

## Hybrid Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: An Appreciative Inquiry

Lori E. Kniffin and Justin Greenleaf  
*Fort Hays State University*

This study is an appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivasta, 1987; Priest et al., 2013) into hybrid courses offered in Fall 2020, which included a combination of face-to-face and online elements. The courses in this study were part of an academic leadership studies program at Fort Hays State University and were taught in the hybrid format for the first time in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of the study was to identify the assets of the hybrid modality of instruction in order to retain and implement them post-pandemic in any modality. Our findings include three themes: (1) perceptions of hybrid learning, (2) student motivations, and (3) design considerations—which all demonstrate a positive outlook on hybrid learning with considerations for designing effective courses. We offer recommendations in three areas including (1) administrative considerations, (2) course design, and (3) opportunities to prepare students for a continuum of virtuality.

The COVID-19 pandemic fast-tracked many educators to develop new digital teaching strategies (Gnaur et al., 2020). Hybrid teaching and learning can be defined as a combination of “instructional elements from traditional face-to-face formats and online course formats” (Hall & Villareal, 2015, p. 69). The combination of face-to-face and online teaching is not new, but Gnaur et al. (2020) remind us that “digital transformation is associated with major change processes,” and the pandemic caused many educators to “skip the gradual transformation” due to this extreme case (p. 205). Colleges and universities made quick transformations to meet their missions and public safety guidelines (Baker et al., 2020), and these changes required many faculty to try hybrid teaching to meet this moment.

As many of us wait to “go back to normal” there is also a growing sense that we—our society and many of its functions—will never return to what we knew before. This sentiment could be stemming from the cultural and technological shifts that have been required of large numbers of people and institutions to adapt to the new environment. While this collective shift has caused numerous challenges, it has also provided many opportunities to examine new ways of operating. To take full advantage of this unique moment in higher education, we designed a qualitative study using an appreciative inquiry framework to identify the assets of hybrid teaching and learning, dream about a better future, and design our new normal. We do this by first discussing the relevant literature on hybrid teaching and learning. Then, we describe how the appreciative inquiry process was implemented in our study. We share the three themes of our findings: (1) perceptions of hybrid learning, (2) student motivations, and (3) design considerations. Lastly, we take our findings from this inquiry and provide recommendations for educators that extend beyond the hybrid modality.

### Literature Review

We sought literature about hybrid teaching and learning using various search terms and combinations (e.g., hybrid, virtual, teaching and learning). Literature related to using a hybrid modality was found across many disciplines, which guided our study as literature within our own field of leadership education was limited.

### Hybrid Teaching and Learning

Hybrid learning existed prior to the pandemic. Linder (2017) describes hybrid pedagogy as “a method of teaching that utilizes technology to create a variety of learning environments for students” (p. 11). At the foundational level, success in hybrid learning appears to be rooted in the relationship between the student and teacher, the content of the course, and the technological tools used in delivery (Calais et al., 2020). When well designed, there is potential for hybrid learning to have a positive impact. For example, Ahlin (2021) compared course outcomes for a face-to-face vs a hybrid course and found that students in the hybrid course experienced greater engagement as well as higher average test scores. At the same time, however, when courses are not well adapted to the hybrid modality, the student experience suffers (Carper & Friedel, 2022; Gamage et al., 2022; Woo et al., 2021). This is demonstrated in a study conducted by Chingos et al. (2017) where students in hybrid courses reported “considerably lower satisfaction with their experience” (p. 227), which the authors suggested could lead to lower retention and persistence rates over time.

We define hybrid learning as a combination of face-to-face and online course formats (Hall & Villareal, 2015), which are available to all of the students in the course. This is distinct from what Irvine et al. (2013) call multi-access learning where one set of students participate face-to-face while another set of students join

online. Potter (2015) puts in context the role of hybrid learning in higher education stating that “in the Fall of 2006, 3.5 million higher education students took online courses. This was an increase of more than 100% since 2002” (p. 2). Potter further explains that although online learning is popular for students and holds “positive viewpoints,” the areas for improvement center around wanting “more face-to-face interaction” and “(physical) contact with faculty and peers” (p. 2). Potter lifts up hybrid learning as a resolution for these issues and note hybrid learning has “been gaining in popularity” (Potter, 2015, p. 2). The literature on this increasingly popular modality falls in two main categories: (1) student perceptions of hybrid learning, and (2) resources for faculty.

### Student Perceptions

The literature points to a strong preference by students for hybrid learning as well as some benefits and challenges. Baker et al.’s (2020) study of 300 undergraduate business students showed a preference for hybrid learning over face-to-face learning. The students preferred the hybrid modality because it offered flexibility and increased availability of course materials in the online portion and still had face-to-face connection with students and instructors. Marquis and Ghosh (2017) studied student perceptions of hybrid instruction versus lecture and online modes. They examined an undergraduate introductory course in computer information systems in a business administration degree program. It was taught in 12 sections over seven semesters by the same instructor. Their study indicated “a high preference” for the hybrid mode over the lecture or online modes separately (Marquis & Ghosh, 2017, p. 111).

Additionally, Sellnow-Richmond et al. (2019) used a closed- and open-ended questionnaire at both mid-semester and end-of-semester to assess three hybrid and three fully online sections of a basic communication course taught by the same two instructors. They found that “62% of the students enrolled in the hybrid course claimed they would likely enroll in another hybrid course in the future, and 50% of these same students claimed they would definitely do so” (Sellnow-Richmond et al., 2019, p. 5). Students reported valuing flexibility in hybrid courses and also shared they felt “short-changed” because of the limited interaction with both peers and the instructor (Sellnow-Richmond et al., 2019, p. 8). The results of the study illuminate some challenges with the hybrid learning modality, but they also showed the benefits outweighed the constraints and that students would continue taking hybrid courses.

There is also evidence that graduate students prefer hybrid learning. In a phenomenological study of 36 graduate students in teacher education (Hall & Villareal,

2015), students demonstrated a preference for the hybrid modality. The key findings of this study show students valued the access to course materials and assignments and the flexibility to work independently. Students appreciated interactive discussion boards and short videos in the online portion and also noted the importance of interactive classes when face-to-face. Ultimately, they valued the balance between online and face-to-face portions as it allowed both time to interact with each other and time to work independently. Another study on graduate students (Flynn-Wilson & Reynolds, 2021) showed there is a learning curve to online aspects of learning and students became more satisfied as they became more competent with the online course delivery.

### Resources for Faculty

As with most pedagogical techniques, the application of hybrid instruction varies by discipline. Thoms (2011) highlights the value of using web-based applications, such as *Notes in Spanish* (<http://www.notesinspanish.com>), in foreign language courses to provide “additional practice with and exposure” to both the language and culture. The hybrid modality allowed more time for students to interact with the web-based applications independently, and the students reported an overall preference for this modality.

Kuchle et al. (2021) noted that as schools adopted online or hybrid learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, “educators often struggled to meet the language and learning needs of the diverse population of English learners (ELs) with disabilities” (p. 1). They compiled a report with resources related to supporting ELs with disabilities through distance learning including engaging families or caregivers of ELs. It is important to note that most of the literature we found, thus far, on hybrid learning has been in the higher education environment. Kuchle et al.’s report, focused on children, brings to light the home environment and those who may need to support students more if learning occurs outside of the classroom walls.

Linder (2017) highlights the need to train faculty to teach in hybrid settings. Just because an instructor has taught face to face and/or online does not mean they are fully prepared for hybrid teaching. Faculty need to be trained on how to teach the hybrid modality and need to design their course in this new teaching modality—both of which take significant time. Other concerns included technology experience, finding the appropriate blend of course design and technology training, and educating faculty about what hybrid really means and how it differs from other modalities.

Creating and teaching a new hybrid course takes time. Kenney and Newcombe (2011) emphasize that providing faculty training and time for course redesign is essential. They share that faculty currently may have to

find that time on their own for course redesign and often do not get a workload reduction. The authors also found that students who had not taken hybrid courses were skeptical at first and struggled with time management and technology. Kenney and Newcombe (2011) provide several lessons learned from their experience teaching a new hybrid course including starting small, conducting action research on a pilot study (similar to their study and this current study), seeking support and training, collaborating with other faculty, and acknowledging that change takes time. Additionally, Stromie and Baudier (2017) provide guidance for conducting assessment on student learning outcomes for hybrid courses. They remind us that assessment strategies should be similar regardless of modality, but they also provide examples for assessing the various elements of the hybrid classroom.

While there is more research available regarding online or face-to-face teaching, Linder (2017) helps us understand that we cannot just draw from these two separate modalities and think we understand what is needed in the hybrid environment. More practitioner-scholars ought to consider studying and writing about hybrid teaching that occurred prior to the pandemic in addition to capturing the unique case of hybrid teaching during the pandemic. There is an opportunity that now presents itself to explore hybrid learning more deeply at this unprecedented moment when more teachers and students are engaging in hybrid learning.

### Researcher Reflexivity

Although I, Lori Kniffin, have been a leadership educator for over a decade, teaching hybrid courses was something I only experienced due to the pandemic. I taught two courses in both Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 during my first year at Fort Hays State University, and therefore, I was able to design my approach to these courses from a hybrid perspective first, rather than adjusting them from a face-to-face version. I have an overall positive view of hybrid teaching and learning, as I took several hybrid courses during my graduate studies and valued the flexibility in time and ability to balance independent work and face-to-face connections with peers and students. Due to my socioeconomic status and geographic location, I have always had access to strong internet and reliable technology. Moreover, I have a home environment that allows me to focus and work without being interrupted. I am also highly organized, self-motivated, and introverted; I thrive at independent work, but I value building relationships. These components of who I am as an individual and educator contribute to my positive outlook on hybrid teaching and learning.

In my current role as a leadership educator, I, Justin Greenleaf, have had the opportunity to teach both face-

to-face and online classes. Prior to the pandemic, I did not have any experience teaching in a hybrid format but was interested in the possibility. The abrupt shift to hybrid classes in the Spring of 2020 was not a difficult transition for me because much of the coursework I teach was already available in both formats, and I was comfortable with the learning technologies needed to make the adjustment possible. However, as an extrovert, I struggled greatly with the synchronous online classroom we were obligated to utilize in the second half of the Spring 2020 semester. I taught three courses in the Fall 2020 semester and two courses in the Spring 2021 semester that were hybrid in nature, and I was excited about the opportunity to try something new. For these reasons, I approached the topic of hybrid teaching and learning from a positive perspective.

### Method

We used an appreciative inquiry (AI) approach to guide this qualitative study. Priest et al. (2013) explain that AI has “emerged as a tool that faculty, students, stakeholders, and higher education leaders can use as a “strategic planning [tool] that [encourages] transformative change” (p. 20). We felt that the pandemic provided a unique opportunity for hybrid learning to be experienced by more faculty, and that engaging in an intentional planning process could help us create transformative change in our department—rather than returning to an old “norm.” This methodology allows stakeholders to construct new ideas and practices from an “‘affirmative’ (rather than ‘deficit-based’) and ‘appreciative’ (rather than critical)” approach (Ridley-Duff & Duncan, 2015, p. 1581). There were many imperfect components to hybrid teaching in 2020 due to how quickly faculty adjusted to this new modality, yet we wanted to capture what worked and what should not be lost. Therefore, an affirmative and appreciative approach aligned with the purposes of this study.

Scandura (2017) provides a description of how AI can be used in undergraduate and graduate classrooms to solicit feedback on their course experiences and foster dialogue about suggested revisions. This author builds upon the four steps of AI described in Cooperrider and Srivasta’s (1987) seminal article on AI: (1) appreciating, (2) envisioning, (3) dialoguing, and (4) innovating to outline an activity summary and instructions on how a teacher may use this process as an in-class activity. In sum, the students are asked to (1) individually write about their peak learning experiences, (2) imagine if their learning was always like the peak experience, (3) meet in small groups to discuss peak experiences, and (4) create suggestions for course revisions as a group. This article would be valuable to instructors wanting to use AI in a current course.

Priest et al. (2013) demonstrate how AI can also be used as an activity beyond the classroom to improve teaching and learning by outlining three case studies for using AI to make organizational change in a leadership program. The case studies included AI as a process for departmental strategic planning, program level planning (e.g., program assessment of a living-learning community), and project level planning (e.g., a student-led service experience). Priest et al. (2013) modified the steps of AI to the following: (1) Defining: What is the focus of inquiry? (2) Discovery: What gives life? (3) Dream: What might be? (4) Design: How can it be? (5) Destiny/deliver: What will be?

In the current study, we designed an AI process for students who had previously been in our classrooms to help provide insight about our course interventions and to make actionable changes in our own program. To do this, we drew from Priest et al.'s (2013) five steps and outline here how that process unfolded in our study.

### Defining

As co-researchers, we defined the focus of inquiry together. We began by reviewing literature on hybrid learning and consulted definitions of hybrid learning. We had discussions with each other and our colleagues about our experiences of hybrid teaching. Together these elements helped us to define the focus of inquiry including our definitions of hybrid learning, the focus of our research questions, and our participants. Ultimately, we wanted to explore the assets of hybrid learning in higher education. This current study took place at Fort Hays State University, which is a mid-sized, 4-year public institution in the Midwest. The student participants were enrolled in undergraduate courses in the Department of Leadership Studies.

### Methods

We designed two opportunities for students to participate in the study. The first was an open-ended survey that was completely anonymous. Since these students could be currently enrolled in other leadership courses (including our own), could be our advisee, or majoring in our program, we wanted an option for students to participate with complete anonymity. The survey included demographic information and the following eight short-answer questions:

1. Can you tell us generally about your experience in the LDRS<sup>1</sup> hybrid learning environment?

2. Describe what, if anything, about the LDRS hybrid course(s) positively enhanced your ability to learn the course material?
3. Describe what, if anything, about the LDRS hybrid course(s) helped you interact more effectively with your peers?
4. Describe what, if anything, about the LDRS course(s) helped you interact more effectively with your instructor?
5. Name two to three benefits of the LDRS hybrid course(s) and explain.
6. Describe, if any, specific technology tools utilized in your LDRS hybrid course(s) that aided you in your learning experience.
7. What did you appreciate about the logistics of the LDRS hybrid course(s)?
8. When considering your experience with the LDRS hybrid learning environment, what changes would you suggest for the future?

Secondly, we designed an online interview (as face-to-face research was prohibited on our campus) in groups to understand the student experience more deeply. We offered three group interview times, and the participants were in groups of three, two, and one. The content of the survey and interview engaged participants in the Discovery and Dream phases of AI. Consent was received from participants in the form of participation after receiving an emailed copy of a consent form and the restatement of participant of consent prior to the survey and interview.

### Participants

We had three professors (including the two of us) in our department who had taught hybrid courses in Fall 2020. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, a recruitment email was sent from the professor of each course to the students in Spring 2021. Students were invited to participate in a survey anonymously and/or an interview on Zoom. Ten students participated in the survey and six students participated in the interviews. Of the 10 students who participated in the survey there was one freshman, one sophomore, five juniors, and three seniors. Three students were majoring in Organizational Leadership while the others represented a range of other majors (e.g., Business

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<sup>1</sup> LDRS is the course prefix for the courses within our department.

Management, Sonography, General Studies). Half identified as female and the other half as male. Seven identified as White/Caucasian, two as Hispanic/Latino, and one as African American. Students represented all of the courses taught in a hybrid format in Fall 2020. We did not collect the same systematic demographic data on the interview participants. We do, however, know there was one freshman, two sophomores, one junior, one senior, and one graduate student. None of these students were majoring in Organizational Leadership. These students did not self-disclose their race/ethnicity or gender.

### Discovery

Drawing from the literature on hybrid teaching and learning (e.g., Baker et al., 2020; Potter, 2015), we focused our discovery on five areas: (1) general experiences or assets with hybrid learning, (2) learning the class material, (3) interactions with students, (4) interactions with instructors, and (5) logistics. Most of the questions followed this format: What assets/benefits did you identify related to the course material?

### Dream

We then invited students to dream with us about the future of higher education. The question included on the survey related to this was: When considering your experience with the leadership class hybrid learning environment, what changes would you suggest for the future? One question in the interview included: If you could visualize a future in a face-to-face offering or an online offering that drew from benefits of your hybrid experience, what might that look like? Through this asset-based questioning, we got to learn about how students envisioned their courses regardless of modality.

### Design and Destiny/Deliver

The Design and Destiny/Deliver phases draw from the previous stages to intentionally create a better future. In this study, we do this by providing thoughts on new ways to design learning using the knowledge shared by the students in the previous two stages. We share in our recommendations section ways that educators may deliver on these dreams and designs.

### Thematic Analysis

We analyzed the survey and focus group data using thematic analysis, which is a process of “searching for themes and patterns” (Glesne, 2016, p. 184). Coding is an important process within thematic analysis which includes applying words or phrases to portions of the data (Saldaña, 2016). We used an open-coding procedure

to allow the patterns to surface from that data. This included a heavy reliance on NVivo (qualitative data analysis software) codes, which use the participant’s language directly for the code. Here is an example of NVivo coding from this data:

- Participant quote: “I learn more when I’m face to face even if it’s on the Zoom.”
- Code: “Learn better face-to-face (even Zoom)”

During the coding process, categories began to emerge. If a strong category was present, we would add the category in front of the code (example, “Benefit: Convenient to ask instructor questions in class”). Each of us took on initial coding for half of the data and then reviewed the codes for the other half. We met to reconcile any divergent thinking. Although the categories began to emerge during coding, we conducted a round of axial coding together to clarify the categories and organize codes within those categories. For example, although balance may be seen as a benefit, it was distinct and large enough to warrant its own category. Ultimately, the codes were organized into eight categories including affirmation, time, flexibility, balance, value, benefit, worry, and instructor strategy. These categories were then combined to create the themes of: (1) perceptions of hybrid learning (2) student motivations, and (3) design considerations.

### Findings

The survey and interview data provided insights into the hybrid approach within higher education. In this section, we present the findings by discussing each of the three themes: (1) perceptions of hybrid learning (2) student motivations, and (3) design considerations.

#### Perceptions of Hybrid Learning

This theme included categories related to affirmation, time, flexibility, and balance. The findings from this category revealed a generally positive student perspective related to hybrid learning.

#### *Affirmation*

Throughout the survey and interview process, students affirmed the nature of the hybrid approach. Taken collectively, the comments described an appreciation for a learning environment that bridged what had previously been either face-to-face or online instruction. Reflecting on the structure of the course one student commented, “I was actually able to do more outside of class, like study, and it was pretty much like having the best of both worlds.” Other students also described how they preferred the hybrid approach

because the reduced in-class time helped them focus and experience fewer distractions. In the words of one student, “Having the hybrid class allowed me to gear my learning to what I needed...the hybrid class definitely kept me engaged in the course material better than a full [on-campus] class would have or an online class would have.”

### ***Time***

In addition to the general affirmation of the nature of the hybrid learning environment, students also described a particular appreciation for the time-saving nature of the approach. Students noted how fewer face-to-face meetings opened more time for other things. One student commented, “I was able to allocate time better [on days without class]...I could do homework, or take a nap, or eat something and it was nice having that extra time.” For another, it provided more opportunity to connect with family, “The benefit for me was being able to spend more time with my kids.”

### ***Flexibility***

Although similar to time, flexibility was identified as a separate category because students discussed attributes of the class that assisted them in achieving their goals and completing the course requirements. For example, due to the nature and format of the hybrid course, additional technology was integrated that allowed students to meet synchronously in multiple locations during class. Student comments included,

Being able to get on Zoom and actually work on stuff where we’re not always having to meet in one spot...being able to be [home] in the evenings helps out a lot and being on Zoom I can still do all my research through the library and people can still see me working.

This was also true for students who were unable to attend class due to circumstances outside of their control. For example, one student commented, “I was unfortunately quarantined, but I was still able to Zoom in and participate living so far away back home...which was very awesome.” Other technology such as the Blackboard learning management software also increased the flexibility felt by students. As one student stated, “I’ve learned so much more about Blackboard...I can do anything on it, and so I find it really beneficial.”

### ***Balance***

The final category that emerged from student perceptions of hybrid learning focused on a sense of balance related to the nature of the experience. As

students reflected on the increased time and flexibility, they made favorable comments related to the balance between class and coursework with respect to the hybrid environment. One student commented, “It’s nice to have at least one day that can be designated to do readings and answer group discussion and those days we are in person [we] will learn more. I think the balance is good.” This went beyond just course preparation, however. For example, “Because I have hybrid classes, I’m able to do more with my life.”

Taken collectively, the student perceptions of hybrid learning were positive and supportive. Students appreciated the increase in time, flexibility, and balance that they associated with the hybrid learning format. Examining the student motivations for engaging in this format may provide a deeper understanding into this apparent affinity for hybrid learning.

### ***Student Motivations***

The student motivations theme included categories related to value and benefit. The findings from this theme focused less on how students perceived the hybrid learning environment and more on the personal, interpersonal, and tangible attributes of the setting that students connected with throughout the semester. We remind the reader that this study was not focused on understanding student motivations for taking the hybrid courses as they existed primarily due to the pandemic restrictions. However, the students surfaced many elements that provide insights into their motivation for learning.

### ***Value***

In discussing their experiences in the hybrid learning environment, students described several key aspects of the class that seemed to hold value for them. This included a desire to not “miss out” on something that was happening in class. When students were required to miss a class, they felt better knowing that they could still remain connected to the course and what the other students were doing. One student commented,

I wasn’t able to come to class on campus and view the lectures in person. I really like that there were copies of the PowerPoint and that there were recorded lectures so I didn’t feel like I missed out a whole lot on the material and the class in general.

Even though students expressed gratitude for this ability, they also suggested that this online attendance option was still a less desirable substitute for in-person interaction. It became clear that one of the attributes of the hybrid class that students appreciated was that, even

though there was an online component, the class still met in person. As one student stated,

All my other classes were online and I just lost connection with the class because I didn't have any face-to-face interaction...it is so much better to discuss things in person than it is to discuss on a discussion board.

This desire to connect with peers extended to the faculty member as well. Students seemed to value face-to-face contact with the instructor as one student described,

The added benefit [of the hybrid format] is that you are able to talk to your teacher and not go out of your way sending emails...after class I'm just like 'Hey I didn't understand this, could you please tell me a little bit more?'

Despite this apparent preference for face-to-face interaction, however, students also recognized the benefit of working from a comfortable/familiar space. For example, "It's a little more comfortable when you can sit in your own environment and be relaxed. That helps a lot when you are trying to focus on learning the material."

### ***Benefit***

Students also described several practical/tangible benefits from the hybrid learning format. These benefits included a more engaging and efficient class experience. There was a sense that, due to the decreased amount of time in class, students were more engaged. The students suggested through their comments they were more likely to remain engaged if they knew their time was limited in class. For example, one student said "I feel like the hybrid course had limited class time, which allowed us to not become bored with the material." Similarly, another student shared, "Students were not disengaging from the topics because of the condensed format."

A second benefit discussed in the survey and interviews was related to having better access to course materials. Due to the nature of the course, materials were often made available through a learning management system for ease of access. Many students appreciated this access, making comments such as, "I like that the lectures and PowerPoints were on Blackboard...I didn't have to wait till the lecture to have that material [*sic*]." Additionally, another student commented, "It was nice being able to come back to the information. If there was a discussion I didn't understand, I could

come back once, twice, three times, if need be, just to make sure it was clear."

It was also noted that students viewed the hybrid experience as a way to learn more about online learning and begin to feel more comfortable in the online environment. One student described how the hybrid format allowed them to ease into the online environment saying,

This hybrid course let me transition better into online classes because I wasn't just thrown into a fully online class and just left there. I was eased into it a little bit more and I wasn't fully cut off from everyone else.

Other students described how the hybrid setting helped to enhance their skill working with various technologies with comments like, "It's helped professors and students adapt to the technology. I've learned so much more about Blackboard."

These apparent values and benefits illustrated several intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that seemed to increase student appreciation for the hybrid learning environment. However, students were also quick to point out that even though they had a good experience, there was always a potential for things to go wrong. As they considered the future of hybrid learning, they also had concerns and recommendations.

### **Design Considerations**

The design considerations theme included the categories of worry and instructor strategy. While the emphasis of the survey and interviews was to learn about the assets of hybrid-based approaches to higher education, the references to student concerns and the importance of instructional design were discussed when students were asked to dream about what could be in the future.

### ***Worry***

As students reflected on the future of hybrid education, their comments often reflected concern related to unknowns of hybrid education in the future. For some, the worry was that the hybrid option would not be available after the drastic demand for the modality created by the global pandemic decreased. This was reflected in the comments of a student who noted, "In going back to normal I think keeping people's minds and opinions open about how this hybrid experience is going to work will be vital."

In addition to this worry about the loss of hybrid options, there were concerns related to what the process would look like if it remained. Some students worried that they would experience a loss of personal contact

with their peers and/or instructors, making comments such as, “The worry is the online aspect and less human interaction.” Another commented, “It was really hard getting to know your classmates because we only had an hour and a half a week...it was hard to make connections.” Other students suggested that not everyone would be equally prepared to make the changes required to move into a hybrid environment; these comments included, “Some people are going to be really comfortable with it and some are going to be uncomfortable...there’s going to have to be some compromise no matter which path the college takes.” Students also noted concerns over tuition and how hybrid courses may need to use a different fee structure than just aligning it with on-campus or online tuition rates.

### *Instructor Strategy*

Based on their experiences, the students also had recommendations for instructional strategies that seemed to work well. Given the shortened class time, students suggested that instructors could focus on key highlights and make additional material available for further study, “[The hybrid classroom] allowed the teacher to focus fully on what needed to be focused on...if you’d like to know more you can read the material.” One student appreciated the use of online breakout rooms because of the interaction they had with the instructor, saying,

I felt like it was easier to talk to the instructor because he would always pop into each breakout room and ask what’s going on. He would ask us what’s going on and we would be able to ask questions...I felt like we had a better connection and I felt like the whole class did.

Additional strategies were discussed including the division of the class, what days to meet or not meet, and use of instructor video. While each of these varied by class and instructor, a common thread that emerged was related to student appreciation for instructor efforts to be intentional about the design of the class and communicate that well to everyone. For example, in reflecting on their experience, one student commented, “I think the professors did a good job during the hybrid of being in person but still keeping communication really high.”

These student concerns and recommendations suggest that a need for a more intentional and methodical approach to course design in the hybrid classroom exists. While students appreciated many of the aspects of hybrid learning, they also demonstrated what appears to be a weariness or sense of unease related to the future of this type of learning. Next, we take this student feedback, including the assets and worries they identified, and their thoughts on instructor strategy, to identify

recommendations for educators when designing and teaching hybrid courses.

### **Recommendations**

Drawing from the relevant literature and the findings of the current study, we have three areas of recommendations for educators. The first area is *administrative considerations*, and is consistent with the recommendation of Kenney and Newcombe (2011), in that it is important that higher education administrators create the appropriate infrastructure for delivering hybrid courses. This includes being clear about how hybrid courses are listed on the class schedule to set expectations for students as they enroll. The rationale for the cost of hybrid courses should also be made clear to students, and perhaps the cost structure needs to be reevaluated to better represent the mixture of face-to-face and online learning. Additionally, administrators may also develop specific ways to train faculty to develop and teach hybrid courses, as Linder (2017) suggests, including training on content, pedagogy, and technology. Administrators might also consider categorizing the creation of hybrid courses that have previously existed as fully online or face-to-face as course redesigns, aligning resources typically provided to faculty for the course redesign process.

The second area of recommendations focus on *course design*. These recommendations are not only for hybrid courses, but are meant to be considerations for all modalities. The first is to provide course materials to students in advance as a way to increase the flexibility and availability of course materials (Baker et al., 2020). This might include posting readings, activities, videos, or PowerPoint slides in a learning management system prior to the time students are asked to engage with them. Students may access these digitally before, during, or after a synchronous time to support their learning. Secondly, as suggested by Marquis and Ghosh (2017), be purposeful in deciding how to use time in courses, such as when synchronous or asynchronous work best meets the learning goals. As the students recommended, if there is synchronous time for a course, use it to the fullest. The students in this study highlighted the value of human connection; they helped us realize we should not underestimate the value of instructor or peer connections, so, we might want to dream about, design, and deliver courses that balance human connection with time flexibility. Reducing the number of face-to-face sessions may allow students to invest their time in the coursework materials and manage other components of their lives more effectively, while still creating valuable human connections and meeting learning goals. Lastly, it is important to be clear about attendance policies and consider, given the preference for hybrid learning described by Hall and Villareal (2015), if there are times



where it would be appropriate for students to join online. This might include a formal multi-access attendance plan (i.e., some students join face to face, others join online) or flexible attendance policies to accommodate student challenges (e.g., illness, university-related travel).

Our last area of recommendations focuses on our *opportunity to prepare students for a continuum of virtuality*. We created this study because we hoped the pandemic would subside, and that we could teach fully face-to-face courses again; however, we did not want to forget the benefits of hybrid teaching when done well (Calais et al., 2020). After this study, we highly recommend educators consider teaching more hybrid courses. While our institution had a definition of hybrid courses prior to the pandemic, yet we did not consider using this modality regularly before the pandemic. Endersby et al. (2017) describe that we operate on a continuum of virtuality (i.e., online, hybrid, face to face). In reflecting on our own experiences teaching in 2020–2021, we recognize this continuum does not just apply to course modalities—it applies to many professional fields. Even as we developed this manuscript, we demonstrated this continuum. We worked online, asynchronously through Google Docs, we met face to face to discuss our progress, and we even met face to face with our laptops—sometimes communicating virtually while sitting in the same room. Similarly, we must also prepare students to lead across a continuum of virtuality. I (Lori) currently serve on the board of a national nonprofit organization. Prior to the pandemic, our board met annually face to face, but the rest of our work occurs online (both synchronous and asynchronous). During the pandemic, I learned how to apply my knowledge and practice to this hybrid environment to lead this organization. Therefore, we believe, as we develop students to lead, we ought to consider they too may need to lead across this continuum. As the students highlighted in this study, hybrid courses can expose students to one important point on this continuum, and can also ease them into online learning.

### Limitations

We acknowledge that some limitations of this study are important for readers to consider. First, the participants are students from one institution with limited diversity and likely have different experiences than students in other programs; therefore, we encourage larger studies on hybrid learning in higher education. Further, due to the nature of the AI framework, this study only highlights the asset-based and appreciative components of hybrid learning. Additionally, we recognize we represented only two of the three instructors who taught these courses, and that may have influenced student feedback; however, we do note that when provided the opportunity to dream up any version

of a course moving forward, 100% of the students imagined hybrid courses. If hybrid courses become more heavily adopted in higher education programs, it would also be beneficial to understand students' worries in greater detail. Last, due to the purpose of the study, we collected and analyzed the data during the pandemic. As with most things we experience in this unique context, it would be wise to look at this information when we are in a post-pandemic world. At the same time, we hope capturing this information in the chaos of the moment provides it with great relevancy.

### Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic created a lot of challenges across the globe, and it caused those in higher education to make some dramatic shifts. While we have collectively lost a lot along the way, our hope with this study was to gain perspectives that can improve higher education. As many educators did in 2020 and 2021, we taught several hybrid sections in our department. Through the appreciative inquiry process, we studied this experience with an eye toward retaining and implementing the positive aspects of hybrid learning into future courses (in any modality). In our findings, we share three themes: (1) perceptions of hybrid learning, (2) student motivations, and (3) design considerations. Overall, our students showed great affinity for hybrid learning and dreamed up a future where hybrid courses continue. They illuminated their values of education and the benefits of hybrid learning and cautioned educators with their worries for the future. The students also provided great insight into how we can design courses moving forward. We take these findings and mesh them with current literature to provide three areas of recommendations: administrative considerations, course design, and opportunity to prepare students for a continuum of virtuality. Our dream is that educators take the valuable insight provided by the students in this study to improve courses in any modality. We also hope that more educators design and deliver more hybrid courses, not out of necessity or convenience, but out of duty to create competent leaders who will inevitably lead in a continuum of virtuality.

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LORI E. KNIFFIN, PhD, is assistant professor of leadership studies at Fort Hays State University. She teaches a variety of courses including undergraduate and graduate courses through in-person and virtual modalities. Her teaching and research interests include collective leadership development, civic leadership, service-learning and community engagement, and qualitative research methods, and critical leadership studies.

JUSTIN GREENLEAF, PhD, is associate professor of leadership studies at Fort Hays State University. He primarily teaches undergraduate courses on leadership theory and practice, and his areas of expertise are related to community psychology and leadership in the context of the community. Justin's research interests focus primarily on the practical application of leadership, which has included research on teaching and learning strategies as well as community impacts of service learning.