

Nontraditional Teaching Methods in a Human Resource Management Course: Delivery and Effectiveness

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Abstract

According to UNESCO, over 100 countries during the COVID pandemic implemented closures, impacting more than half the world's student population [1]. In 2021 as COVID restrictions eased some, the hybrid (simultaneously online and in person) teaching modes were adopted by Canadian universities allowing students to select their preferred mode of course delivery. This study examines student perceptions of hybrid teaching combined with a flipped classroom design. The research is based on qualitative and quantitative results from a survey with 142 respondents from a third-year Human Resources class at a Canadian university. The effectiveness of the hybrid course delivery is analyzed through student satisfaction, effectiveness of learning methods, answering student questions and group work. Findings attest to the limitations of hybrid teaching when a Zoom option is available. It also identifies the benefits of a flipped classroom design when teaching online.

1. Introduction

In 2020, universities had to rapidly adapt to COVID lockdowns when governments closed business and all university and government buildings. With conferencing software, such as Zoom online, teaching modes were adopted with mixed reviews. They filled the void but also limited student interaction. In 2021, when universities in Canada started allowing students back into the classroom, there were mixed responses from students. Some students wanted to remain at home, while others were anxious to return to in person teaching. There were also international students to consider who were faced with travel restrictions and accommodation uncertainties. Universities provided the option for these students to continue their studies by accessing class online.

Universities introduced a variety of modes to suit the needs of faculty and students. Faculty that were able to return to the class were given the option of teaching in a hybrid mode to accommodate the varied needs of students. The results were varied but provide valuable insight into the benefits and limitations of online and

mixed modes of teaching. This study looks at student feedback on a course taught hybrid and as a flipped classroom. The survey provides both quantitative and qualitative data.

2. HyFlex Classroom Design

HyFlex, also referred to as hybrid course design (multi-modal courses that combine online and classroom-based students) have been used successfully for more than a decade at many higher education institutions around the world with a wide variety of courses. When students are given the freedom and ability to choose which mode to participate in from session to session, they are able to create their own unique hybrid experience" [2, p. 6]. courses. Reasons for introducing HyFlex classrooms include facilitating distance learning [3], accommodating student needs and life circumstances, differentiating instruction, increasing access to course content and instruction, encouraging student choice and control [4], providing a more active approach to learning, and creating a high level of course satisfaction [5], increasing enrolment and retention [2], increasing student motivation and serving students better [2].

Challenges include students taking advantage of the flexibility, technical difficulties [4], matching learning designs between the two modes [6] and converting in-class courses to HyFlex courses [7], financial implications of HyFlex teaching [8].

3. Flipped Classroom

The "(f)lipped classroom is a pedagogical method which employs asynchronous video lectures and practice problems as homework, and active group-based problem-solving activities in the classroom [9]. The flipped classroom is also called the "inverted classroom" [10]. It transfers teaching responsibilities from teacher to student [11]. Since classroom time is not used to transmit knowledge to students by means of lectures, the teacher is able to engage with students by means of other

learning activities such as discussion, solving problems proposed by the students, hands-on activities, and guidance [12]. Teachers conduct collaborative group activities and learning in the flipped classroom [11], [13], [14], [15]. The flipped classroom aims to increase student engagement, enhance the student learning experience [16], [17], [18] and improve student learning performance [12]. A major challenge associated with the flipped classroom is inadequate student preparation [12], [19]. Without the class students may fail to complete the individual class preparation work.

4. Combining Hyflex and Flipped Classroom

During the pandemic restrictions, when HyFlex classes were enforced, instructors noted a reduction in student engagement. Flipping the class in the HyFlex environment was a way to remedy the shortcomings of the HyFlex class design [20]. According to Griesemer, “flipping the classroom was a change that was born of necessity” [20, p. 2] It helped to improve the student experience but introduced an added challenge of group work in a HyFlex environment. Another advantage of the HyFlex flipped class is improved student grades [21]. The improved grades can reflect the improved level of engagement by students in the course material.

5. The Research Context

In the fall of 2021, a university-funded study began considering ways to improve the HyFlex experience for students and faculty. The study involved two steps. The first was student input on course design and content from a student research assistant. The course was introduction to human resources at a mid-sized Canadian university with three sections for a total of 170 students. The course was also a flipped course, linking third-year business students with real organizational human resource problems. The input was provided by a fourth-year student who had taken the course and also helped teach a second-year course that gave the student a sense of student behaviours across a large cross-section of business students. The student was funded as a research assistant and had also taken courses in which the design was a flipped classroom. The student provided input on how best to capture and retain student interest, challenge students and provide meaningful group activities.

During the fall when the course was running the student helped design a survey and input the survey into SurveyMonkey. Between the 10th and 12th class, the survey was made accessible through a link in the Brightspace class page for students to provide feedback on the course combining the HyFlex and flipped class design. In the survey students were asked to comment about the overall presentation of the course. This paper

summarizes the findings of the study. Once the results were in, the student evaluated the results and provided feedback that was combined with the instructor’s evaluation of the results.

6. Research Objective and Questions

The overall objective of the survey was to understand student perceptions of a HyFlex and flipped classroom. The survey questions focused on the following:

- Students’ attitudes towards blended learning, including HyFlex and flipped classroom methods.
- Preferred learning activities in the HyFlex/flipped classroom methods.
- Students’ preference to pre-recorded lectures and in-class lectures and the integration in these teaching methods (HyFlex/flipped).
- Perception about group work in HyFlex/flipped classroom teaching methods.

7. The Respondents

In total, 142 of the 170 undergraduate students in the three course sections completed the survey. Students were given a bonus grade to participate but it was not required that they complete the survey for the bonus grade. They had the opportunity to enter the survey and once in decline to participate and still receive the bonus. The survey respondent details were coded by the research student, so the instructor had no identifying information. Only two students that started the survey declined to participate. While the course was a third-year course, 38 per cent of the students were in their second year and 43% in their third year. The remainder were in their first, fourth or fifth year. The students were in five concentrations: Marketing, management, finance. International business and accounting. Twenty-three per cent of the students were international students and 77 were domestic. Seventy-nine per cent of the students were studying from the city where the university was located.

8. Findings

The survey provided valuable insights through both quantitative and qualitative data. In this section the key findings highlighted student satisfaction and preference, effectiveness of the HyFlex and flipped classroom methods, whether student questions were adequately answered during the classes, and challenges related to

groupwork.

8.1. Student Satisfaction and Preferences

Out of the 142 students, 69% liked the blended learning methods, 26% had mixed feelings about the learning methods and 4% were dissatisfied. In particular, 70% of the students stated that they were satisfied with the flipped classes, 27% stated they were ambivalent about it and 3% stated that they were dissatisfied with the flipped classroom. Within the flipped course delivery, the preference for flipped course format varied: 39% students preferred to have part of the lecture pre-recorded and available to watch on their own time and the remainder to be in class; 31% preferred to have their learning experience to be fully in-person or fully on Zoom in real time and 19% preferred to have their entire learning experience to be virtual and self-directed. When the students were asked about the overall satisfaction with the HyFlex delivery methods of the course 80% said they were satisfied and 14% said that they are ambivalent about it, while 6% stated that they were dissatisfied. The following are sample comments highlighting the benefit of the course practicality and the enjoyment of the course design:

“The delivery of the course was enjoyable”

“I think this course gave me a great perspective from the HR Partner perspective and I now understand how effective HR is important in an organization.”

“really enjoyed the structure of this course. It was unique and it was a great way of managing a course over zoom. I wish more courses took a similar approach!”

“Well laid out never felt overworked yet felt challenged. Course seemed focus on the context and application of HR methods rather than theories. Personally I enjoyed it”

“I really liked how many of our assignments involved real companies that are dealing with true current issues, to me that was interesting to see and how we students can work on it with the material we learn in class”

“I loved the way the course was run. I thought the assignments were a great way to put the knowledge learned into real life scenarios. It was also really cool dealing with real companies”

Further, when asked about their preference for HyFlex course format, almost 51% liked it because of the increased flexibility it provides in all circumstances. But 24% stated that given the pandemic they enjoyed the

blended course delivery but without the pandemic would have preferred in-class delivery methods.

8.2. Effectiveness of the Learning Methods

The survey asked the students to rate how effective group assignments, in-class activities, pre-recorded lectures, media links, and slides were in learning the course material. Sixty-four per cent stated that group assignments were very effective and 28% stated that it was fairly effective, while 5% stated that they were not effective. Further, 51% stated that the slide decks were very effective, and 40% felt they were fairly effective while 3% felt they were ineffective. One student commented that the number of slides detracted from the effectiveness of the content and that the content needed to be more focused. The number of slides are reflective of the flipped classroom design as the student needs to be given the depth of content to prepare for class on their own:

“Too many slides, and too much irrelevant information on slides, too much of the slide info was also intuitive and already taught”

Fifty one percent felt in-class activities were very effective while 40% were deemed fairly effective and 6% felt that they were ineffective. In addition, 46% felt pre-recorded lectures were very effective while 35% stated that they were fairly effective and 14% felt they were ineffective. The following comment shows a favouring of the slides over the recorded lecture:

“the prerecorded lectures add no value to the slides, and I would always take my notes from the slides directly, not the lecture video”

Lastly, for the use of media links, 35% stated that they were very effective while 43% stated that are fairly effective and 14% stated that they were ineffective.

Comparing pre-recorded lectures and in person lectures: 65% of the students were satisfied with the pre-recorded lectures while 32 % had mixed feelings about it; 4% were dissatisfied with the pre-recorded lecture content. When we analyzed satisfaction with the in-class lectures of the course 62% were satisfied, 29% were ambivalent about it and 19% were dissatisfied. The in-class lectures were a linking of the assignment to the course content, but the time dedicated to presenting these connections as an in-class lecture was limited to 15 to 20 minutes per class and was not completed in a traditional class-lecture format. Some students suggested integrating a few traditional lectures into the course. For example:

“I think it would be beneficial to add a few live lectures

to the class. I understand that by doing the in class assignments we are working on HR Management, however, I do not know much about HR and felt a lack of understanding even though the questions were straightforward. I think it would help the groups work more smoothly and have everyone on the same page”

Further, integrating the pre-recorded lecture to the live lecture is critical in blended teaching methods. In this sample, 67% of the students felt that the lectures were well integrated and 22% stated maybe and 6% that it was not integrated and another 6% felt uncertain. However, when it was asked whether the content of the pre-recorded lectures was related to the live in-class learning only 22% stated always and 45% stated that it was often the case, while 27% stated it was only sometime relevant, 4% stated rarely and 1% stated never.

Apart from the course content, the survey specifically asked about the flipped classroom course delivery. One concern that was raised with this approach was the amount of work for the student:

“As long as the professor doesn't rely too heavily on pre-recorded videos this is an effective format, the flipped course format means an additional requirement to complete before attending class. Completing weekly textbook reading plus the recorded lectures and then coming to class for another 3 hours starts adding up”

There were also comments about the HyFlex aspect of the course. For example,

“I would enjoy pre-recorded lectures then in-person activities. The option of coming in was kind of pointless because I would have loved to come into class but I was the only one to show up most times so it is pointless”

“I like the flexibility, though I will say presenting is SO much easier online, because having both in-person and virtual group members when presenting is just added stress on top of everything else...Coming in for group work when all other members are online isn't really worth it either”

“I feel as though the class runs well online because when doing the group work in class everyone needs a computer anyway”

8.3. Answering Students' Questions

When it comes to answering student questions from the pre-recorded lecture in the live session, 37% said it was always the case and another 37% of students stated it was often the case. But 22% who stated it was only sometimes and 3% stated their questions were rarely answered. When asked if the in-class portion of the

course deepened their understanding of the course content introduced in the slides and the pre-recorded lecture, 20% stated always and 33% felt it was often the case, but 34% stated only sometimes, 8% stated rarely, and 4% stated that their knowledge was never deepened with the in-class portion of the course.

8.4. Group Work

Another factor that is part of blended course delivery is group work. When asked whether compared to the regular in-person or online class format, group work was complicated in the HyFlex delivery methods, 51% stated that it was not complicated. However, 25% said that it was complicated and 15% stated it may be complicated and another 10% they were uncertain. A further 17% also stated that they strictly like in-class course delivery methods and 8% said they had no preference.

Lastly, when asked what factors would influence your decision to attend your HyFlex class in person, 19% stated it would depend on the weather, 1% stated presence of other students in the class and another 17% stated presence of my friends or team members and 15% stated it depended on the level of interaction of the class. Students commented that they ran into the timeworn issue of finding the right group members. For example:

“organizing the work to be completed as a team was not so difficult, more so, forming groups and finding like-minded students to join your group was a difficulty at times”.

“I would have liked to switch groups half-way through the semester or something, because my group members were not contributing equally, and this has hurt my grades throughout the semester.”

The following positive comments highlight the benefit of the student experience with groups in the HyFlex classroom:

“I found group work to be easier since everyone could meet at a predetermined time with no interruptions. I also enjoyed the high flex class as my job requires me to travel often between Ottawa and Calgary, making it very convenient for me to not miss any content”

“Group work is definitely easier in person. If the group work is not done in class using the online method or HyFlex, it is extremely difficult to contact and organize group work online. Resulting in a terrible experience”

“Maybe making the group assignments to worked on more in person, rather than online could be beneficial”

9. Discussion

During the recent pandemic starting 2020, when universities and colleges were closed, it was an ideal time to examine the effectiveness of blended course delivery in student learning. Many researchers from different fields, such as Engineering [22], Social Work [23], Statistics [24], and Nursing [25], Anatomy [26], examined the student perceptions of blended course delivery. In this regard, our study contributes to the existing literature on blended course delivery by capturing student perception about flipped and HyFlex course delivery in a Human Resource management course.

Most of the students who took this course, liked the blended course delivery methods. Listening to the recorded lecture, at their convenience, gave the students greater flexibility. Group assignments were found to be the most effective course material and activity in this blended course delivery, followed by in-class activities and slide decks. Student satisfaction with pre-recorded lectures and media links was secondary. Group assignments and in-class activities provide students with an opportunity to work with other students, satisfying the psychological needs of the students. These findings highlight that students need opportunities to work together online and in-class when designing blended course delivery. Such interactions between students allow the creation of social bonds with their peers. These findings are similar to those of Magana et al., [22] who emphasize the importance of teamwork facilitation in the HyFlex learning environment. Having group work in a course enhances individual knowledge; stimulates creativity; group discussions are remembered better; students who provide solutions in a group are found to be committed and satisfied; group work allows students to understand themselves better, and teamwork is greatly valued by employers so it is an important skill to develop [27]. In the traditional classroom environment, students can see each other in person and form a group to work on assignments. When they meet to discuss group projects, such group meeting allows the formation of group cohesion and social connectedness. The blended class delivery methods is also needed to facilitate group cohesion and social connectedness as it centres the class on students working together applying the course content. Although group work was considered as one of the practical activities, in our sample, only half of the class stated that in comparison to in-person classes or online class format, group work was simple in the HyFlex delivery mode. The rest of the sample stated either yes, maybe, or uncertain. This finding likely reflected the limitations of the in-class facilities. The classroom was an auditorium with fixed seating that made group interaction difficult. Also, the technology provided to link in-class students to Zoom students was

complicated, so students resorted to using Zoom in class to work with their group or to participate in class discussions.

The student view of group work in HyFlex was that the mode made this activity more complicated. This aspect of teaching HyFlex needs improvement. Carter et al. [23] suggest careful group-based technologies are necessary to enhance successful group project work in HyFlex course delivery. Further, as students are working online in this duo-modality, clearer instructions and greater clarity on expectations are needed for a better group work experience [28].

Another evident factor in this research is that, compared to other course activities media links have been less effective than group assignments, in-class exercises and slide decks. Comparing pre-recorded lectures with live in-class lectures, satisfaction with pre-recorded lectures was slightly higher. This may be because the students could go back and listen to the pre-recorded lecture often and prior to the final exam. Most students felt that when they had questions from the pre-recorded lectures, they were answered well during the in-person lectures. Students also felt that the pre-recorded and in-class lectures were integrated well. However, only 67 % of the students provided an affirmative answer when they were asked whether the lecture content of the pre-recorded lectures related to the live classes. Similarly, when asked if the live class portion deepened their understanding of the course content introduced in the slides and pre-recorded lecture, 63% provided an affirmative answer. Although the students stated that integration between the live and pre-recorded session was good, these findings indicate that the integration between the pre-recorded lecture, slides and the live in-class portion can be better. Instructors must be given sufficient instructional and technological resources to facilitate greater integration between pre-recorded course material and in-class sessions. Technology-delivered instruction (TDI) has been particularly shown to increase in human resources competency among students taking HRM courses [29]. Integrating these technologies in HRM HyFlex courses can constructively integrate online and in-class lectures. Instructors may require additional training in using these information technologies since their experience in using information technologies can be a significant factor in blended course delivery success [30].

In addition to integrating both forms of lectures, students' ability to learn also needs to be considered in evaluating the pre-recorded and live lectures. Le [31] found that pre-recorded lectures reduced lower-ability students' academic achievement but did not affect higher-ability students' academic performance. When the students were taught via pre-recorded lectures at the beginning of the semester, it hurt their academic achievement more than in the last weeks.

10. Conclusion

Students positively received blended course delivery with a flipped course delivery and HyFlex methods in a third-year Human Resources course. Student satisfaction can be increased with better classroom facilities and more formal integration of group work and in-class activities in the blended course. Investment in the correct information technology can align in-class activities with the online components of the course, making the blended delivery more effective. Additionally, instructors need to be trained more fully in these new technologies, enabling better knowledge transfer in blended course delivery. Given that students find in-class group work preferable/less complicated than online group work, for students in a HyFlex flipped class all students would ideally meet in the class for the first one to two classes to facilitate group formation, establish and reinforce friendships and improve cohesion for the remainder of the course. Finally, this study shows that the weaknesses of the HyFlex class (complexity of group work across modalities and limitations of technology) can be improved by teaching in a flipped classroom design as class time can be dedicated to group work so that problems can be addressed during the class and solutions shared by all the students rather than left to time outside the classroom when coordinating schedules between group members and the instructor can be an added layer of complication and delay resolution.

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