

Changing with the Times: An Evaluation of Hybrid Online Teaching and Learning with Suggestions for Improving Delivery

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Executive Summary

The following report evaluates the efficacy of hybrid teaching and learning in a college-based higher education setting. Primary data was collected using face-to-face and online focus groups. Students currently undertaking an access course in Criminal Justice and Policing Studies were invited to take part in the investigation, along with staff members who deliver the course. Thematic analysis revealed there are key advantages to using the hybrid model. Improved access and flexibility for students and increased fluidity of support and communication were some of the advantages discussed. Some limitations were also identified. For instance, some students suggested they missed the richness of face-to-face communication when personal circumstances forced them to learn in a digitalised way. The report concludes with the suggestion that hybrid teaching and learning could transform college-based higher education, but that further research is needed to ensure delivery meets the needs of twenty-first century individuals. The report ends with several suggestions for improving delivery. These suggestions may be used to inform future investigations.

Main Report

Research Aim and Key Objectives

Aim: Identify how hybrid teaching and learning opportunities can improve provision in college-based higher education to help students excel.

Objectives:

1. Evaluate the quality and effectiveness of hybrid teaching and learning from the perspectives of staff and students.
2. Explore the advantages and limitations of increasing access to hybrid teaching and learning in college-based higher education during a period of interregnum.
3. Provide suggestions for improving hybrid teaching and learning in a college-based higher education setting.

Societal Context and Direction

Writing during his lengthy incarceration from within Turi prison, Antonio Gramsci warned us that ‘the old is dying and the new cannot be born’ (1971: 276). What Gramsci was talking about is a period of interregnum, a period of time-lag separating one planetary condition from another as societies transition from a formerly ‘solid’ style of modernity into something new (Bordoni, 2016). Zygmunt Bauman’s (2000) way of putting it was to suggest that the mid-twentieth century marked a point of transition from a world of producer-based modernity into a rapidly changing software-based modernity. What this means in real-world terms is that progress is measured through technological achievement and fluidity rather than the socially prescribed path of rationality and permanence.

As something that infiltrates the lives of virtually all human beings, digital technology has become an essential component of twenty-first century living. It sits in our pockets, hangs from our living room walls, clings to our wrists, permeates everyday conversation, and it does so subtly. Mindful of the collateral consequences of becoming immersed in a software-based modernity, scholars such as Donna Haraway (1991) and Sherry Turkle (2011) have argued that human beings have become so dependent on technologies they have become cyborg-like. However, portrayals like this cannot help but paint a dystopic, nightmarish even, image of metal fused with human flesh. While there is perhaps much truth in Haraway and Turkle’s forewarnings as their predictions of the future have in many ways become reality, viewing present modernity in such a way is potentially hyperbolic.

There is another side to the interregnum. If technologies are thought of prudently and with greater trust, they might be better thought of as facilitating light behaviours, mobility and new freedoms (Haleem et al., 2022). Viewing technology in this way, as a facilitator for communication, accessibility, international collaboration and the publication of knowledge, is perhaps more pragmatic. To avoid following the eternal habit of the Owl of Minerva, the symbol of wisdom made famous by Hegel (1821/2005) which is known for spreading its wings just before midnight and representing things that are recognised only when they have disappeared, what this project sets out to do, in true fashion of the Latin aphorism *carpe diem*, is ‘seize the day’.

The speed at which digital technology has impacted both pedagogy and andragogy is astonishing. By far its greatest impact, as Lim, Azevedo and Cooper (2016) point out, is its effect on younger generations who have embraced the use of digital platforms because they enable them to more effectively and efficiently source information and social networks. In addition to these developments, digital technologies have, just as Marshall McLuhan (1964) predicted they would over half a century ago, changed the way all people learn, the way they process information, and the way knowledge is produced. Aware of the changes that have taken place, and the wider context that has initiated a shift in thinking, this project can be viewed as an attempt to remain responsive to the coming needs of present-day and future students in higher education.

The impact of the interregnum notwithstanding, several scholars have argued that most higher education institutions have been slow to adopt new digital technologies (Liu, Geertshuis and Grainger, 2020; Dahlstrom, Brooks and Bichsel, 2014). An additional problem is that when they are used, they are underused (Liu, Geertshuis and Grainger, 2020). Responding to this problem, Gargano and Zeigler (2021) and Toetenel and Rienties (2020) have argued for a radical shift in thinking, a shift that reflects a willingness on behalf of higher education institutions to remain contemporaneous and invest sufficiently in digital technologies to make programs more relevant, interactive and accessible. With the same argument in mind, and some intuitive awareness that the world has changed further

still due to COVID-19 and the present economic crisis, ultimately this project sets out to advocate the use of digital technology for hybrid delivery in higher education settings.

Building on precursory work conducted at the University of Northampton which aimed to revolutionise teaching and learning in higher education by blending face-to-face teaching with digital technology-enabled synchronous and asynchronous activity (Armellini, Antunes and Howe, 2021), this project sets its sights on hybrid delivery in college-based higher education settings. The overarching aim of the project, as stated at the beginning of the report, is to identify how hybrid teaching and learning opportunities can improve existing provision in college-based higher education to help students excel.

Defining and Understanding Hybrid Learning

So far, the broad impact of the interregnum has been unpacked but what has not been highlighted so far in the report is a clear definition of hybrid teaching and learning. What is also missing is a critical overview of the potentials and limitations of hybrid teaching and learning. This is the focus of the next section of the report.

Shaping Up

As consistently stated throughout this piece, the western world has become increasingly individualistic and transformative. Under these circumstances, it is expected that teaching and learning delivery methods will adapt. For many educational institutions this has been the case. As access to communication tools has improved, and the lines between online and face-to-face delivery blurred, the latest change in the past decade has been the emergence of different methods of online delivery (Raes et al., 2020). A variety of different methods have been proposed, implemented, and reviewed and they include ‘hybrid learning’, ‘blended learning’, ‘online learning’, and ‘asynchronous learning’. A key problem, however, is that these terms are often used interchangeably which can cause ambiguity and confusion (Johnson, Seaman and Poulin, 2022). To avoid making the same error in this report, the term ‘*hybrid teaching and learning*’ has been adopted in this investigation. To further enhance clarity, a clear definition of hybrid teaching and learning follows.

Analogous to scholarly debate in Sport Studies over how sport and physical education should be defined, there have been years of deliberation over how hybrid teaching and learning should be understood and applied (Johnson, 2021; Smith and Hill, 2019). To avoid entering the unresolved debate and contributing to furthering the ambiguity, a definition similar to Wu et al.’s (2014) is adopted in this report. According to Wu et al. (2014), hybrid teaching and learning involves the delivery of ‘a formal education program in which students learn at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction with some element of student control over time, place, path or pace’. What Wu et al. (2014) emphasise is the point that hybrid learning is not exclusively virtual. Rather, it is a form of learning delivered through the ‘brick-and-mortar’ of an educational institution and involves computer-mediated activities guided by classroom instructions (ibid). Although this definition might lead to the surface-level assumption that hybrid learning is merely a combination of online and classroom learning, the stance in this report is that it is more than this. As Wu et al. (2014) argue, a robust definition of hybrid learning should highlight four key points:

... [1] students can have more choice and control over their study but under the guidance of the instructors at the same time... [2] students can make full use of the abundant resources and materials on the Internet and have a better understanding of these substantive materials with the help of teachers and other students in a traditional face-to-face classroom... [3] students [have] a greater opportunity to interact with each other and with their instructors and thus from a stronger sense of community... [4] students perform better than those [who] take mere face-to-face classes or online classes... (26).

The above definition of hybrid learning is similar to the Office for Students' definition of blended learning, where teaching and learning combine in-person delivery with delivery in a digital environment (Office for Students, 2022). However, it differs in one crucial way: hybrid learning allows students to decide which mode (in-person or digitally) suits their needs the best. Furthermore, students can rotate between methods depending on their situation.

In terms of the practical application of hybrid teaching and learning and other online learning methods, research has shown that there are two main delivery methods. The flipped model which involves three stages – pre-class, face-to-face, and post-class – is most prevalent (Saichaie, 2020). The second delivery method involves the flex model. The flex model is where students rotate between face-to-face and online delivery (Ashraf et al., 2020). It is fair to speculate that hybrid delivery can provide more flexible methods of teaching and learning that align more coherently with the rapidly changing needs of contemporary society. The benefits of hybridity and other methods of online delivery in meeting demands have been observed during the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Finlay, Tinnion and Simpson, 2022).

Key Advantages of Hybrid Learning

COVID-19 had an intense impact on hybrid learning as schools, colleges and universities were forced to deliver in this manner as a matter of necessity. This has presented a unique opportunity to reflect upon the effectiveness of hybrid teaching and learning and evaluate its role in the delivery of future provision. In Jisc's 2021-22 Student Digital Experience Insights Survey, 45% of students preferred a mix of onsite and online delivery. Significantly, this was the first-time students had been more supportive of hybrid teaching and learning than onsite, with 42% of students preferring onsite delivery (Jisc, 2022). Correspondingly, in 2022 the Office for Students found that 79% of current university students advocated hybrid learning (Office for Students 2022). Similar findings have also emerged in Finlay, Tinnion and Simpson's (2022) recent investigation of a sport and exercise science student cohort at Edge Hill University. What data is beginning to reveal in other words is that there is preliminary evidence to suggest that hybrid teaching and learning should be considered a more effective and responsive method of learning.

The most prominent benefit of hybrid teaching and learning is that it can be highly flexible. Recently, in the "Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth" white paper, the Department for Education (2021) insisted that people should be able to access training and learning flexibly throughout their lives. Given that the United Kingdom is experiencing a cost-of-living crisis at the time this report is being written, it is unlikely that people will be able to reduce their work hours to study in the usual face-to-face format. Flexibility is therefore essential. Although the concept of hybrid teaching and learning is in its infancy, there is consistent evidence that the method improves flexibility (Vaughan, 2007; Raes et al., 2019; McKenna et al., 2020). Often those enrolled on hybrid

courses encounter issues around time management. However, this is usually resolved with students taking responsibility for their learning (Vaughan, 2007). Comparably, hybrid teaching and learning, by providing flexibility and convenience, allows more time for learning preparation and reflection (McKenna et al., 2020). In summary, it seems fair to advocate the use of the hybrid model to increase accessibility and learning outcomes through flexibility. Nevertheless, course design is key to achieving that goal and the hybrid approach has limitations. Some of the most conspicuous are discussed below.

Limitations of Hybrid Learning

Given that hybrid teaching and learning has only become prominent in the last twenty years, there are some clear areas for improvement. The most noteworthy are that a) a lack of digital skills amongst staff can lead to inferior quality delivery (Office for Students, 2022), b) a paucity of research focuses on the role of the instructor/course designer and methods adapted (Smith and Hill, 2019), c) the quality of feedback is frequently perceived to be inadequate (Office for Students 2022), d) students' diligence and time management can be lacking (Hamila, 2016), and e) hybrid students are more likely to feel isolated and disconnected from their peers (Office for Students, 2022). What these limitations reinforce is that further research that reflects on and critically assesses current practices must be conducted. By exploring student and staff experiences, different lessons on good practice and poor practice can be shared among policymakers and course designers.

Widening Participation in Adult Higher Education Using a Hybrid Learning Approach

Widening participation is a topic high on political and institutional agendas, both locally and globally (Rizzica, 2020). Increasing access to higher education to promote positive diversity growth at a micro level in the United Kingdom was first propelled into political agenda by Ron Dearing's (1997) report, *Higher Education in the Learning Society*. Since then, interest in widening participation has grown further, especially as social, economic and political contexts have become less stable and unpredictable.

Recently, it is the COVID-19 pandemic that has reignited interest in the topic as educational institutions have had to adapt and implement new hybrid strategies of learning. At the beginning of the pandemic, the focus was centred less on widening participation as the priority was to keep access to higher education open. In the aftermath, however, it can be argued that opportunities to further enhance teaching and learning in the HE sector have been realised. As Butcher and Curry (2022) point out, the growth and extended use of hybrid teaching and learning strategies have unveiled new opportunities to diversify and widen participation in adult education. Post-pandemic, the new aim for many institutions appears to be how HE can be made more accessible for a wider range of disadvantaged socio-demographic groups (Whalley et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2020).

Although the shift in thinking is positive, scholars such as Guàrdia et al. (2023) and Armellini, Antunes and Howe (2021) report that many challenges to widening participation remain. Foremost among them are ongoing issues such as access problems faced by White, Black, Asian and Minority working-class students (Crozier, Reay and Clayton, 2020). Following a similar train of thought, Shaw (2021) traces UK policy changes aimed at widening participation for disabled HE students. Although

important advances have been reported over the past fifty years, what Shaw (2021) reveals is that disabled individuals are among the most at risk of experiencing exclusion from HE. The most recent event to cause further participation barriers is the present cost-of-living crisis in the UK. As Goodwin (2022) explains, for individuals who are already among the most impoverished, the current socio-economic climate exasperates existing barriers to HE.

Socio-economic disadvantage is fundamental within this study as it frames the pre-determinate factors that influenced the validation and implementation of the hybrid learning course of which this study is based upon. The Access to HE Level 3 Criminal Justice and Policing programme, based at Barnsley College is currently the only one of its kind within the organisation. It falls in line with the organisations widening participation strategy for adult learners, within a region of social disadvantage where educational attainment levels fall short of national averages. The working age population of Barnsley with an educational attainment of level 3 or above stands at 48.3%, in comparison with a national average of 59.8% (Gov.UK, 2021). These statistics reinforce the necessity of education providers to strive to heighten educational attainment aspirations of their adult demographic in the Barnsley region. The use of hybrid teaching and learning strategies offer flexible access to widen adult participation and bolster negative traditional patterns of attainment levels.

Methodological Considerations

Ontological and Epistemological Stance

Beginning with its philosophical foundations, the present investigation is grounded in the belief that nothing exists beyond collections of human imagination, language and thought. This follows Gilles Deleuze's (2001/1953) reinterpretation of David Hume's proposition that knowledge can be gained through the intuitive expression of ideas and expressions of matter-of-fact understandings which have been deduced or directly observed. At the heart of Deleuze's (2001/1953) thinking is the idea that human beings are not stable and consistent because what occurs in the mind is always derived from perception. Also at the heart of his thinking is the suggestion that human minds and their passions can be organised to some degree by social orientation (ibid). Both ideas inform the contents of this report.

In keeping with the ontological standpoint, a phenomenological approach to inquiry is what follows in the remainder of the report because it is a means of obtaining knowledge about how people think and feel. The intent with phenomenology, as Bentz and Shapiro (1998) explain, is to provide descriptions and analyses of human experiences as they have been experienced. An obvious drawback with this type of approach is that information gathered through independent subjectivities can end up taking the form of a cacophony of opposed thoughts and ideas. To avoid this problem, microsocial environments were exploited. This follows Alfred Schutz's (1967) argument that people can be encouraged to temporarily reject their independent sense of subjectivity when they are brought together in intersubjective spaces where similar values, experiences and expectations are shared.

Research Design

Participants for the study consisted of students and staff at Barnsley College Higher Education (BCHE) who were directly involved in the delivery of, or learning within, a hybrid model of teaching and learning. Uniting all participants in interest and intent (a microsocial environment) was an Adult Access to Higher Education Criminal Justice and Policing programme (level 3). Everyone involved in the investigation either delivered or received face-to-face synchronous and online asynchronous delivery of content.

Participants were invited to take part in a semi-structured group discussion to evaluate the quality of hybrid teaching and learning and deliberate possibilities for widening participation and developing skills for employment. Three focus groups were successfully organised by an experienced moderator and two undergraduate students employed to support the project as associate researchers. Two of the focus groups were conducted face-to-face while the third was conducted online via Microsoft Teams. The duration of the focus groups ranged from 38 minutes to 1 hour and 10 minutes.

Following the data collection and transcription period, a simple thematic analysis was conducted. The analysis adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase coding framework. Member checking occurred in the final analysis to ensure the representations of participants' views were accurate (Tobin and Begley, 2004).

Discussion

Students undertaking the access course suggested that there are many advantages to hybrid teaching and learning. The flexibility of hybrid delivery was viewed as a crucial advantage as it made the course more accessible. Several participants were able to clearly articulate how flexible hybrid provision removed barriers to their engagement in higher education. These participants all shared similar thoughts to Serena:

"... with it being online, it's a lot easier to access, a lot more flexible as well around the kids and things like that" [Serena].

The point about flexibility was particularly relevant for participants who were parents to young children.

Hybrid delivery also helped students catch up with learning by accessing recorded materials at a time suited to their commitments to cement understanding. It allowed them to catch up more easily if they missed a session and it offered more opportunities to access support from peers and staff. The ability to access materials at any point allowed students to develop a deeper understanding of the topic at their own convenience, thus enhanced the fluidity of learning.

"The lessons were recorded. I have gone back and used those recordings while preparing for and doing the assessments. You know, I have come back to the recordings, and there might have been things I forgot or things that would help me understand more. I always come back to the recordings." [Macy].

"Well, all the materials that we need for the class are online, and you have your live session. I know I can view it at home live or go in; if I miss it, I can always watch it later. Even the activities students do in class are linked and saved so you can access them. This improves

the "realness" of it all and means you don't miss out too much whatever your situation or whatever is happening in your life." [Sarah].

The hybrid model also increased the fluidity of support and communication between students and staff. This was particularly helpful given that many students had returned to education after a significant amount of time away. Most notably, participants noted the speed and ease of communication (messaging service).

"You've basically got a direct messaging service to your tutor. If that service were not there, you'd have to drop an email, wait for them to get through all the emails and then eventually get back to you. The service on offer was quicker, which usually mattered as you need an answer as quickly as possible. The system and staff were rapid. [Sarah].

The most significant point made here is the efficiency of students accessing material, information, and support. As revealed earlier in the report, the speed in which technology is impacting younger generations is astonishing. Many are used to efficiently accessing information and services outside of education through digital platforms, so they expect education to be no different. In other words, the hybrid model falls in line with present-day, consumerist expectations of students where fast responses and results have become the norm.

Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the advantages highlighted so far, the hybrid approach to teaching and learning is not without its limitations. For instance, it is important to point out that some students find communicating online awkward. Under these circumstances, it is important to concede that these tools may only partially replace the tangible richness of in-person communication. As two students explained:

"I have got a group with Gemma and Laura that we have spoken a couple of times in. Erm, but I cannot really say that I have really spoken to anyone else, erm, and I think it is just because of being kind of mainly online, you feel a bit awkward messaging someone I do not really know. Just because I do not really know them, and they are going to be like, oh, why is this person messaging me? I've never spoken to them before kind of thing." [Jess].

"I think it's a bit harder online just because when you're in person, you get to know people a lot quicker. Whereas online like, I feel like we have barely gotten to know each other unless you put in like separate teams to do tasks. And even that is quite minimal because you mute your mic, you go do your research like you come back. So, I would still say it is quite nerve-racking to speak. I feel like the conversation doesn't flow like it should." [Chloe].

It is pivotal here to recognise that hybrid teaching and learning is not exclusively online. Yet, when the conditions of life dictate that only online learning is possible, individuals may miss the richness of in-person communication.

Another area for improvement that was frequently mentioned was the access to necessary technology or, more pertinently, the lack of an uninterrupted home environment. As Courtney explained:

"Erm, I struggle to get into the right headspace at home. Especially with the children at home, I just, I can't. So, I struggle a little bit on the lessons that have been delivered online. I miss conversations etc., as there is a lot going off in my background." [Courtney].

"See, I'm saying, I find it hard if you're at home; you've got to get the right headspace because I know that other stuff needs doing such as the pots need washing. Or I watch the

said by the clock because the kids are going to bed soon, and I miss stuff that has been teacher." [Courtney].

The above comments indicate that some students find it difficult to fully immerse themselves in learning whilst in their home environment. Often, household chores, commitments or general noise impacted their concentration abilities. Similarly, there were issues with having the right equipment. Interestingly, this was a comment mentioned by both students on the course and staff members delivering the course. It also left some students with no other option than to access learning face-to-face.

"I didn't have the equipment to be able to do the lessons or assignments at home. So, I spent nearly four days a week in college, even though we only had two lessons. This was a barrier for me and made it difficult. [Macy].

"We were probably quite naive at the beginning, it is like thinking we could just do it with a normal laptop and Microsoft Teams rather than having a camera, weren't we? You know, like and then realise that they (students) could not hear everybody clearly. We needed a high- quality camera from the start." [Rebekah, Staff Member].

Both comments make plain the importance of having the right equipment. In the above incidents, it is clear more equipment was needed to ensure a smooth learning process. If the hybrid approach is to reach its true potential, all students must have access to the essential equipment (own laptop). Similarly, staff should have access to equipment such as sophisticated webcams rather than relying on equipment designed for more traditional face-to-face learning. Likewise, institutions must seize the opportunity to better prepare their staff members for hybrid learning and digital technologies. Often, staff members noted that the training methods provided did not align with the hybrid learning method.

"Because it is not the norm of college here, to do that kind of model of learning? So, because it is new, we have not got the right type of training that helps with hybrid delivery." [Matt, Staff Member].

Again, the above indicates that education needs to move faster to 'seize the day'. Equipment and training should reflect and adapt to the changing ways students consume information and learn.

Conclusions

The report reveals that hybrid teaching and learning can improve existing provision in college-based higher education settings. Its greatest impact is that it transforms education in a way that better fits the period of interregnum present-day societies have entered.

What the results of the investigation indicate is that the hybrid approach has the potential to provide learning experiences that are adaptable and more flexible. This is important because people have become more heterogeneous in present modernity which means their needs are not static and fixed. As Zygmunt Bauman (2000) explains, years ago being modern was about chasing a final state of perfection, but in the present-day where there is no final state to be reached adaptability and flexibility are the only permanence. The investigation also reveals that hybrid teaching and learning can enhance the speed of delivery which is something students look for in college-based higher education courses. Once again, this finding supports the idea that hybrid models of learning are

better suited to changes that have occurred in the present interregnum where speed and instantaneity are preferred qualities. As Bauman (2000) explains, speed is valued in present modernity because it is not only associated with convenience but also greater efficiency and progress. The final key observation, which is perhaps the most obvious, is that hybrid teaching and learning generates greater equilibrium between traditional learning styles and emerging digital technologies. In other words, the hybrid approach provides opportunities for students to develop their awareness and understanding of technology. In the interregnum, a world that is ruled by rapidly advancing technologies, being mindful of the utilities of technology is essential if people are to have any chance of succeeding (Bauman, 2000).

In terms of making suggestions for improving hybrid teaching and learning, the present investigation reveals that the right equipment is needed if delivery of content is to be high in quality. On the back of this observation is the important suggestion that educational institutions – providers of college-based higher education especially – must work harder to adapt provision. Failing to adapt in time means both methods of delivery and facilities remain firmly rooted in old-fashioned settlements belonging to the disappearing era of ‘solid’ modernity. That is to say, if institutions do not keep pace with the interregnum their provision is destined to become incongruous and out of touch with the real world. On this point, requisite professional development opportunities and support structures must be in place to help educators realise the full potential of hybrid teaching and learning. The final suggestion for improving hybrid teaching and learning is to consider the suitability of home environments for students. As the study revealed, some individuals find it difficult to fully immerse themselves in learning whilst in their home environment which means more thought could be given to the development of habits that support concentration. Alternatively, hybrid learning could be encouraged in a variety of alternative settings such as public libraries, cafes or parks.

In sum, hybrid teaching and learning has a definitive place in present-day education. Nevertheless, much more research is needed to build the current evidence base given that the hybrid model is still in its infancy compared to more traditional methods of instruction. With more diligent and evidence-based evaluations of hybridity, researchers and educators can begin to shape a pathway that is more refined and effective, a pathway that is more efficient in the way it caters to the ever-changing needs of students in the present interregnum.

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