7.8 HyFlex Meets Needs of Students Who Prefer In-Person but Sometimes Have Challenges with Childcare and Transportation

Milwaukee Area Technical College

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Description of program and learners

The ESL/ELL program at the downtown Milwaukee campus of Milwaukee Area Technical College began to offer its HyFlex format in August 2021. Teacher Joy Lehmann works with lower-level ESL learners there. Joy believes that the downtown campus, which is one of four campuses, offers the most HyFlex classes. Few in-person classes (about 20 percent) are offered at that campus, and mostly to the lowest-level learners. The market for in-person learning has changed, with more students now online than in person.

In the HyFlex program, students could choose and move fluidly among in-person, synchronous online, and asynchronous online instruction. Sessions met twice a week for one to three hours, depending on the class. Students could attend those sessions in-person or online, and switch modes at any time. Classes were recorded and uploaded to [Blackboard](#) so that learners could also view the video recorded lessons asynchronously. Twelve teachers were teaching 17 HyFlex classes. At the time she was interviewed in March 2022, Joy reported that the asynchronous mode was not polished and not much encouraged.

Recruitment and Orientation

Learners didn't specifically select HyFlex classes but having HyFlex did allow the program to recruit learners when they might not have enough to run a class solely in-person. Joy noted that it wasn't clear to many learners that they were going to be in HyFlex when they were recruited. Their choices were HyFlex, virtual or in-person.

Orientation took place in class, not beforehand. In the first few weeks, Joy demonstrated Blackboard, [Burlington English](#), and various digital tools.

HyFlex in Action: Course and Instruction

Planning

Joy planned for synchronous online and in-person instruction. She planned first for the online learners because she believed that they had fewer tools. For example, she used matching activities or brainstorming done in breakout rooms, or she shared a picture on which they could write. When planning, she asked herself, "How will this work for those online?" Joy said she was learning how to teach in person again after being primarily remote for so long. Joy said she hadn't yet mixed in-person and online learners.

Delivering Instruction

Although some students changed modes, most online students almost never came in person. Joy said, "Last semester I had a learner who strongly preferred to attend class in person, but sometimes did not have childcare. On those days, she attended online from home. Not all students take advantage of the flexibility; they'll attend either in person or virtually, but if they can't make one, they won't attend the other. For the few who take advantage of it, it allows them to keep up with classes even when they have transportation or childcare issues."

Technologies

For hardware, the program used wireless speakers/microphones that were built into the ceiling and adjustable video cameras at the front and back of the classroom. The cameras, however, didn't track movement; instead, there were pre-sets, for example, on the teacher or on the board. Joy used dual monitors, one for slide presentations and one for [Blackboard Collaborate](#). She also set up a personal laptop with which she joined Blackboard Collaborate as a second log-in to check in with online learners. In-person students used an internet-accessible digital device — a laptop, tablet or smartphone they'd brought from home or a laptop available in the classroom — although they weren't required to do online work in every class period.

Joy used the Blackboard Collaborate software to store video recorded lessons. The camera focused on her was always on. She and her colleagues also used Blackboard Collaborate for synchronous online instruction and Burlington English for their online curriculum in many of their HyFlex classes. Joy taught oral communication and pronunciation using the HyFlex format. She sometimes also used printed books for pronunciation classes.

Technical Support and Training for Teachers and Learners

Tech Support

Joy noted that providing digital technology support for English language learners was challenging. She successfully helped in-person learners understand and use the technology, including going beyond simply logging into class (i.e., viewing assignments in Blackboard and accessing Burlington English), but found it much more difficult to help online students learn the technology.

Teacher Training

The college offered a two-day faculty workshop (three hours each day) online and in-person: It was an overview of HyFlex model design, and it used HyFlex technology in its delivery. Joy thought it could have been designed better, adding support for the management aspect of HyFlex. She believed that teachers needed to practice using both modes, and to experience what it's like as an online learner.

The program had on-call technology helpers and also provided useful laminated sheets with the basics of the digital technology in classrooms. Microphones didn't work at the outset and then a camera at the back of the room wasn't working. There was a definite need for backup hardware so a broken camera or other hardware could be swapped out, without waiting for it to be repaired by the manufacturer, which could take weeks or months.

Joy said that teachers need practical experience with the technology, with teaching both in-person and online learners prior to starting their classes. She has observed that some teachers need to learn the basics of how to use digital technology. She said that the initial training she received was useful, but that it could have been better tailored to teachers of ESL classes, that the presenters appeared to wrongly assume this would be for lecture-style classes. She added that she would love to see what other teachers do, for example, through videos of other HyFlex teachers teaching. As a HyFlex teacher herself, she added, she would like to know what makes HyFlex fun?

Implementation: Lessons Learned

Data Collected for Program Improvement

Joy looked at learner attendance and data from Burlington English's reports to gauge HyFlex's impact. She also entered students' grades in Blackboard. She noted that while formative assessment was easy with in-person learners, it was harder with online learners. She had to make sure to call on those who were online. Joy did not know of any plans by the college to evaluate the HyFlex model.

Benefits

The main benefit of using Hyflex, Joy said, is the flexibility it allows students. She said, "When it works correctly, it allows students to stay actively engaged with a class even when they have barriers to being physically present, such as the student I currently have who started class in-person, but needed to travel to Puerto Rico for a month and continues to attend virtually while she is there."

Challenges

Joy found these general challenges: the need for professional development and training specific to HyFlex models; onboarding learners; staff resistance or reluctance; classroom management when teachers had both in-person and online learners; engaging both in-person and online learners during class; and tech support for teachers and learners. She described managing an ESL class using the HyFlex model as a particular challenge. Doing learner pairing and group work, for example, was difficult, especially in a large-group setting. In groups ─ and pairing work — Joy matched in-person with in-person learners and online with online learners because it took longer to prepare these matches for a mixed (in-person and online) group. Although she tried to think about who she needed to check in with first, the online groups could be more difficult to teach. The quality of assessments was lower because her attention was so divided between the online and in-person learners.