

Hybrid learning: facilitating the future of higher education

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Introduction

The topic of hybrid learning has taken a new prominence in the field of higher education. It went from being something that was slowly growing in popularity to practically mandated in a short period of time.

CHAPTER 1

What is hybrid learning?

What is hybrid learning?

Hybrid learning refers to a situation in which students attend class in-person or virtually at the same time. It incorporates synchronous and asynchronous learning activities.

Synchronous learning means that the students are in class while learning (either physically or virtually), while asynchronous learning activities are those that take place when the student isn't in a classroom. Asynchronous learning materials are available for students any time they want to use them; teachers generally post them to a virtual learning platform for ease of access.



The shift to hybrid learning

As technology developed further and further, it made its way into the halls of higher learning. Educators began using an approach called “blended learning.” Blended learning means that students learn in-class, and that learning is supplemented with online resources (including videos, articles, and learning activities). It’s important to note that the difference between blended learning and hybrid learning is that blended learning primarily takes place in-class, while hybrid learning is more flexible—learning takes place virtually as well as in the classroom.

Over the past few years, administrators at universities and colleges have dipped their toes into the realm of hybrid learning by offering online classes. Yet, the vast majority of courses were built on the blended learning approach; students attended class and used online resources to supplement their learning.



That changed in the spring of 2020. A global healthcare crisis forced higher education institutions to close their doors and quickly switch to a virtual learning model. As the months wore on and schools mulled the safety considerations of in-person learning, hybrid learning became an attractive and feasible option to allow students to learn safely.

The most common hybrid learning models

Hybrid learning is not monolithic—there’s more than one way to do it successfully. The method an instructor chooses will be based on individual class needs.

There are five common hybrid learning models:

- The differentiated model
- The multi-track model
- The split A/B model
- The virtual accommodation model
- The independent project model

The differentiated model

The differentiated model works under the assumption that there will be students at home as well as in class. They’ll engage synchronously on the same lesson and engage frequently with one another.

Students at home utilize a virtual learning platform to participate in the lessons. They can join in class discussions either through video or through chat. Small breakout rooms allow students to interact with each other.

The students in-class either watch the same video as the students at home or attend a lecture. There will be points during the lesson when they’ll interact with the students at home.

The multi-track model

Through the multi-track model, the instructor divides students into cohorts. The students work on the same lessons, but they rarely interact with each other.

Students from home have two options:

- To work asynchronously
- To work synchronously with the in-class group

Both of these options require a virtual learning platform. The at-home students working synchronously with their in-class peers who don't interact with them.

In-class students engage in face-to-face learning in the classroom. At certain points during the lesson, the instructor will give them independent work or group projects so she can work with the students engaging in synchronous virtual learning.

The split A/B model

The split A/B model works best when there are few or no restrictions on in-person meetings. Students alternate: some days they're in class, other days they engage in virtual learning at home. Most of the virtual learning is asynchronous, although there can be opportunities for live learning via a virtual learning platform.

When at home, students work on asynchronous assignments posted on the virtual learning platform. They'll supplement their learning by watching videos, listening to podcasts, or reading articles. When students are in class, they hold discussions, work in groups, or meet with instructors for personalized assistance.

The virtual accommodation model

The virtual accommodation model is meant for very small groups (three to four students) learning from home while the rest of the class learns in-person. These students use a virtual learning platform to participate in in-class activities synchronously.

As with other models, the virtual accommodation model assumes that public health guidelines permit in-person learning. Experts advise that one student learning in-class is designated to liaise with the virtual learning group to ensure those students can see the instructor during the video conference.

The independent project model

There are times when there are only a few students who need to learn virtually (the ideal cohort is between one to four students), and it doesn't make sense for them to participate in in-class learning. That's when the instructor would use the independent project model.

Within the independent project model, students work by themselves on a project or an adaptive learning module through a virtual learning platform. An adaptive learning module is a customized course that adapts to a student's unique learning needs; for example, if a student needs to review foundational material for a course, the learning module would direct him to remedial content.

This is another model that assumes the situation is safe enough for in-class learning to take place. In this model, students learning in-class do not interact at all with those participating in the independent project track. Rather, the in-class students attend class and focus on their own work.

The challenges of hybrid learning

Hybrid learning has presented a number of challenges to educators at institutions of higher learning. This section will delve into these challenges in more detail.

- Using the right virtual learning platform
- Offering a seamless virtual learning experience for students
- Making the experience simple and easy for instructors
- Keeping virtual learning secure



Using the right virtual learning platform

Using the right virtual learning platform is one of the biggest challenges in hybrid learning. When local governments mandated lockdowns, officials at colleges and universities scrambled to shift to virtual learning. They turned to what Harvard Business Review referred to as “stopgap solutions”: software that wasn’t built for virtual learning and that wouldn’t provide all of the functionality students and instructors needed.

What does the right virtual learning platform look like?

- Students and instructors should be able to use it on any device
- There should be the capability for synchronous learning with live video conferencing
- Students should be able to participate through live chat
- Instructors should have the ability to record lectures
- Virtual learning platforms must integrate with learning management systems so instructors can upload asynchronous learning materials
- Students should be able to connect with their instructors and their peers through video conferencing, chat, and voice calls

Offering a seamless virtual learning experience for students

Students at colleges and universities today come from a diverse group of backgrounds. They have never lived without some form of technology in their lives, be it smartphones, laptops, or networked devices. As such, their expectations of the virtual learning experience are fairly high: they want to be able to access learning materials easily and quickly.

Yet, the sudden shift to virtual learning in the spring of 2020 did not offer a seamless virtual learning experience. As mentioned above, stopgap measures such as using inadequate technology had a negative impact on virtual learning.

Making the experience simple and easy for instructors

Today's instructors at institutions of higher education could also be described as "diverse"—they also come from a variety of backgrounds. Yet, unlike their digitally-savvy students, not all instructors feel confident with technology.

One challenge instructors faced during the shift to virtual learning was that many of them had little experience teaching online. They weren't familiar with the technological solutions their institutions had put in place, meaning that it was difficult to teach effectively.

Keeping virtual learning secure

By June 2020, the education industry accounted for 61% of the 7.7 million malware attacks that took place in the preceding 30 days. Malware wasn't the only threat for virtual learning, though—data breaches and infiltrating virtual lessons with streams of lewd content became a common threat at higher education institutions.

Maintaining virtual learning security was and continues to be an obstacle for colleges and universities due to insecure software.



The benefits of hybrid learning

In spite of the challenges, there are benefits to hybrid learning.

- Health benefits
 - Hybrid learning offers greater flexibility
 - Reduced student absenteeism
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Health benefits

For instructors and students with compromised immune systems, the shift to virtual learning enables the continuity of education.

Through hybrid learning, instructors could teach from home, while students can learn remotely. They don't have to expose themselves to dangerous illnesses, yet instructors still work, while students can still gain knowledge and earn their degree.

Hybrid learning offers greater flexibility

Another benefit of hybrid learning is that it can offer greater flexibility for students.

Not every student is able to attend in-person classes. Hybrid learning can fit into working or mature students' schedules, allowing them to earn their degree.

Moreover, learning no longer needs to be location-dependent. Students can attend the institution of their choice, even if they're not in the same time zone or country.

Reduced student absenteeism

Because hybrid learning allows students to learn where they are, students have fewer reasons (or excuses) not to show up to class.

RingCentral: a virtual learning platform to facilitate hybrid learning



RingCentral helps higher education institutions meet the challenges of hybrid learning and reap its benefits with its virtual learning platform. The virtual learning platform offers:

- One-click video and audio on any browser so students can easily join the virtual classroom
- The ability to record live video
- Screen sharing
- Live messaging, so students can participate in lessons
- Integration with learning management tools, so instructors can share asynchronous learning materials
- Group messaging and file sharing, so instructors can share vital information after students leave the virtual classroom
- One-click meetings and messaging, so students and instructors can stay in touch with one another after class ends

RingCentral and security

At RingCentral, digital security is one of our highest priorities. That's why our virtual learning platform offers robust security, without sacrificing user experience.

RingCentral's virtual learning platform offers seven layers of security:

- Physical
- Network
- Host
- Data
- Application
- Business processes
- Enterprise organization

The platform is monitored 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Moreover, there's a 99.999% uptime guarantee, so IT departments, students, and instructors can rest assured their data is safe and lessons can continue without threats.

RingCentral's virtual learning platform has earned the following security certifications:

- ISO/IEC 27001—the most widely recognized international standard for information security
- ISO/IEC 27017—a rigorous cloud security standard
- ISO/IEC 27018—one of the highest standards for protecting personal identifying information in the cloud
- SOC 2 Type II—validation of the effectiveness of RingCentral's operating controls
- SOC 3—validation of RingCentral's compliance with the AICPA Trust Services Principles and Criteria

Conclusion

Hybrid learning offers benefits to higher education institutions: they can offer students flexibility, while reducing health risks for students and instructors and reducing student absenteeism. However, colleges and universities will only realize the benefits when they use the right virtual learning platform—one that's secure, easy to use, and provides an excellent student and instructor experience.



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