

Hybrid Courses: Obstacles and Solutions for Faculty and Students

Robert Kaleta
Director, Learning Technology Center
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Carla Garnham
Instructional Innovator, Learning Technology Center
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Alan Aycock
Instructional Designer, Learning Technology Center
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Overview

The presentation discusses the challenges and problems encountered by faculty and students when working in the Hybrid course model. Based upon classroom and online experiences collected from courses in a variety of academic disciplines, we explain how to address the challenging transition to Hybrid instruction.

Both faculty and students must recast their traditional teaching and learning methods to benefit from this new instructional model that combines online and classroom work. Instructors can create very effective and flexible teaching environments with Hybrid courses. However, to do so successfully, instructors must learn new skills. We explain which skills are most important for faculty to learn and provide our faculty development materials and online resources for the participants to take back to their institutions.

Instructors using the Hybrid model must also help students become more independent and self-reliant learners. But this independence challenges students' abilities with technology, time management and study skills. Some students in Hybrid courses feel that they need help. Working with students who have enrolled in Hybrid courses, we developed a set of materials to assist students succeed in these courses.

Definition of Hybrid Courses

Hybrid courses are courses in which a significant portion of the learning activities have been moved online, and time traditionally spent in the classroom is *reduced* but not eliminated. The goal of Hybrid courses is to join the best features of in-class teaching with the best features of online learning to promote active independent learning and to reduce class seat-time. Using computer-based technologies, instructors use the Hybrid model to redesign some lecture or lab content into new online learning activities, such as case studies, tutorials, self-testing exercises, simulations, and online group collaborations.

Obstacles for Hybrid Course Instructors and Students

Although faculty who have taught Hybrid courses at our institution are universally positive about the format, we have encountered challenges getting additional instructors to accept, develop and teach Hybrid courses. Similarly, though Hybrid courses are extremely popular with our students (e.g., in one survey 80% reported they would recommend a Hybrid course to another student), faculty report difficulty getting their students to grasp the Hybrid course concept, understand what is expected of them, and adapt to their changed roles in the course methodology. This session focuses on the *obstacles* that instructors and students encounter in Hybrid courses and offers some *solutions* to these problems.

Obstacles & Solutions for Faculty: Getting Started!

The two major obstacles in getting faculty to consider teaching Hybrid courses are *change* and *time*. Instructors are asked to change the way they teach and commit a significant amount of time and effort to the process. Faculty are accustomed to teaching in a particular way. It is familiar and comfortable. Changing to a Hybrid course model requires motivation, especially because of the time needed to develop a first Hybrid course. A successful Hybrid course involves much more than simply transferring lecture materials to the Web. It requires the substantial time commitment required for course redesign.

A well-designed, formal Hybrid Course Faculty Development Program is the most effective and time-efficient solution for introducing faculty to Hybrid teaching. The program should emphasize practical, pragmatic advice about how to design and teach Hybrid courses. We offer our program as a model (complete with our timetables and materials) for you to refine for use on your campus.

(<http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/LTC/model-program.html>)

We highly recommend that instructors are compensated with course release time or summer stipends for the time spent working on their course redesign. The active support of deans or department chairs is also helpful in keeping instructors engaged in the course redesign program.

Obstacles & Solutions for Faculty: Common Mistakes in Course Redesign

Once instructors have committed to developing a Hybrid course, there are some Hybrid course design issues that consistently create difficulties for faculty. Based upon our experiences with over one-hundred instructors using our Hybrid Course Program, these are Hybrid course redesign errors to watch for.

- *Avoid the “course and a half” syndrome.*

When developing their first Hybrid course, instructors tend to “add-on” to their traditional course instead of rethinking their course’s objectives with the Hybrid model in mind. It is important to encourage instructors *not* to overload their first Hybrid course. Instead they must rethink their course goals and learn to achieve those goals in new ways. Simply inserting all the work they have always wanted to accomplish in the traditional course as an additional online component in the Hybrid course will not work!

Directing instructors to the “Ten Hybrid Course Planning Questions” – the ten reflective questions that we ask instructors complete prior to our first in-person Hybrid Course Faculty Development Program session – is a good approach for avoiding overloading the Hybrid.

- *Integrate the face-to-face and online (out-of-class) components of the Hybrid course.*

Our formal course redesign program emphasizes how to integrate the face-to-face teaching with the out-of-class work. Nonetheless, the *most common regret* (i.e., to the question, “What would I have done differently?”) expressed by our Hybrid instructors is that they did not focus sufficiently on integrating the course’s online learning with the classroom activities in their first Hybrid course. The connection between what occurs in class and what is studied online is essential. If well done it enables the students to develop more in-depth and thoughtful discussions and ideas. Students are quick to be critical if they perceive they are taking two separate courses, one online and one in the classroom. Asking an experienced Hybrid instructor to speak to instructors in the Hybrid course redesign program about techniques for integrating the two components is an effective way to highlight this potential problem.

- *Keep the course plans and the technology simple.*

Instructors should start with modest course redesign goals and keep their first Hybrid course *simple*. Faculty tend to overestimate what they can accomplish in their first Hybrid course. This results in overworking themselves and their students. Learning to develop Hybrid courses should be an incremental process.

At present relatively high-tech activities, such as streaming video, are also relatively high-risk pedagogically. These technologies are not always easy to use, things do go wrong on a regular basis, and even when everything works right, bandwidth issues limit what and where learning activities take place. Students strongly prefer working from home, thus technologies should be selected with this preference in mind.

Recommendations to help instructors “keep it simple” include: a) prefer simpler technologies to reduce risk and complications; b) do not organize the course too tightly; there is always some slippage due to “transaction costs” of working online that should be built into the course design, and c) things will occasionally go wrong, so plan carefully and provide some flexibility in the course design for making adjustments when needed.

Obstacles & Solutions for Faculty: Common Problems Teaching the Hybrid Course

- *Managing student expectations*

Hybrid instructors must learn to manage their students’ expectations about the course. The Hybrid model is new to students, and they often make incorrect assumptions about it. For example, students think that fewer class meetings means less work in the course, and they may assume that all online course work can be done at home. Instructors need to provide students with a clear rationale that explains why the course is organized as a Hybrid and what is expected of students. Some students have difficulty comprehending and adapting to their more responsible, active role in the Hybrid course. Suggestions to help instructors teaching a Hybrid course include:

- Explain and justify the format of course and assignments clearly and *repeatedly*
- Make certain students understand the equivalence between the amount of work in traditional course and in Hybrid course
- Make students aware that it is not always possible to complete all online work at home
- Make all assignments and other course expectations as explicit as possible right from the start
- Be very clear about what students are expected to do, and how you will grade them

- *Extra time needed to teach a Hybrid the first time*

Teaching a Hybrid course for the first time does take more time than teaching a traditional course. After two or three semesters of teaching Hybrids, this is no longer true. Initially, though, the instructor is learning new skills and becoming accustomed to using them effectively. Some of the more important new skills are managing email messages, facilitating and evaluating online discussions, and assessing students’ online work. Some important tips for instructors teaching a Hybrid course include:

- Break down and phase in longer assignments
- Ask for feedback from the students often and take their responses seriously
- Falling behind or sloppy record-keeping can be fatal: stay current and keep copies of everything
- Develop and use templates and rubrics to evaluate students’ online work

- *Using the technologies*

Students have most of their technology problems at the beginning of the course. Common problems are forgetting their passwords and not understanding how to access the online course materials. We have found that preparing technology help sheets (e.g., instructions for how to log on, how to get a new password, and the course's web address) are especially useful. Instructors of large enrollment courses simply carry the help sheets with them everywhere on campus and hand out the sheets as students approach them with the inevitably identical questions. However, during the semester things do go wrong with instructional technology. For these situations a cooperative 24 x 7 institutional Help Desk is invaluable. In addition to preparing technology help sheets, instructors should identify a place for students to go for live help.

Obstacles & Solutions for Students: Student Expectations

As discussed above, students have mistaken expectations about Hybrid courses. The most common misconceptions are that Hybrid courses are easier (less work) and require less time because there are fewer class meetings. We prepare students for the Hybrid course experience with a website titled, "Hybrid Courses: Information for Students" (<http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/LTC/hybridcourses.html>). The website introduces the Hybrid course concept, provides examples of typical Hybrid course assignments, and directs students to technology labs and support. This website address can be listed by instructors in the university's Schedule of Classes Timetable next to Hybrid courses.

Obstacles & Solutions for Students: Common Problems Taking the Hybrid Course

- *Taking responsibility for their own learning*

Just as a Hybrid course requires instructors to rethink their teaching roles and adjust to its more student-centered format, it demands that the students assume more responsibility for their own learning. This can be difficult for some students who are accustomed to a passive learner role. Instructors must describe the students' responsibilities repeatedly, in the syllabus and in person, explaining why an active role will improve students' abilities to learn course content more effectively than a more passive listening-to-lecture mode of learning.

- *Time management skills*

Instructors report that students' inadequate time management skills are a major obstacle for students in Hybrid courses. We suggest that Hybrid instructors be prepared for this problem and coach their students about the importance of time management. Providing time management tips for students and pointing to useful time management books, web resources or exercises is helpful.

- *Using the Technologies*

Using the technologies is not a barrier for most of the students, and most of the problems with technology occur at the start of the classes. The instructors report, "If the students got past the first couple of weeks, they were ok." Most Hybrid instructors recommend that the first week of class should be dedicated to technology orientation and class socialization. Clear "how to" instructions for students about how to access the course material and where to seek technical assistance are useful.

Students like using the technology, because they perceive they are acquiring a useful skill. Generally, students report that the university's course management system is easy to use, and they appreciate the

opportunity to learn how to use the Web. Universally, they believed that computer skills learned in the Hybrid course will help them in other courses and in the workplace.

Conclusion

After presenting our insights into preparing instructors and students for Hybrid courses, the session will engage the Distance Teaching & Learning conference audience in a discussion of their Hybrid course problem/obstacles and solutions, both experienced and anticipated. This paper will be revised after the conference session is held in August 2003. In September 2003 a revised copy of this paper, that reflects the audience's comments and participation in the face-to-face session, will be posted at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee LTC's Hybrid Course Website at <http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/LTC/hybrid.html>

Biographical Sketches

Robert Kaleta is director of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Learning Technology Center, the campus faculty development center for instructional technology. The Center focuses on reaching and working with mainstream faculty and assisting them with their efforts to integrate technology into their courses. Bob has presented papers recently on the Hybrid course model, reaching and working with mainstream faculty, and using technology for teaching. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin. Bob is a member of the MERLOT disciplinary team for psychology.

Address: P.O. Box 613
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Milwaukee, WI 53201
E-mail: kaleta@uwm.edu
Phone: 414.229.5136
Fax: 414.229.6758

Carla Garnham is an Instructional Innovator in the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Learning Technology Center. She has been actively supporting Hybrid Courses since 1999 when she conceived and secured funding for the original University of Wisconsin-System Hybrid Project. Carla speaks frequently at conferences and workshops on Hybrid Courses, most recently at EDUCAUSE 2002 and EDUCAUSE Midwest 2003. Carla received her M.A. from the University of Minnesota.

Address: P.O. Box 613
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Milwaukee, WI 53201
E-mail: cgarnham@uwm.edu
Phone: 414.229.4319
Fax: 414.229.6758

Alan Aycock is an Instructional Design Consultant in the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Learning Technology Center. He taught the first fully online course at the university and is an experienced Hybrid instructor. In 2002 Alan was named one of fifteen Wisconsin Teaching Scholars; his task was to revise a course – Ads in American Culture – as a Hybrid course to emphasize the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOT&L). Alan holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Toronto.

Address: P.O. Box 613
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Milwaukee, WI 53201
E-mail: aycock@uwm.edu
Phone: 414.229.4319
Fax: 414.229.6758