



Creating Engagement and Connection in Hybrid Courses

Although most colleges and universities have reopened their campuses for the 2021-22 academic year, the return has been anything but ‘back to normal.’ Ongoing Covid outbreaks have forced institutions to adopt new health and safety protocols, which have limited campus activities and caused some classes to move online temporarily. Longer-term consequences of the past year are also underway, as institutions diversify teaching, learning, and working modalities to include in-person, remote, and hybrid.

Many institutions are moving towards hybrid learning models, which give students the flexibility to choose between synchronous online, asynchronous online, and in-person learning options. Some colleges are even offering “hyflex” courses, which support both in-class and online students in the same section

Planning and teaching hybrid higher-ed courses is a new experience for many educators. In many cases, they’re quickly learning that designing a course that’s just as effective for in-person students and those connecting remotely can be challenging. However, over the past several months, some best practices have emerged that allow both educators and their students to thrive in the hybrid learning environment.

Here is what some professionals in higher education had to say about how to design and teach hybrid courses that engage students and cultivate the connections that form the core of any higher-ed community.



Connecting with students from a distance

One critical hurdle that must be addressed up-front is the ability to engage students remotely, says Kate Novak, Ed.D., a professor at [UPenn GSE](#) and an international education consultant. Creating relationships with students is important in any setting but particularly important in remote learning environments. Students need to have a strong sense of who their teachers are and even why they teach, says Novak, who stresses the importance of creating a strong instructor presence. “Your students have to know that you are ‘there’ and your instructor presence is tremendously important in making sure they know they can contact you for support and ask you for help when needed,” she says.

Stacy Haynes, Ed.D., LPC, ACS is an adjunct professor of psychology at [Rowan College of South Jersey](#) and has taught courses for the past 15 years, for several years online classes only. “The new model of hybrid and Zoom are changing the look of college,” she says. For her classes, she says, she uses videos from YouTube frequently to help engage her audience through Zoom. She has open discussions through chat. “I find students who may never have participated in class are now participating in the chat,” she says.

Haynes also appreciates the ability that teaching hybrid higher-ed courses provides to instructors to show students their environments. “I have had class from my private practice office or from my basement office,” she says. In addition, Haynes takes advantage of discussion boards during the week to add opportunities for additional conversation and “to make up for the in-class dialogue that normally would happen in a classroom.” Zoom and hybrid courses, Haynes says, “are making a connection to students similar to in-class teaching.”

Establishing an effective learning environment

Matthew Wright, PhD, is an associate professor and chair of the physics department at [Adelphi University](#) in New York. Last year wasn't a good year, says Wright, who adds that “2021 hasn't started off too hot either.” Teaching in this environment, he says, is difficult. To cope, he says: “The number one and number two rules I have learned from teaching during the pandemic is to be flexible and continuously engage students.”

Wright points out that students have other things going on besides their classroom activities. Recognizing the different walks of life and responsibilities they have, he says he tries to be as flexible as possible and offer multiple options when he can. Hybrid lesson plans shouldn't just be focused on course content, he says. “It is important to take time and talk to each student, if possible, to find out where they are.”



“Give them as many opportunities as possible for them to share their situations with you so you can help them out,” Wright advises. It is also important to ensure that students are prepared to master the digital environment, Novak says. That means making sure students have the tools or supplies needed for the course—and that they know what to do with these tools and how to use them. Access, she says, is key.

“When delivering a lesson and your goals, consider the range of possible ways that students will access this delivery,” Novak recommends. “What options and choices can you provide so that your students can access the plan either digitally or technically?” Building technology considerations into lesson planning will make it easier for both instructors and students to access and accomplish the goals of each lesson, she says.

Using technology to humanize learning formats

Nadia Ibrahim-Taney is a university career coach and lecturer teaching students how to get hired and be successful in the professional workplace. Teaching hasn’t changed much over the past 100 years, she says, but it’s certainly changing now.

“What we are seeing is a move towards cooperative education and learning in the classroom meaning students are learning from peers, through guest speakers, or outside classroom sources like podcasts or hands-on experience through internships,” Ibrahim-Taney says.

With the shift to a virtual or hybrid learning environment, Ibrahim-Taney says that she has stopped “lecturing to my students.” Instead, she says, she creates recorded lectures and reserves live classroom time for activities, conversation and collaboration.

Her hybrid teaching strategies include consideration of students’ wellbeing and mental health. “I make it a point to incorporate check-ins and mental-health focused activities into my lesson plan because as much as I am teaching my students how to do something, I want to give them the space to feel safe and supported.”

Russell L. Meek, Ph.D., and visiting professor of Old Testament at William Tennent School of Theology also makes use of videos in his hybrid higher-ed courses. He uses short videos in three ways, he says:

- **To summarize the objectives and assignments**
- **To offer encouragement to students and demonstrate how the material covered in the current week has impacted my day-to-day life**
- **To provide insight into the “daily life of your professor”**

Meek’s day in the life videos are short videos that share whatever he is doing with his family that week. “These are short, silly, and mostly unrelated to the course,” he says. “I use them as a way to connect on an emotional and personal level with students.

Use student feedback when planning

Michael Garbade is the founder of [Ledu Education Ecosystem](#), a learning ecosystem for future technology topics. “What I have learned from the experience of teaching hybrid classrooms is that engaging in small group and individual discussions with the students helps me a lot in making a lesson plan for a hybrid classroom,” says Garbade. He says he’s noticed that discussions help both him and his students get to know each other better. He seeks feedback from students about how he can make the hybrid classroom and the learning environment more effective. “It allows me to know them personally and give and get in-person feedback,” he says. “The students also get personalized support to improve their concentration and learning during a hybrid class.

Good hybrid classroom lessons will have built-in check-ins, breakout rooms, and even one-on-one tutoring sessions even if they’re very brief, says Fayz. For hybrid classrooms, he recommends:

- **Preplanning to ensure teachers are getting the most out of their rare in-person time.**
- **Soliciting feedback from students ahead of time about what they miss about in-person learning or what they need to cover in person**
- **Plan fun, engaging activities—experiments, show-and-tell interactives—that students can’t do at home**
- **Take advantage of resources available to help support hybrid learning—like prerecorded lectures or assignments requiring online research**





Parting Thoughts

All of the adjustments and experimentation with hybrid teaching strategies seem to be paying off for educators who are finding that hybrid teaching can really work well.

Ibrahim-Taney, for example, says that her new approaches for engaging students in hybrid teaching settings are paying off. "My students are more consistently attending classes, more engaged, talkative and social with me and their peers," she says. "I honestly believe they are learning more and having fun actually doing it even with the challenges of virtual environments."

Ibrahim-Taney's advice for other teachers is to "be flexible and open to new ways of connecting with your students and connecting students to your content." Students, she says, "want engagement, not sitting and listening to lectures and reading academic textbooks." While this is still part of the experience, it shouldn't, she says, be the entire experience.

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