What’s in a Hybrid?—Sybil Priebe, Editor, “TYCA to You”

Our little department at the North Dakota State College of Science (NDSCS) “fell” into the idea of hybrid courses in a very quirky way. Since our campus tends to be a “suitcase campus,” we were simply sick of hearing complaints from our 3 p.m. students about, you know, “doing anything important” during Friday’s classes. Thus far, that has been the only time slot we’ve moved to a hybrid format.

Recently, we’ve started pondering the idea of shifting more classes to that format to open up scheduling for faculty, scheduling of classrooms, and to allow for flexibility in students’ schedules as well.

As I read through the reports from the representatives, I started to reflect on my 3 p.m. hybrid course (which meets twice a week—on Mondays and Wednesdays for 50 minutes, with online activities slotted for the Friday class time) versus the courses I teach for 50 minutes three times a week. Just based on my own memory, students who take my hybrid class—and do well—are already very motivated students. I do tend to see more absences with that 3 p.m. class, and the drop rate does seem higher in that class versus the other courses I teach that are nonhybrid. Perhaps it just comes down to the student; a motivated student is going to do well, and an unmotivated student—who is not properly prepared for the hybrid course set-up—is not going to do well.

One of the most interesting finds of this question was the variety of hybrid formats. My colleagues and I have stuck to viewing these classes as 2/3 face-to-face and 1/3 online, so I hadn’t thought beyond that setup.

TYCA-Pacific Northwest Report from Teresa Thonney

I surveyed members of TYCA-Pacific Northwest to learn how they and their students feel about composition courses taught in hybrid format. Twenty-two in-
structors responded, representing 20 colleges located in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Alaska, and British Columbia, Canada. All but two of the colleges offer hybrid composition courses. These courses have the same outcomes as face-to-face courses but meet less frequently, usually once or twice a week.

Students like the flexibility of hybrid courses. Those with jobs, long commutes, or small children at home, for example, can spend fewer hours in the classroom while still having regular opportunities to interact with the instructor. Students also like having more time between classes to complete reading assignments, to reflect on new material, and to write papers.

Like students, instructors enjoy the flexibility of a hybrid schedule. It frees up hours for grading and frees up classroom space on campuses where that is in short supply. In class, the instructor can introduce new projects and cover difficult concepts; outside of class, students can work on research or writing assignments.

Most respondents mentioned advantages that come with the online portion of hybrid courses. Online class discussions, for instance, give students time to think about what they want to say and ensure that every student is heard; another benefit is that students practice their writing skills when participating in online discussions. Conducting peer review online also works well because students can work at their own pace, and they tend to be more thorough and candid with feedback in an online format.

However, hybrid courses aren’t a good option for every student. Some students register for a hybrid course thinking that fewer class sessions means less work, and they complain when they realize that hybrid courses mean more work must be completed independently. Some students need the routine of meeting at the same time every day and have difficulty adjusting to changing deadlines and formats (e.g., meeting only once a week but having assignments due online throughout the week). Several instructors noted that they have had students who attend classes but ignore the online portions of a hybrid course. In addition, because hybrid courses meet less frequently than face-to-face courses, they put more demands on students to read assignments and follow instructions on their own.

Finally, some instructors mentioned that designing a hybrid course is more labor intensive than preparing for a face-to-face course, and the grading load is higher because students are expected to write on the days class does not meet. Hybrid courses have their limitations; however, instructors generally agree that for students with good reading skills, computer skills, and busy schedules, they provide the best of both worlds: face-to-face time with the instructor and flexibility to complete much of their coursework on their own schedule.

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TYCA-Southwest Report from Erin O’Neill Armendarez

In the Southwest region, many campuses offer hybrid (also known as blended) composition courses. In general, course caps for hybrids are the same as those for face-to-face and online courses. Some are capped at 20 students, while others are
typically capped at 24 or 25. Approximately 50 percent of the hybrid contact hours are face-to-face, and the other 50 percent are online. In terms of overall instructor load, hybrid courses count the same as face-to-face and online courses around the Southwest region. Some campuses require online office hours for the hybrid students. One instructor reported that since her blended class met on Tuesdays from 8:30 to 9:50 a.m., she was expected to be in her office during that same period on Thursday although the additional time was not counted toward her regular office hours.

Responses varied widely on whether students prefer the hybrid format to regular face-to-face classes. One instructor exclaimed that students love his hybrid course because they work full-time jobs and prefer to do some course work asynchronously. Another said her dual-enrollment students seem to be “on the fence.” While her students would apparently prefer more face-to-face contact, their schedules are very busy. The hybrid course is a necessary compromise for them. Yet another instructor, who simultaneously taught hybrid and face-to-face versions of the same course during the same semester, reported that the students in the hybrid course were not well served because the pass rates and retention rates in the face-to-face course were significantly better. One student who took two courses from this instructor in the same semester (a blended journalism class and a traditional English class) failed the blended course but got a B in the traditional class. Another of her students complained about the amount of online homework. Convinced most incoming first-year students aren’t sufficiently prepared for hybrid courses, this instructor said, “I don’t plan on doing it again.”

As for the advantages of hybrid courses, some instructors think it works well to assign tests, quizzes, and homework for the online portion of the class, reserving the face-to-face time for hands-on activities and one-on-one or group discussion of progress. Moreover, hybrid courses may be helpful in getting low-enrollment courses to fill and in maximizing use of classroom space.

Disadvantages and drawbacks are apparent. First, formal training required for teaching online doesn’t necessarily transfer to delivering successful hybrid courses, and results aren’t always carefully assessed. Incoming first-year students may not be familiar with the campus LMS (learning management system) and may lack the self-discipline and time management skills required for online study. One campus in Oklahoma has shifted to offering hybrid courses only when instructors can justify the benefit to students. Previously, instructors were requesting hybrid courses so that they could teach more classes while offsetting their heavy loads.

Most respondents agreed that hybrid composition courses can benefit students under the right circumstances. Instructors and students should both be well prepared, and campuses should assure these courses are actually serving students. As one instructor concluded, “It shouldn’t be the ‘easy way out.’”

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TYCA-West Report from Stephanie Maenhardt

The online description of Joanna N. Paull and Jason Allen Snart’s 2016 text Making Hybrids Work on the NCTE website states: “The hybrid instructional mode . . . has . . . the potential to maximize student learning in the twenty-first century.” While each school in the TYCA-West region might define the specific parameters of this type of instruction slightly differently, most English departments do offer hybrid courses for both composition and literature tracks.

As the book description notes, the interest in hybrid courses is not limited solely to students who are trying to arrange flexible semester schedules that allow them to also focus on work, family, and other obligations/interests; faculty and administrators alike are also increasingly interested in this mode of instruction, albeit for reasons that likely differ from those of the students we serve.

While it’s only fair and right to note that many in-person and online courses also incorporate a variety of technologies and modalities that allow faculty and students to engage with each other, there is something unique about hybrid courses. Indeed, one might say that they offer up the “best of both worlds.”

When I surveyed instructors in the TYCA-West Region, one instructor commented that in her experience, students like hybrid comp courses because they “fit into their busy schedules” and “are both face to face and online.” The same could be said for instructors, as hybrid courses (an average of around 80 percent online, 20 percent in person) allow them the opportunity to interact with students on different levels, using a variety of technologies and modalities.

Considering the issue of instructor workload, hybrid courses generally have the same enrollment cap as other types of composition courses and are weighted the same as those taught in person or online. Most schools offer some sort of technical assistance for the online portion of a hybrid class, and the obvious appeal of the hybrid course’s flexibility must appeal to administrators who are trying to manage valuable on-campus classroom space.

Speaking specifically to her service-learning-oriented composition classes, one instructor noted that the hybrid format is ideal, as it gives students the flexibility to be working with community partners on the days when they are not engaged in classroom discussions. Additionally, this instructor stated that between these in-person meetings and their online conversations, “students know me and their fellow students in class,” which actually connects them together “more than a fully online class would.” One additional interesting note was that she also noticed that her students appeared to write more in their hybrid composition class than they might in a class that met solely in person.

The responses I received when I surveyed the TYCA-West region noted that many students wish their schools offered more hybrid courses. With the obvious advantages of time and flexibility appealing to administrators, faculty, and students, it seems safe to say that hybrid courses are here to stay.
Hybrid courses are offered at many institutions across the Midwest, one of which is Metropolitan Community College in Omaha. Below is a report from Andrea Lang, English faculty and Nebraska representative to the TYCA Midwest Board:

Our college has quite a few hybrid courses; the English department has hybrid Composition 1 and 2 courses which have been offered for the last several years. Our courses have the same seat count and count the same in the faculty workload as traditional on campus courses. The hybrid courses provide flexibility for students who work or who have childcare issues. They’re also helpful for those students who want to get through with their programs of study more quickly by taking another hybrid course that meets on the opposite day; however, at least at our institution, that doesn’t happen as often as it probably should. In my experience, a lot of students sign up for hybrids, so that they only have to be in the classroom for one class period instead of two.

There are definite drawbacks. One of the biggest is that students are often unaware when self-enrolling that the section in which they have enrolled is a hybrid course, despite the fact that it is identified as such in the course schedule. As a result, they may not have a compatible learning style with hybrid courses. Another drawback is the lack of orientation; we have tutorials offered on the homepage, but it’s not clear if students are actually going through them. Finally, the students who enroll in hybrids are often the ones who would most benefit from taking an on-campus course: English language learners and special needs students.

At our institution we know that hybrid courses are here to stay, so we are constantly looking at ways to better identify these courses in the schedule and better address the needs of students who enroll.

Andrea’s experience is similar to my own at Oakland Community College in southeast Michigan, where we offer both hybrid traditional courses (10-49 percent online) and hybrid distance courses (50-74 percent online). Faculty who teach hybrid courses are required to complete the same extensive training required for online instructors. Contractually, hybrid classes have the same number of students as all other courses. For load purposes, hybrids are counted as half on-campus and half online instruction. Since faculty are required to teach a minimum of 50 percent of their base load of classes on campus, this may affect how many sections an instructor can offer in the hybrid format, especially if that instructor also teaches online courses.
As far as drawbacks, my observations align with Andrea’s regarding student preparedness and awareness. In addition, I find that hybrid students need more handholding than both traditional and online students. Something about the blended format renders many students uncertain and easily confused. Even so, I have seen hybrid courses meet the needs of the busiest and most driven students, as well as those who are interested in dipping their toes into the online learning pool before making the jump.

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TYCA-Southeast Report from Susan Slavicz

Colleges sometimes assume that hybrid learning is identical to the traditional classroom and that all content specialists can design effective online learning materials that enhance learning and engage students in the learning process. I have not found this to be true. Teachers who agree to teach in this modality need training in the use of the online tools and in the andragogy of online learning. Students also need support—both technological and through strong advising—as they are often unfamiliar with our learning management systems.

Hybrid courses seem to be the best of both worlds: the benefits of face-to-face interactions with faculty and classmates and the convenience of online work. Faculty in TYCA-SE agreed that both they and their students love hybrid courses because of the convenience. Some schools use a 50/50 ratio so that a class meets once a week with online work counting for the other 50 percent. Other hybrid courses meet on campus two days a week (generally Monday and Wednesday) with the online portion taking the place of the Friday meeting. Deborah Byrd, from Perimeter College at Georgia State University, also noted that while the hybrid class took time to design and implement, the up-front preparation led to less prep time for future classes.

Several faculty discussed retention rates in hybrid courses. Dan Powell from Florida State College at Jacksonville and Gaye Winter from Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College noted that their retention rates in hybrid courses were good. Gaye based her dissertation on hybrid and online classes versus face-to-face classes and wrote that her analysis showed that hybrid courses better fit the needs of our technologically savvy students. However, Deborah reported that the retention rates in her entry-level composition courses are poor—possibly because the entry-level students do not have the necessary foundations and don’t understand that these courses require a great deal of online work.

Additionally, the faculty members’ and students’ technical abilities can affect the success of both hybrid and online courses. Students love technology, but they often need help submitting assignments and accessing course materials. As I improved my abilities to help students in these areas, I noticed my retention rates improving. Dan also noted his students’ enthusiasm for the classroom interaction.
That interaction is the clearest advantage of the hybrid courses because faculty can identify students’ technological needs. In fact, I often spend part of the face-to-face class explaining the technological aspects of the course. The hybrid course, then, allows faculty the opportunity not only to explain course content but also to help those students who have problems with the technology.

Feedback from around the Southeast was clear: hybrid courses are popular and are here to stay. Institutions, however, should be intentional in building programs that adequately prepare both faculty and students for success.

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TYCA-Northeast Report from Leigh Jonaitis

Partially online, or “hybrid” classes have existed for over 15 years, so it was with interest that I requested information from the members of TYCA-Northeast.

How are hybrid composition courses faring now, especially in comparison to online courses?

There were a few trends in the responses. In general, hybrid courses seemed to be generally well enrolled; however, due to a lack of awareness about hybrid courses, they have a tendency to fill later, when most other sections are full. This kind of late registration could be one potential reason why students seem unclear about the expectations of the hybrid course—specifically, that there are both online and face-to-face expectations. Students seem to have a better sense of what is required of fully online courses or “traditional” face-to-face courses. Some instructors reported that students don’t prepare adequately for face-to-face activities because they don’t keep up in online activities. Some sign up because the class meets fewer times during the week, and they tend to disregard online deadlines.

Despite this, several respondents wrote that the hybrid course has the potential to offer “the best of both worlds”: students can gain confidence online, and many students appreciate being able to work independently. For some students, it is a useful way to explore whether or not they would do well in a fully online course. Faculty can use class time to clarify questions and respond to student work through online grading/feedback systems. The hybrid also allows for a “flipped” classroom environment, which minimizes the need for lecturing in the classroom. Diane Thompson of Harrisburg Area Community College explains: “because I close the discussion threads on the day of class, they have to do the reading before class and are better prepared.” Don Reilly explains that he uses a texting app called Remind 101 to communicate with students several times a week. He explains: “Through this app, I communicate much more with my hybrid students than with traditional face-to-face students. It enables me to answer questions which would definitely go un-asked. One drawback of the texting app is that some students try to use it as a shortcut instead of reading the calendar and weekly introduction detailing the week’s requirements. In response to such queries, I have to train myself to reply: ‘read the calendar.’ Sadly, I write this a lot.”
In addition to increased communication, some respondents felt that holding the face-to-face meeting of a hybrid class in a computer lab is very useful for addressing questions and issues related to the online portion of the course. Others indicated the need to make the online component less text-based. Instructors include videos on such things as writing techniques, key concepts, and MLA format as a way to both free up class time and make the online component more interactive. As with any online activity, however, students need to be encouraged to engage with them.

At Bergen Community College, the hybrid modality is being used not only for first- and second-semester composition courses but also for some developmental English courses and accelerated (ALP) composition courses. The ALP composition class meets once a week for all composition students and then meets a second time only for accelerated students. As with other hybrid courses, there are online deadlines throughout the week.

Ultimately, advising plays a role in the success of a student in a hybrid class. As a long-time instructor of hybrid classes, Ellen Feig writes, “While I have taught many hybrids, I believe that it takes a special type of student to succeed in such a course. The student has to understand that they will see me once a week where we will discuss concepts and readings, but that they are required to be responsible for at least a portion of the class on their own. The hybrid could work better if students were advised either prior to or at registration as to the nature of the course.”

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TYCA-Pacific Coast Report from Sravani Banerjee

Hybrid composition classes are offered at almost all the California community colleges. There is no distinction between DE courses and traditional courses from either a workload standpoint or a curriculum standpoint, so hybrid and online classes are capped at the same number of students as the face-to-face classes, and the instructor loading is the same. In the last few years, there has been a big push at the colleges to offer more online and hybrid courses.

Hybrid classes offer many advantages. They accommodate students with unconventional schedules or enrollment needs; additionally, they allow the independent, self-paced learning of an online class but also the regular face-to-face interaction helpful to students unsure of their abilities. They offer the best of both worlds as instructors get to know their students in the face-to-face class and offer students the online experience as well. Many students choose not to participate in classroom discussions but will do so on the online discussion board and will collaborate with a virtual community of learners. Hybrid courses also allow administrators the opportunity to offer twice as many classes within the same logistical constraint of room availability and time slot.

Hybrid classes also have several disadvantages. Students are often confused about the concept of hybrid classes, and some think it is an online class and don’t
show up at all. Some sign up because they think the class will be easier as they meet only once a week, and they quickly find themselves overwhelmed. One instructor felt that she was unable to “bridge the gap” or achieve all the great “flipped classroom” benefits as she had expected to achieve in a hybrid class. Most significantly, the drop rate tends to be higher than in face-to-face classes. Santa Barbara City College has been tracking the success rate of their face-to-face, hybrid, and online composition courses since 2013, and the success rates and retention rates for hybrid and online classes are consistently a few points lower than the success rates in the face-to-face classes. Additionally, many instructors mentioned that hybrid courses require a substantial amount of preparation time to develop.

Despite the several disadvantages, hybrid courses do allow students with busier schedules at least some classroom time with their instructors. Students who enroll in these classes often live outside the area or work full-time and possibly would not enroll without the hybrid option, so these classes definitely cater to the needs of a certain student population. Consequently, to increase success rates in the hybrid courses, colleges could offer more robust academic counseling, and hybrid instructors should offer well-designed and student-friendly courses that build community both online and in person. Students should also be counseled about the need for strong time-management skills and motivation for successful course completion in a hybrid class. Finally, many instructors stressed that these hybrid courses should be offered at a first-year composition or higher level and not at the developmental level where students need substantial guidance and more frequent contact with the instructor.

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