

## HyFlex Programming as a Delivery Approach for Changing Student Demographics and Demands

Southeast Missouri State University

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HyFlex at Southeast Missouri State University (Southeast), a regional public institution, evolved from a proof of concept in a single department, to a 100-section campus-wide pilot, to intentional program design. This chapter provides an outside-the-classroom look at administrative conversations, as well as a look into the classrooms of two programs that have implemented HyFlex to meet the needs of their unique student populations. These two academic programs—MA Higher Education Administration and MA Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)—have found delivering their programs HyFlex provides an avenue to serve their students in a way that other modalities do not always allow.

### Phase 1: Curiosity

Attendance at higher education conferences can stimulate new and innovative ideas, that may sometimes evaporate after the conference-goer returns back to their university and the day-to-day operations of life. One such idea that survived the everyday minutia at Southeast is HyFlex. After attending a conference, an individual in the online education department, who doubled as an agriculture instructor, pitched an idea to university leadership to lead a proof-of-concept study of HyFlex in an agriculture marketing class. With the goal of providing flexibility and access to students who balance time in the classroom with time in the field, this HyFlex course was delivered in Fall 2019 (Weathers & McNeely, 2021). Initial informal feedback from the instructor and students was positive, and the course was offered as HyFlex again in Spring 2020. Grades in the HyFlex sections were compared to grades in sections delivered face-to-face. Using a simple t-test and comparing letter grades, strong statistical significance ( $p < 0.0001$ ) was found across each letter grade. The HyFlex sections produced more “A” grades, and fewer “B/C/D/F” grades.

### Phase 2: COVID-19 Pilot

Building off the successes of the proof of concept, the team developed a plan for a pilot project that would expand HyFlex to approximately 10 sections across the university, incorporating a variety of disciplines and allowing the

delivery mode to be piloted at a larger scale. Amid COVID-19 implications, this project expanded quickly with a goal of delivering 100 sections in Fall 2020. In total, 98 sections were offered in the Fall 2020 semester, and then 57 more in the Spring 2021 semester. Each academic department on campus was represented in this pilot, and HyFlex courses accounted for 3.1% of all sections offered during that time.

Implementing a new course modality during a pandemic may seem challenging, but it may have been the best window of opportunity to explore this type of innovation. We relied on both an administrative team and faculty support team to launch the pilot. A series of informational webinars were offered early in Summer 2020 to ensure campus was educated about this new delivery mode and implementation plans.

The website <http://www.semo.edu/HyFlex> provided FAQs and an informational video. Members of this cross-functional team included representation from the following offices:

- Registrar
- Southeast Online
- Student Financial Services
- University Marketing

A consistent struggle that this group had in its journey to implementing HyFlex courses was helping our campus become flexible in what was a considerably inflexible environment. The coding we had established for our software systems was based on a system of this or that, not this and that—online or face-to-face. This system was set up to create tidy boxes where we could put distinct populations of students, courses, or programs, to adequately trigger student rate codes, email communications, student service initiatives, and faculty assignment, among other things. In the early 2000s when we tried implementing more flexibility through hybrid courses, it resulted in us creating seven classifications of hybrid, so we could still neatly classify, quantify, and group distinct things. Though HyFlex incorporates three modes in which courses were already being offered—face-to-face, online, webinar—we could not find a way to integrate those existing codes into a new mode that would make sense for rates and communications. Ultimately, based on our student information system and current coding architecture, we decided to make HyFlex its own distinct coding, a standalone entity within our coding structure.

Beyond coding and tuition rates, though, there was still the matter of teaching the teachers about this new modality. We needed to make sure our faculty had the resources and support to navigate a new way of teaching. A faculty training and support team was created consisting of individuals from Southeast Online, the Center for Teaching and Learning, and Information Technology. The team provided training for HyFlex in a HyFlex environment—including group synchronous Zoom sessions, one-on-one consultations, and an online self-paced training course in our Learning Management System (figure 1).

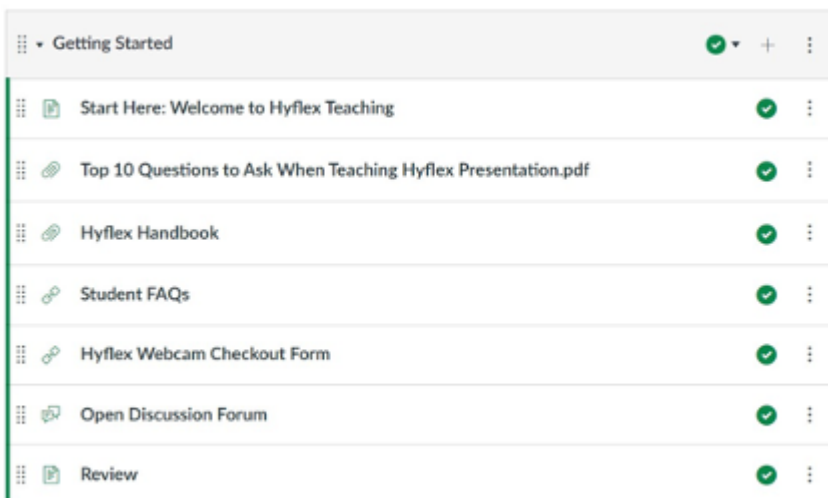


Figure 1: HyFlex Training Course for Instructors

Even though training was offered to all faculty delivering their first HyFlex course, it became clear during the implementation process that the definition of HyFlex had not been fully agreed on by all campus constituents. While the implementation team had adopted a definition of HyFlex that incorporates three modes (Beatty, 2019), some individuals interpreted HyFlex to include only two modes of delivery. Confusion about modes of delivery were resolved with personal conversations, but a lesson was learned that clear and constant messaging is imperative when launching something so new. From this experience, we realized that down the line we would need to have more formal conversations about how delivery issues in flexible learning courses would be addressed.

Defining HyFlex at Southeast did not end with agreeing on a delivery approach. Defining who would be responsible for the success of HyFlex long-term came into question. Our previous campus structure had created a separation between traditional teaching in our Center for Teaching and Learning and responsibilities for the growing number of students and courses the online learning department was responsible for. Given that HyFlex spanned the scope of each of these two departments, it was unclear who should support and promote this modality. These territorial conversations are not new in higher education, but are ones we continue to grapple with, as we seek to create efficient and effective teaching and learning centers.

Launching a new modality like HyFlex was neither a simple nor a linear process, but the pilot project provided intriguing data that encouraged further exploration. In the first-year pilot project, more than 150 sections of classes were delivered HyFlex to more than 2,500 students. When learning outcomes were assessed by letter grades, comparable results to those in the proof of concept emerged, students in HyFlex sections produced more “A” grades, and fewer “B, C, D, F” grades as compared to all other modes. As we concluded the pilot phase, we had asked and answered many questions, but there were still more questions to address. How could we sustain HyFlex? What students, courses, and instructors were best suited to HyFlex delivery?

## Phase 3: Strategy

When the pilot phase was over, we began work on an institutional definition of what HyFlex is at Southeast. While much of the promotional and website material listed our definition, that a course would incorporate three modalities, there was no formal policy establishing how these courses needed to be taught. Individuals from Southeast Online worked with our original project team, which included members from the registrar and the vice provost’s office, to define not only what HyFlex was, but how all modalities offered at our institution were to be delivered. This process included feedback from chairs and deans, as well as from the provost. Eventually, the definition of a course with optional synchronous sessions, in-person and virtual, as well as asynchronous components was agreed upon and approved to be posted on our school’s portal website as well as on the provost’s website. This definition was also formally shared with our deans, chairs, and faculty.

Following the pilot phase, some instructors recognized that HyFlex met the needs of their particular student demographics in ways that other modalities did not, and the decision was made that Southeast would launch its first HyFlex degree programs. Having learned some lessons from our hundred-section pilot, our approach this time around was to start with just one program launch. This slower, more measured approach allowed us to troubleshoot with a smaller number of instructors being impacted.

To date, Southeast has one degree program which is completely HyFlex, the MA in Higher Education Administration, one program in the approval process, and one in which courses are offered either asynchronously or HyFlex., the MA in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). The following are two examples of the utilization of HyFlex at Southeast from inside the classroom; the directors of these two programs share how they are reaching students where they are.

## MA Higher Education Administration

After being part of the Department of Communication Studies & Modern Languages for over fifteen years, I transitioned to a new role at my institution as the program coordinator for the MA in Higher Education Administration. While the job description included taking the program completely online, during the interview process, I proposed making the program HyFlex. I had taught my intercultural and health communication classes in this modality in 2020 and 2021 and found upper-level students benefitted from the flexibility.

I explained to the administration in my department and college that based on the current student population, HyFlex seemed a better choice than fully online. The program had a significant percentage of international students, who must attend face-to-face courses for visa eligibility, and students with graduate assistantships, who could not afford to pursue a master's degree without that tuition assistance. Going HyFlex represented the best of both worlds: we could attract new students who would be 100% online, keep the students who needed to be on campus, and make the program more accessible for student-athletes, student-parents, and students who worked off campus.

During the 2021-22 school year, I worked with stakeholders throughout the campus community to redesign the curriculum. In addition to making the program HyFlex, I wanted to bring it in alignment with the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education. I worked with all the faculty who taught courses offered within the program, leaders of functional areas in student affairs, administrators, as well as past and current students. The changes were accepted at the end of that school year. We officially launched the new curriculum and soft-launched the HyFlex aspect in the 2022-23 school year. Now, in the 2023-24 school year, we are marketing the MA in Higher Education Administration as a HyFlex program.

My HyFlex delivery approach involves utilizing Nearpod slides for each class. This allows me to have the fidelity of using the "live" presentation option for my synchronous face-to-face and Zoom students, then providing a link to the "student-led" option for my asynchronous students. Utilizing polls and collaboration boards helps the students in the classroom and on Zoom communicate during class (figure 2).

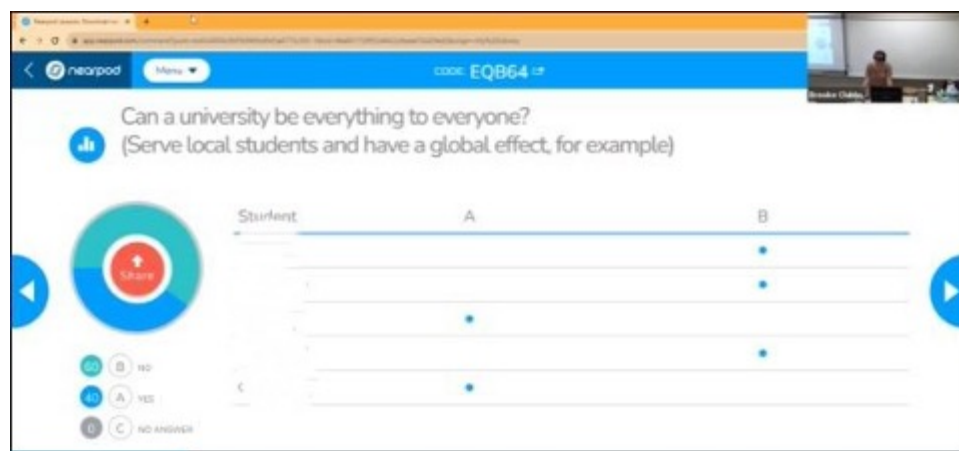


Figure 2: Nearpod poll used in HyFlex class

I put open-ended questions in the Nearpod for the asynchronous students to type answers, while those are class discussion prompts for the synchronous students. I sometimes employ "Think, Pair, Share" for these discussion questions, putting my Zoom students into breakout rooms while the in-class students move their chairs together. Each class meeting is recorded and transcribed through Zoom. I transfer those videos to our Learning Management System's Canvas Studio, then post a link to the captioned video on the course Canvas page. I also record a short (three- to five-minute) podcast using Spotify for Podcasters after each class session. These podcasts can be used by asynchronous students as a quick introduction before watching the whole class video or by any of the students as a little refresher before the next class. I conduct a lot of assessment by presentations; students who are asynchronous record and share the link to their presentation which is watched in class or posted on Canvas.

However, I do not teach all of the classes in my program. I rely on adjunct instructors to teach two of the core courses; a full-time faculty member in my department provides the required research methods course in a completely online format, and full-time faculty in other departments teach elective courses. It was a challenge to ask the adjunct instructors, many of whom are full-time student affairs professionals, to increase their course delivery and design burden to make their courses HyFlex. However, with help from Southeast Online and the Center for Teaching and Learning, these instructors were given resources and assistance to ease their transition to the format. While they may not utilize all the same delivery approaches I do, the courses are delivered in a HyFlex format. The instructors from other departments were not enthusiastic about adopting HyFlex, particularly because they had both undergraduate and graduate students in the courses HEA students could take as electives. However, even with those faculty not using the HyFlex modality, an HEA student can still complete this degree completely online.

I sympathize with the faculty who were reticent to utilize HyFlex. Many of them first experienced the format during a time of “panic-gogy”: a tongue-in-cheek combining of panic and pedagogy for the rapid online pivot during the pandemic (Kamenetz, 2020). During the fall of 2020, to practice COVID precautions, the university had employed “mixed” classes where half a class would attend in person and the other half attended on Zoom one class period, then switched the next class period. However, there was no penalty if you did not attend in the manner you were assigned. By the end of the semester, most students attended via Zoom, regardless of the day. Faculty felt like they were shouting into the void, and sometimes they were. I had students in my undergraduate classes later admit they would log into Zoom, turn off the camera, and go back to sleep. There is a lingering doubt that students receive the same experience or that courses have the same rigor when offered in more than one modality. Also, because HyFlex students can choose how they attend the class each class period many faculty feel it is difficult to plan activities when you could have a varying number of students in the room on any given day.

These issues with faculty were not the only challenges faced. While most administrators endorsed the idea of a HyFlex program, when we got to the nitty-gritty of policies and procedures, some lost their enthusiasm. Before officially becoming a HyFlex program, we had to resolve how students would be classified (main campus or online) and how that would affect their financial aid. After sitting down with representatives from student financial services, international education, and the registrar’s office, we felt we had a working plan.

Then, later when it came time for Spring 2023 registration, the registrar contested classes being classified as HyFlex and blended. These classifications had been used to denote that the course did not include three hours of face-to-face portion of instruction. I found that to enhance fidelity, it was better to not have a three-hour course (with the exception of 8-week courses) because asynchronous students had difficulty maintaining attention watching a video of that length. Thus, I made up for it with shorter videos all the students could watch online and other resources for the students to utilize on their own. The registrar argued that students should not have to do any online work if they chose the face-to-face modality and that for accreditation purposes, we would have to meet in person for three hours each week. The vice provost and dean of graduate studies determined that rather than list a course as blended, we could classify it only as HyFlex and list the times in-person instruction was available. Because the course could also be classified as fully online, that instruction did not have to add up to 3 hours. Issues like making sure our administrative assistant knew how to code the classes when loading them in the system reminded us, we were doing something that had not been done at our institution before!

However, a year in, I can confidently say making the program entirely HyFlex has been worth it. Being able to choose how to attend provides flexibility for student-parents who can come to class when they have a babysitter and attend via Zoom or asynchronously when they do not. Student affairs staff who are traveling for recruitment or professional development events can attend class from their hotel rooms. Student-athletes no longer must miss class when traveling for games. Students who moved away for work are still able to finish the program because they can attend via Zoom and online. Students with health issues have been empowered to attend in the modality that best suits how they are feeling. Moments that stand out: 1. a final exam where the President of the University came for a roundtable discussion, which was attended by some students who had been online most of the semester and included taking a selfie with the students attending on Zoom and 2. hugs at the commencement ceremony from students who told me they did not think they would finish but were able to make it because the program was flexible.

# MA TESOL

Before May 2020, every course in the MA in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) was offered in both an asynchronous online format and in-person. When the COVID pandemic forced students and instructors off-campus, in-person courses continued to meet synchronously on Zoom. With the return to campus, all courses which had previously been held in-person became HyFlex, offering the option of participating virtually, and making attendance in synchronous sessions optional.

The MA TESOL program brings together students from a wide variety of backgrounds. U.S.-born students working in France, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Spain, Thailand, and full-time teachers in K-12 schools across the U.S. often study part-time, taking one or two courses a semester. Students from the region where the university is located and those who have come to the U.S. to complete their degrees before returning to teach in Bangladesh, China, Egypt, Ghana, Iran, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Spain, Turkey, or Ukraine generally study full-time and attend classes on campus.

HyFlex courses offer rich learning environments for all students in the program, bringing together individuals who would otherwise never have the opportunity to interact with one another. Particularly in a field like TESOL in which culture and language are at the core of the discipline, developing communities of practice where students share their experiences and perspectives as language learners and teachers is invaluable. Replacing in-person with HyFlex courses has also offered a solution to a very practical problem. Sometimes the number of students who plan to attend a TESOL class on campus is below the minimum number required for a course to be offered. Now classes are often filled to capacity.

As the above description of the MA in Higher Education Administration illustrates, there are numerous ways to develop and teach compelling HyFlex courses. For me, the initial design for a HyFlex course is the same as that of an asynchronous online course. A semester-long course is divided into weekly modules containing readings and materials. As students living outside of the U.S. can have difficulty accessing physical copies of textbooks, I use Open Educational Resources (OER) as much as possible. Each weekly module has a PowerPoint presentation with voiceover; the recordings are divided into one- to two-minute chunks to allow students the option of listening to a particular section as often as they like or of skipping over it completely. I use the same PowerPoint, without the voiceover, in the synchronous class sessions, and students can preview the presentation online before class or use it as a means of reviewing if they choose.

Creating opportunities for student interaction and for building community among learners across modalities is essential. In addition to semester-long projects, my HyFlex courses include online discussion boards where all students are expected to share their work and respond to that of their classmates. Each week, there is an “Apply what you know” activity that links theory and practice. For example, in a sociolinguistics course, students compare the web pages for the disability services offices of any two universities focusing on the language used to describe the populations served. Students also have “Making Connections” posts where they share items that connect with the topics we have explored that week. I make references to these posts during synchronous class meetings, seeking to bridge the gap between students who never meet each other face to face and those who spend several hours a week together in-person or via Zoom.

Developing and teaching HyFlex courses can be challenging. Engaging with students online, throughout the week, a key part of any asynchronous course, takes time. In addition, leading group discussions and facilitating pair work in a synchronous class when students are participating both virtually and in-person poses logistical hurdles. For example, in the classroom where I teach the microphones are located in the ceiling, and it can be difficult for students attending virtually to hear what is happening in the classroom; I often encourage students to “use their teacher voices.” In addition, it is challenging to effectively and consistently include students who participate virtually, as they can be uncertain how and when to jump into a discussion; I will frequently ask these students directly if they have anything they would like to contribute.





Figure 3: Synchronous Students in Class

Technology plays a vital role in fostering a sense of community in a HyFlex course. When I first began teaching in this mode, the only camera in the room was near the back and focused on the teacher and the whiteboard. As a result, those who attended on Zoom could see only the backs of their classmates' heads. The installation of a second camera near the front of the room has changed this dynamic. Now the virtual students can see their classmates' faces, and I make sure to display the Zoom feed on the classroom screen, in addition to the PowerPoint presentation, so that in-person students can see those who are participating virtually. Pair and small group work play an important role in my classes. Over time, I have developed some strategies but there is still a lot I would like to learn about how to bring together students attending on Zoom and those who are in the physical classroom. Students who have their own computers often log onto Zoom to work in break-out rooms, and I share my own laptop so that those who do not have devices with them can take part. I still need to get better at using the whiteboard feature in Zoom and at switching from one camera to the other so that when I write on the whiteboard, which is at the front of the room, the students attending virtually will be able to see it.

Given the many "moving parts" – online lessons, in-person sessions, discussions that take place synchronously and asynchronously—I sometimes describe teaching HyFlex courses as a "three-ring circus." In any teaching there are risks; an assignment might not go as planned or a discussion might fall flat and in a HyFlex course technology might not work or students who participate via Zoom might feel isolated from their peers. Nonetheless in the MA TESOL, we have found that HyFlex courses are worth the risk. In the past two years, students living in Racine, Wisconsin and Chicago, Illinois have actively participated in synchronous classes throughout their degrees. One student in Saudi Arabia did not miss a session one semester, and currently a student in Vietnam logs in to one class at midnight and a second which begins 2:00 am Ho Chi Minh City time to meet with others attending class in-person and on Zoom. In short, HyFlex courses open new opportunities to model multiple modes of teaching for our students and to foster discussions that would otherwise be impossible.

# Conclusion

Southeast Missouri State University implemented Hylex courses broadly during a time of panic-gogy (Kamenetz, 2020), and we have found strategic implementations for it programmatically in our new normal. HyFlex has allowed us to broaden the pool of potential students exponentially, not just for local students, but for students across the U.S. and around the world. Beyond that access, though, it has also provided a robust learning environment for unique student populations in two graduate programs that are taking advantage of the flexibility that this modality has to offer.

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