

# THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT...

## THE HyFLEX COURSE MODEL

### Scenario

For the fall term, David and Bryce both sign up for a course on Shakespeare. The class is taught as a HyFlex course, in which all of the learning activities are offered both in-class and online and students have the option of attending face-to-face or online (or both) on any class day. The syllabus offers a menu of assignment choices, some of which are tailored for remote students and others for those in the classroom.

Bryce works part-time at a bicycle shop. Because he enjoys the social interaction on campus, he makes time to attend classes in person, and he often reads while riding the bus to campus. He's done well in his classes for years by attending lectures, doing the assigned reading, and taking the quizzes, and he feels confident following that pattern now. David commutes 30 miles from his home to a construction job and 35 minutes in the other direction to campus. All this car time gives him plenty of opportunity to listen to audio versions of the Shakespeare plays, but by the time he leaves work, his enthusiasm for driving to class is low. Instead, he prefers to participate in the online discussion session.

Sometimes students who attend in person join the online discussion, and a couple of students have mentioned that "double attendance" has helped them learn the material faster and more thoroughly. As a result, when he finds himself confused by *King Lear*, David decides to attend a couple of classes in person as well as online.

The final exam requires all students to attend class. The professor asks each learning team to draw out of a hat the name of one play studied during the term. Bryce and David are on the same team, which draws *King Lear*. Each team has 30 minutes to write a five-minute "playlet" that sums up all that happens in the chosen play. The team members take roles and read lines or deliver in an improvisational mode. Overacting is encouraged, and a box of costumes is provided. During the next hour and a half, each team delivers their production to the class and then addresses questions about the play. David and Bryce are proud of their understanding of Shakespeare and their ability to discuss *King Lear* with the class—and of the rousing ovation they got for their performance.

### 1 What is it?

HyFlex is a course design model that presents the components of hybrid learning (which combines face-to-face with online learning) in a flexible course structure that gives students the option of attending sessions in the classroom, participating online, or doing both. Students can change their mode of attendance weekly or by topic, according to need or preference. In this "flexible hybrid" design, instructors provide course content for both participation modes and can tailor activities for each format. This is not a self-paced model, even though online sessions can be either synchronous or asynchronous. Students frequently take the same final assessment, regardless of the chosen path through the material. The menu of options offered by HyFlex can ease the scheduling burden for students who commute long distances or who must be away from campus for athletics or other competitive activities. It is useful, too, for students who must coordinate work and family responsibilities with a challenging course schedule. In providing an online option, the model provides the flexibility to keep a class from falling behind if, for example, the instructor has to travel unexpectedly or the campus is closed due to weather or other circumstances.

### 2 How does it work?

Because the HyFlex model is a conceptual framework—not software—it can be implemented using an institution's existing course management system or other online course infrastructure. The course is generally listed in the catalogue as a face-to-face course because the assignment of a room is necessary. Class sessions are offered both online and in the physical classroom so that students can attend either or both—those who attend face-to-face sessions can join the online class discussion if they like, and those who attend online can later review in-class sessions that are posted in audio or audio/video format. Students choose assignments from a menu of learning options that might include readings, exercises, and research projects. Some of these might be tailored to either face-to-face or online attendance, but all selections should equally support the learning goals of the course. A frequent feature of the HyFlex model is small-group engagement and collaborative work, which might call for team meetings, conducted virtually or in person.

### 3 Who's doing it?

At San Francisco State University, several classes in the Instructional Technologies (ITEC) master's program are taught using the HyFlex model, which was developed there to accommodate a student population with significant commuting and work-related demands on their time. The array of courses that follow this

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model has been growing since its introduction so that now most seminars in the ITEC program are offered as HyFlex courses, and the faculty are working to present more courses that use the HyFlex model each semester. Herkimer County Community College uses a slightly different approach to HyFlex design in which two sections of an introductory psychology course are scheduled in one classroom and two instructors lead the class as a team-teaching project. At Buffalo State University, a HyFlex course has been offered in Advanced Library Research, which focuses on research skills, evaluation skills, and critical thinking.

### 4 Why is it significant?

Models like HyFlex, which present multiple paths through course content, may work well for courses where students arrive with varying levels of expertise or background in the subject matter. The flexible approach to attendance allows those needing additional review of the course material to acquire it by attending both face-to-face and online sessions when they need extra review. The menu of assignments can invite a student to select the attendance option that best matches his or her background and skills. In these ways, students will find that HyFlex courses offer them a high degree of customization and more control over the learning process. At the same time, HyFlex encourages students to be more engaged and to take greater initiative in their learning, possibly helping cultivate metacognitive skills. Institutions may see in HyFlex course design a solution for limited classroom space and find the model especially useful for meeting the needs of a student body scattered over a large geographic area.

### 5 What are the downsides?

The successful deployment of the HyFlex model is highly dependent on institutional context. It is easiest to implement where institutions already have an established path for the faculty to offer their courses online. Similarly, the ready availability of technologies to capture lectures digitally will smooth adoption of HyFlex design. But even where technology supports the HyFlex design, there may be a gap of several days between the capture of the in-class session and its availability to students who attend online. Though some instructors contend that offering a menu of options to students is less work than might be expected, there can be little doubt that developing for multiple platforms and providing a high level of customization requires more effort on the part of an instructor, at least initially. The open, flexible model might only be appropriate for those who are highly motivated to engage in the coursework. Accordingly, some faculty find it useful to ask students to complete a “readiness test” that will help them determine for themselves if they are a good fit for this type of course.

### 6 Where is it going?

Introduced in 2006, the HyFlex model has not yet been widely adopted. Additional implementations might clarify which students are most likely to succeed with this open framework and the types of courses for which it will be most effective. The current financial pressures in education might pave the way for more hybrid courses in the HyFlex model, as a way to address space constraints and accommodate the ever-growing population of students who work full time. In addition, the adaptable approach suggested by HyFlex allows students to customize their education, a trend that might continue in coming years as new technologies that support individual learning emerge.

### 7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Courses built on the HyFlex model help to break down the boundary between the virtual classroom and the physical one. That is, by allowing students access to both platforms, the design encourages discussion threads to move from one platform to the other. But such courses require more from both instructors and students than do traditional offerings. To make these courses successful, instructors must coordinate with students, IT support, learning technologies support, and others within their departments. Students must make choices and thereby accept greater responsibility for their own learning processes. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students faced with extended periods of absence or who work farther from campus are able to complete HyFlex courses more easily, potentially boosting student success and retention. In short, HyFlex might help institutions move toward a more customized teaching and learning approach, one that is more likely to meet individual student needs—and one that may eventually alter their expectations of course offerings.

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