7.4 A HyFlex Model that Engages All Teachers — and All Staff — From the Outset

Mesa Adult Education Program

Christine Niven (Administrator) and Jennifer Duclos (Instructional Support Specialist)
Mesa Adult Education Program, Mesa, Arizona

Description of program and learners

Mesa Adult Education is a school district-sponsored grant-funded program with state-administered WIOA (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act) Title II federal funding from the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education in the U.S. Department of Education, and with state funding through the Arizona Department of Education. In March 2022, the district offered ABE/HSE (Adult Basic Education/High School Equivalency), ESL, Integrated English and Training (IET), and Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE) classes. The average class size was 8–10 students, but ranged from four to 18 students.

The HyFlex program pilot began in May 2021 with five teachers. HyFlex was subsequently implemented program-wide, beginning in August 2021. All three modes — in-person, online synchronous and online asynchronous — were offered, although the asynchronous-only option was strongly discouraged because the courses were not yet designed for students who had not already attended one of the synchronous classes, either online or in-person. There were, however, a small number of students who primarily did asynchronous homework. There were 20 HyFlex classes, not including IET classes. Learners met for three hours twice weekly. They could choose day-to-day whether to attend class in person or online.

By August 2021, all twelve HSE and eight ESL classes were using a HyFlex model. Just under 300 learners each term had been enrolled in these classes. Students could go to an open lab during day and evening class times to get extra help online or in person if they weren't attending class at that time. HSE preparation classes and a lab were each offered one day a week. All 16 part-time teachers were teaching HyFlex classes.

From the point at which potential learners indicated interest, they did everything in a HyFlex way — filling out paperwork online, attending orientation class online or in person, doing homework in Google Forms, and learning about how the program worked by watching embedded videos.

Recruitment and Orientation

Administrator Christine Niven noted that the HyFlex model was used for all enrollment, whether in person or online, including via Zoom or Webex. The entire orientation/onboarding system was overhauled. Tech help was provided and as the last piece of an orientation, learners were required to come for a "Readiness for Class" session. Learners brought their device and got all the necessary apps and programs loaded on their device. The orientation leader made sure they could get into Remind, Webex, Odysseyware, Burlington English, and other tools. Most learners understood right away how to do all this, though others learned more gradually. Doing orientation in this way gave new learners a chance to learn and practice the needed skills in a structured and gradual process. It also allowed the program to assess which

learners might need more tech support and tech skill development before joining classes. Learners then had the option to assess using National Reporting System tests remotely or in person.

All learners were strongly encouraged to attend the first week of classes in person. Instructional Support Specialist Jennifer Duclos noted, "Everybody got on Canvas and on Webex together; some learners did only remote, though they were not encouraged to do so. The few learners who were remote only were asked to come in person to the required 'getting ready for class' workshops."

HyFlex in Action: Course and Instruction

Planning

From March 2020 to May 2021, the program offered five eight-week terms of emergency remote teaching. At this point, the program had few tools to help students learn remotely and even fewer to learn asynchronously. Teachers focused on rebuilding their learning community through synchronous online classes, which, Jennifer commented, showed how unprepared they all were to teach this way. Most teachers did not initially have the necessary skills to implement a HyFlex model. Slowly, she said, they added in more asynchronous work using Odysseyware, EdReady/NROC and Burlington English, and then even more as the state set up the *Teacher-Verified Model* system to use a broader range of materials and content asynchronously for time credit.

Jennifer felt that having an entirely part-time teaching staff made it challenging to develop synchronous planning because teachers did not necessarily have as much time and energy to devote to learning a new instructional style. With many instructors only teaching one or two classes — only 6–12 hours of class time per week — experience, experimentation, and learning happened at a much slower pace than if they were full-time staff with more working hours per week. .

After doing primarily online classes with Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), getting teachers comfortable with in-person again was problematic; they had to re-think what to do in the in-person classroom. It was a challenge to balance the modes. Jennifer said that some teachers indirectly indicated to students the mode that they preferred. For part-time teachers, she felt that the learning is slower because they don't get much experience practicing the new model.

There was a transition in the kind of teachers hired for the program. Jennifer observed that "applications for teaching positions now seem to be coming from a narrower profile of people. We used to get more newly retired teachers and parents who wanted part-time employment, but with the added challenges of teaching HyFlex or even just the tech skills needed to feel comfortable teaching HyFlex, a lot of teachers who might previously have applied are self-selecting out. We have been seeing more applicants who work as full-time teachers during the day and who are learning these tech and instructional skills and gaining a lot of experience with them quickly from their full-time teaching job." She added, "Moving forward, we will need to have a higher level of tech skill, familiarity with the LMS and online teaching as part of the hiring criteria."

Delivering Instruction

It took about a semester of struggling with sub-par technology and a new LMS before teachers developed insights into how to design and deliver instruction in HyFlex. At first, their hardware was "inadequate" $40 webcams, "a nightmare," Jennifer said. With eight classes, one day a week, the program managed, but when it went to scale and did simultaneous in-person and online synchronous instruction, learners couldn't hear or see everyone. That inadequate technology overshadowed what learning could take place. The program's acquisition of three Cisco Touch 10 conferencing devices with large-screen TVs made a huge difference, according to Jennifer. It took away the teachers' enormous burden of managing the technology. They weren't fighting the technology. Online learners could see the whole classroom, and in-person learners could see and hear the online learners. Jennifer said they were as functional as corporate classrooms.

Christine concurred that the new equipment was "a game changer." With the initial sub-par equipment, learners couldn't hear and felt incapable. The new equipment solved those problems. Although they cost about $5,000 for each class,

three more conference setups were ordered so the program could hold six HyFlex classes at the same time.

Since Mesa's HyFlex model was centered around synchronous class time, learning how to effectively teach a class with a combination of in-person and online students took priority. Most teachers found that classes flowed more smoothly if they planned a remote-only class and then modified it for in-person students. This ensured that the materials were all adequately accessible online for all learners, regardless of how they were participating in class. Jennifer noted, "Teachers who tried planning for an in-person class with the idea that they could add on accessibility for online learners often found that their online learners became more like observers than participants. Starting from an online-only class design mindset also often ensured that all instructions and details were explicitly written and available in Canvas, and thus more accessible and useful for learners who missed the synchronous class."

Jennifer continued, "Unifying the class into one learning community, rather than dividing it into the online class and the in-person class, was a challenge many teachers identified early in the process. It wasn't until after most teachers had a term or two (8–16 weeks) of struggling with HyFlex and identifying which tech skills and platforms they wanted their students to use that teachers started meeting this challenge. This also coincided with acquisition of the Cisco Touch 10s, which allowed many teachers to be able to implement their activities with less stress and frustration."

"With the Touch 10s, whole class discussions and activities became possible again. With the more limited tech set-up, learners at home and in person could not see each other and often could not hear each other clearly. Teachers resorted to mediating — and thus controlling — most whole-class discussions or activities. Some teachers chose not to do any whole-class activities because of the tech limitations, which often isolated the students, especially the online learners. Because of the Touch 10s, many teachers started reintegrating whole-class activities because students could engage with each other directly, regardless of who was at home or in person."

For the English language classes, listening and speaking activities became enjoyable again, and more teachers started adding these back into class lessons. Other teachers found online platforms to be useful in uniting students in the room and at home. Some teachers used the discussion board in Canvas. Others used Google Docs or Jamboard as shared learning spaces. As learners became more proficient in using Webex, Canvas, and Google Docs, breakout room activities became more productive and less stressful.

Technologies

Every in-person learner used a digital device in class — a laptop, tablet or phone. These could be learners' own devices or devices provided to them by the program for in-class use.

The Cisco Touch 10s (control units) included a monitor-mounted webcam, microphone, and speaker. Classrooms with Touch 10s did not need any additional equipment beyond the teacher's laptop, which was connected to the Touch 10 device via Wi-Fi. In classrooms without Touch 10s, a Tiny OBSBOT stationary web camera was used. Teachers experimented with various microphones and speakers, but these were often more challenging to keep working effectively than to just use the microphone on the Tiny OBSBOT. Cables were used in these rooms, so making them safe for learners and teachers was often challenging. Jennifer noted the variety of approaches to whiteboards: some teachers used the screen-share whiteboard function in Webex or used Jamboard or Google Slides as a makeshift whiteboard, but a few continued to use the old-fashioned physical whiteboard in the classroom with the webcam positioned so that online learners could see it.

The program's software applications included Webex for video conferencing and Canvas for the LMS. Before the shift to HyFlex in August 2021, they had been primarily using Google Sites as a limited LMS, but later everything, except registration and orientation, transitioned to Canvas. The Arizona Department of Education provided Burlington English, Odysseyware, EdReady/NROC, and Discovery Ed, and approved Khan Academy, and USA Learns as content platforms.

Technical Support and Training for Teachers and Learners

Tech Support

The school district provided limited tech support in setting up Canvas. Jennifer also provided tech support to the new HyFlex classes. She dealt with technology crises in the classroom, essentially "putting out fires." With the Cisco Touch 10s, the tech support burden decreased. Jennifer got Canvas templates for the teachers and organized Canvas workshops, a "HyFlex showcase." The program also hired a Canvas training person for more support, such as answering teachers' emailed questions.

Christine noted that Jennifer was thoughtful in how she rolled things out, piloting first, trying out and troubleshooting the hardware. She added that she saw these as professional development needs: how to assure equity of access for learners so they could access everything, whether online or in person; and how to assess learning progress when learners were online. She said that this was hard to do because teachers weren't able to get feedback from online learners, especially when their camera was off, and they were on mute. The HyFlex model has brought forward an issue that has always been there. She would like to provide digital tools to make assessment easier for teachers and help them understand and use the data they have for instructional improvement, especially improving instructional practices in HyFlex teaching and learning. She would like to be able to provide additional planning time, offer training/coaching in using Canvas, provide opportunities to share best practices, and continue to purchase hardware that is easy to use.

Teacher Training

Jennifer formed instructional teams of teachers teaching the same level and content but at different times; these teams met synchronously or asynchronously. They sometimes planned lessons together; at first, she was able to join them. With the HyFlex model, she noted, lesson planning pieces must be more structured. Although the instructional teams were good, they weren't helping teachers break out of their own subject areas. Jennifer noticed that some instructional teams were learning faster and more deeply than others, but that there was little sharing of this knowledge outside of class levels or subject areas, so she had them participate in new Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). She also felt that discussion-board−based cross-pollination was needed.

Twice yearly, a HyFlex showcase, a series of 15- to 20-minute teacher presentations, was held. Some used Jamboard. Some held conversations in-person and online. Teachers saw for the first time what their peers were doing, what tools they used, and how they used them. Many teachers commented that these showcases helped them clarify the learning they had done by preparing to share it with their peers, as well as giving them a learner perspective on how some of these ideas work in practice for both in-person and remote learners.

Some teachers had little prior experience with Canvas, so the program hired an instruction designer to think through how previous lesson planning could work in Canvas. Jennifer said this had paid off and she was seeing better Canvas design. In the first year, Jennifer gave teachers Canvas templates; during the year, teachers were expanding beyond the templates.

Implementation: Lessons Learned

Data Collected for Program Improvement

Early on, in Emergency Remote Teaching, teachers did everything in Google — and the data were in Google Sheets. Moving to Canvas presented a huge learning curve. Teachers tried to use Canvas for attendance data, but the data couldn't easily be exported into Google Sheets. So, data management was in flux. Teachers also did satisfaction and other surveys, and Jennifer did observations. Despite having the pre- and post- data that were entered into the state reporting system, it was difficult to use that data for real-time program decisions.

In the future, Christine would like to be able to compare distance-learning hours and in-person time, in terms of Measurable Skill Gains and attendance, noting that since HyFlex was implemented, proxy hours have steeply increased. She would also like to know if learners' digital skills improved and if their perceptions and feelings about digital

technology improved. Because there was resistance to using technology from lower-level ESL students, Christine considered using the Northstar Digital Literacy Assessment to measure digital literacy skills for IET classes.

Benefits

Benefits included the recruitment of students for HyFlex classes; use of specific hardware and software, including online platform and curriculum; assessing learning differently; better attendance and retention of students; and increased digital literacy skills. Jennifer said, "I'm not sure if this is a benefit or a challenge, but in looking back over the year with a little distance, I can see that HyFlex can create learners . . . who can direct and manage their own learning better — time management, digital resiliency, self-advocacy, intellectual curiosity, study skills/test-taking skills. However, at the beginning of our experiment, we were not capable of supporting students who did not come to us with at least these basic skills. We definitely had an unspoken higher level of expectation for new students, which became yet another barrier to accessing learning for some of our students. As we (as a program) got better at designing our HyFlex learning spaces, clarifying what skills we needed students to learn, and offering higher-quality and more targeted support for students who needed to develop those skills, we started noticing that more students, and not just the ones who came to us as already 'good' learners, were taking more ownership of their learning. The increased opportunities for learning in different formats started to become the strength we hoped it would be. However, those same increased learning opportunities can also become overwhelming, stressful, and just another barrier if the program does not find ways to help students learn to learn better and support that growth."

Christine observed that teachers see learners benefiting from the flexibility. In January, for example, she said the program went entirely remote for two weeks because of COVID; in the past, this would have meant a shutdown. Some teachers, even those who were sick, chose to teach from home. They saw that this flexibility could be for teachers as well as students.

Because of these many benefits, Mesa Adult Education planned to continue using the HyFlex model.

Challenges

Challenges included identifying or securing the best hardware and software; a need for professional development and training specific to the HyFlex model; engaging both in-person and online learners during class; technology support for teachers and learners; the higher barriers for learners lacking good study or time-management skills.

Jennifer observed that her program's solution to the initial challenge — how to do HyFlex — was to do it for everyone. Although this created big challenges, the advantage of this approach was that everyone — teachers, administrators, technology support people, clerical staff — was all in. Everyone now understood the model. Jennifer suggested that for those who want to offer HyFlex program-wide, to involve the entire staff from the outset.

Christine saw these as challenges for the program: identifying or securing hardware and software; professional development and training specific to flex models; onboarding learners; resistance or reluctance on the part of some staff; engaging both in-person and online learners during class; and providing good tech support for teachers and learners.