



A HY COURSE

The Best of Both

BY SANDRA POIRIER

Career and technical educators are constantly being challenged to have their courses meet the changing needs of their students in this fast-paced world we live in. New information and communication technologies have revolutionized the way we teach and learn in our classrooms. In addition, there are more nontraditional students returning to the campus seeking learning opportunities that fit their lifestyles.

As a new faculty member at Middle Tennessee State University, I had many variables to consider when redesigning my program; I found that the hybrid model provides the tools for me to create engaging and worthwhile courses. For the last five years I have been creating hybrid courses that meet my course objectives, while they provide flexibility and convenience to the diverse student population.

Hybrid courses generally provide a significant portion of the learning activities online—so time traditionally spent in the classroom is reduced, but not eliminated. By leveraging technology tools with the more traditional classroom structure, you are able to create a dynamic learning environment with faculty-student interaction as well as student-student interaction. I have learned that by combining the two educational formats into a hybrid model, students are able to receive the best of both educational worlds.

What the Research Says

Research conducted by the U.S. Department of Education in 2009 indicated that hybrid instruction is among the fastest growing enrollment in higher education. This meta-analysis project identified more than 1,000 empirical studies and concluded that students who took all or

part of their instruction online performed better, on average, than those taking the same course through face-to-face instruction. With a hybrid course, students are generally required to do more work on their own, and this expansion of learning time results in better test performance and subject mastery, according to the study. Unfortunately, there is less research on secondary hybrid courses; however a study conducted by Project Tomorrow in 2009 indicated that online learning nearly doubled among high school students since 2008. The number of middle school students taking online classes has also climbed by 21 percent since 2008.

Elowin Harper, a family and consumer sciences teacher at Siegel High School in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, said, “Hybrid courses offer advantages to both the instructor and student. For the students, hybrid courses offer flexibility that allows

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them time to juggle work, family and school. Many students see the hybrid format as the best of both worlds. For the instructor, the hybrid format provides an unconventional, creative learning environment that utilizes technological tools and provides flexibility in terms of in-class contact hours—thereby providing time for experiential learning opportunities.”

Designing a Hybrid Course

There are a variety of approaches to the hybrid model based on teaching styles, course content, course size, and course goals. To create my hybrid course, I generally reduce class time by 50 percent, eliminating two evening classes per month and replacing that time with a variety of project-based or interactive online assignments. Some of the active learning activities I like are online chats with other professional educators, participating in

biweekly discussions, completing online professional development workshops and podcasts, writing journals, and teaming up with secondary programs and local county agencies for community service-learning projects.

When designing a hybrid course, the planning stage is the most important step in the total process. You need to ask yourself: “What do I want my students to learn?” Begin with the end in mind by conceptualizing the entire course using a storyboard or table template, and then identify the learning objectives. It is important to consider which objectives would best be handled in a traditional setting, and those that might be achieved online. Then consider what type of activities will be best suited for the traditional classroom and the online learning environments. Also, you need to consider how to set up the grading system between

the two formats. Guidelines need to be very clear with specific instructions for each assignment. Lastly, it is important to continually update and modify your hybrid courses. I use the students’ feedback mechanism to help guide me each semester in ways I can improve all aspects of the course design.

As educators we know that every student has his or her own strategies for collecting and organizing information into useful knowledge, and the hybrid model can be particularly well suited to most learning styles and personality needs. For example, introverted students often find it easier to communicate via computer-mediated communication than in face-to-face situations. Fanny Sung, a recent graduate student, sent me an e-mail noting, “I feel the online component gets more of a response out of the students than actually being in class



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▲ Preservice teachers observing how technology can enhance the curriculum in the middle schools in Rutherford County.

because people are less shy to “speak up” when typing. If only all classes could be as involving as this one.”

This unique relationship can be established in a hybrid class because students and instructors have the opportunity to communicate in person or online for the benefit of all. Additionally, I have also found that hybrid courses are excellent vehicles for collaborative learning which complements many students’ learning styles, and the independent learners have also found hybrid courses to be well suited to their needs.

Some instructional strategies that I have found to be highly effective in hybrid courses include:

- Encourage student leadership in online discussions. In many of my classes I have traditional and nontraditional students in the same class, with age gaps of 15-20 years. I either ask for volunteers to lead the discussions, or I appoint as group leader a nontraditional student who may have more life experiences relevant to a topic.
- Incorporate extended ice breakers and scavenger hunts to build community and or to introduce a new topic. This is a great way to begin a new topic in a face-to-face class.
- Host a jigsaw presentation where teams of students present part of the topic and then the results are assembled by the group leader. This fun activity can be accomplished online in a chat room or in a traditional class. This is a creative method that builds collaboration.
- Have students submit a photo of themselves, family or pet, and then make a class photo. This is a great way to have the students introduce themselves to others, and can be especially fun for traditional and nontraditional students in the same classes who are in different life stages. They can learn from each other.
- Have students create a simple digital

portfolio and link it for other students to read. There are free portfolio templates available and students can easily create a very professional portfolio that can expand as they progress through their education.

Leveraging Technology to Bolster Student Outcomes

Successful education has always been about engaging students. Today’s students are ready to shape the future by leveraging technology tools to create their vision for a 21st century education. I think the hybrid model provides the unique template to make that vision a reality. This model combines the best features of face-to-face instruction and online learning to promote active independent learning, and reduce class time—ultimately creating the best of both educational worlds. The question is: “Are you ready to meet the challenge?” ■

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Sandra L. Poirier, Ed.D.

is an associate professor in the Department of Human Sciences, College of Education and Behavioral Science, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, Tennessee. She can be contacted at spoirier@mtsu.edu.

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