them. Adequate resourcing of hybrid teaching will be essential to its ultimate sustainability. Further research is needed to understand the potential disadvantages for students, e.g., in relation to digital poverty. Further research is also needed to understand how best to support teaching staff in developing their digital and pedagogical skills for hybrid teaching.

The study concludes with the following recommendations:

- **Provide appropriate staff training for academics:** Develop a comprehensive training programme to support the development of the pedagogical and digital skills required.
- **Provide sufficient human resources for hybrid teaching delivery**: academics need support in teaching two groups of students simultaneously; a teaching assistant can add substantial value.
- **Provide comprehensive pedagogical support:** This should address learning design for hybrid teaching, and any modifications to associated assessment.
- **Provide appropriate technology solutions and technical support:** Teaching spaces for hybrid teaching need to be set up appropriately. Technology needs to be reliable and simple to use.
- **Consult with stakeholders:** Ensure that decisions about hybrid teaching are not rushed through without proper staff consultation or consideration given to the practical or pedagogical implications.
- **Develop a hybrid teaching policy:** This should at least specify the segment of the student body that hybrid teaching is aimed at.
- **Manage expectations:** Raise staff awareness about the possibilities and pitfalls of hybrid teaching, and develop a transparent communication strategy for students.
- **Communicate:** Ensure communication amongst stakeholders to ensure synergy between the pedagogy, the technical infrastructure, and the strategic plans to implement it.