

Transcription for

THE KEY: INSIDE HIGHER ED

INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 91

THE PROS AND CONS OF HYFLEX INSTRUCTION

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(UPBEAT MUSIC)

DOUG LETTERMAN:

During the pandemic, many colleges and universities embraced a form of blended learning called HyFlex to mixed reviews at best. Is that likely to be part of colleges' instructional strategies going forward? Hello and welcome to The Key, Insight Higher Ed's news and analysis Podcast. I'm Doug Letterman, editor, and co-founder of Inside Higher Ed and host of The Key. Happy Fall and thanks for being here. Today's conversation is about HyFlex learning in which students in a classroom learn synchronously alongside a cohort of peers studying remotely. HyFlex, which blends the terms hybrid and flexible, has been around for more than 15 years offered primarily in graduate courses. But it moved from something of a fringe phenomenon to the mainstream, at least temporarily during the COVID-19 pandemic as colleges brought students back to their physical campuses, but needed to provide flexibility so that students who are sick or otherwise unable to return to their classroom could continue their educations.

The experience was to put it kindly imperfect. Professors struggled to teach equitably both to those in the physical classroom and to those studying remotely. Today's episode explores whether HyFlex remains a viable option at a time when many students want more flexibility and when and how they learn. And many colleges continue to experiment with new ways of reaching potential learners. I'm joined for the discussion by two professors who have both taught in the HyFlex format and done research on its impact. Enilda Romero-Hall is an Associate Professor in the Learning Design and Technology Program at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville who started teaching HyFlex before the pandemic and got her PhD in a doctoral program that utilized HyFlex. Alanna Gillis is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at St Lawrence University, who had her first HyFlex experience during the pandemic. Those experiences clearly shaped their views as you'll hear in a minute. Before we begin, here's a quick message from Kaplan, which is the sponsor of this week's episode.

SPEAKER:

This episode of The Key is sponsored by Kaplan, which serves as a multipurpose strategic partner to universities across the globe, delivering more than \$1 billion in annual economic impact to its partners by helping them grow, diversify and innovate.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

Here's my discussion with Enilda Romero-Hall and Alanna Gillis. Enilda and Alanna, welcome to The Key. Thanks for taking the time to be here.

ENILDA ROMERO-HALL:

Thanks for having me.

ALANNA GILLIS:

Thanks so much for having us.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

Tell us a little bit about your backgrounds and how you come at this conversation about HyFlex. Enilda maybe start with you.

ENILDA ROMERO-HALL:

I am an associate professor at the University of Tennessee Knoxville. And I come to this conversation as someone who has been a student in a HyFlex format, I did my doctoral degree in a HyFlex format. But

then during the pandemic, and actually a little bit prior to the pandemic, I've also had some experience teaching in a HyFlex format, then transitioned to also investigating more about this type of instructional modality. So, doing some research and publishing a little bit on the topic.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

Alanna.

ALANNA GILLIS:

So, I'm an Assistant Professor in sociology at a small liberal arts college in upstate New York. And so all of my experience from this is coming from teaching undergraduate courses and sociology about inequality. I didn't start using HyFlex, I wasn't aware of its existence until the pandemic like many instructors. And I taught five out of the six of my courses in the 2020-2021 year in HyFlex modality with basically no training. But I got to the point where I sort of understood the basics enough that I was starting to informally coach some of my colleagues on it. And I ultimately conducted some research about it to sort of understand it in this undergraduate context, particularly issues around equity and engagement.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

It's perfect because you both are typical. Alanna, I think you're right, that you're probably more typical in having been introduced to this during the pandemic, probably not under the best circumstances. And Enilda you have a little bit more experience and probably done under better conditions, which may be affects how you both come at this. And so maybe Enilda why don't you start in a little bit by talking about what your experiences have been and how you view HyFlex as an emergent instructional model in times of emergency, which is obviously part of how it's used? But I think hopefully those are gonna come and go and we'll see how it works as an instructional model generally.

ENILDA ROMERO-HALL:

As a graduate student, I was very fortunate. I did my doctoral degree at Old Dominion University. They have the Gorton building which is fully dedicated to HyFlex Instruction. It is outfitted with all the technology and technological support that is needed in that type of modality. So, you have individual microphones for every student, you have cameras that follow students around. It does take a significant amount of commitment from the instructor, and it also needs a lot of attention in terms of how many students will you have in your classroom in that type of environment. How many students do you have in presence with you and how many students are online? And how do you engage those two students, like do I have a monitor in which I can see my classmates at a distance, then I have a different monitor in which I can see the instruction? So, that was my experience as a graduate student, which was completely different to my experience as an instructor teaching in times of pandemic in which I was in a classroom and all I have is my computer station, I have students who are face to face, and there's no way for them to see each other or we're managing just one classroom.

So, the way I see it, in times of pandemic, institutions were trying to make magic happen with very limited resources. So, it was not the same experience, it was not the same social presence in the classroom. There's not the same level of communication, there's probably feelings of isolation for some of the students who are not being brought into the classroom discussion in a way that is equitable for everyone who wants to participate and communicate. There's also the pedagogical challenges of how do I maneuver assignments and activities for my students face-to-face versus those that are online.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

Having had experience as a student but participating in a HyFlex classroom in good circumstances, were you able to bring tactics or strategies to bear on the imperfect situation that you had as an instructor that gave you and maybe your students an edge over those who were dealing with this for the first time? And if so, can you share what any of those might be?

ENILDA ROMERO-HALL:

I have experience teaching online and I feel like that brought in a different perspective for me. I think that having that knowledge and experience and having some experience teaching online, does give me some knowledge and skills that I brought in to think, OK, well, there's this power dynamic between my students that are face to face, who may dominate the conversation versus the students who are online who want to engage in the conversation, and how do I make space for the students that are online. Also, how do I anticipate what students are gonna be face-to-face versus what students are gonna be online because that's the hybrid flexibility of the modality? So, trying to plan for that was also something that I had to think about. In terms of simple things like hardware, I had to go to my IT department and ask them for a speaker that I could pass around my students so that the students in the back of the classroom could be easily hear by those that were online, as well. So, there were things that because of that experience I was able to consider and accommodate for and I think that it made for a decent experience given the circumstances.

But I do want to say that I felt that institutions were trying to stretch too much in times in which really, everyone was just trying to survive. To some extent, some of us are still trying to survive.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

Alanna you as an instructor, I know you are not hidebound, you seem to have done a fair bit of online teaching. It's not like you came into this as somebody who'd only lectured for 40 years or whatever. I think those are some of the people who had the hardest time with this transition. Tell us a little bit about sort of your experiences and how they shaped your views on HyFlex.

ALANNA GILLIS:

Having never had the experience as a student, there not being very many resources. I think a lot of the literature was a lot more about graduate programs that have done this. In particular, I as an instructor was really concerned about ideas around how to do active learning activities and build class community and sociology. In my courses, talking about inequality, I'm constantly having us engage with these really deep critical ideas. And the only way that students are really gonna be willing to open up and explore these topics is if they feel like a safe part of a community. And how do you do that if that community is not together, either all online together or all in the classroom together? And so, at first, I was thinking through this problem in terms of technologically. All my university provided was a good microphone, a good speaker, a document camera. So, they sort of provided the basics that we needed. The classrooms are small enough that students could generally speak up from the back of the classroom and still be heard.

But my big thing is I have students spend a lot of time working in small groups. And so my question was, how do I structure those small groups? At first, I was trying to have students... So, students in the classroom would bring their laptops or use a phone and join Zoom to participate in small group discussions. That ways that we were actually bridging and connecting the community between the students who were remote and the students who were in-person. But what I found is that the students

in-person really resented that, they absolutely despised having to talk to their remote peers. And as a result, they talked a lot less. And they talked about how uncomfortable it was to be in a classroom where maybe their group was still talking but other groups were done, or the people in the classroom weren't the ones speaking. And so they're speaking into silence, and they hated it. And so they participated less. And so I started thinking through, OK, next semester, how can I adapt this in different ways?

I still want there to be that cohesive class community. And so the next semester I did more of sometimes they had to talk to remote peers, sometimes they could talk to other students who were in-person. I really never found that balance because then when I tried in a different course, having remote students talk to each other, in-person students talk to each other, the remote students rightly felt they weren't really part of the classroom experience. For me, that was a big problem, not just because those students weren't learning as much, or really weren't able to be part of those core conversations as much, but also in terms of the equity issues. Who are the students who are likely to be remote compared to in-person? Those are the students who are struggling more socially, economically. And so they're having the transportation issues, or they're having to balance working more for pay, and making it harder to come into the classroom. Or in particular students with physical or mental health disabilities that they're having to miss class because of some of those disabilities.

And I was finding that those were the students who were then getting the worst experience. And so to me, I felt like I was really doing a disservice were students who most sort of needed the extra support, we're sort of getting the worst end of it. It's really hard as an instructor, we're human beings. And when there's a face in front of us in the classroom, it's really hard to not cater to what those people are most wanting. And I used tricks. Like I said things and full class discussions, we're gonna trade off every other time. Like if someone in class has just spoken, we're gonna wait until someone on Zoom speaks. I mean, there's tricks you can use but at the end of the day, it didn't feel like a cohesive community and it didn't feel like everyone got an equal education.

ENILDA ROMERO-HALL:

I believe that especially when students don't know what they're getting into, or they're being told that this is what they're going to have when that's not really the experience that they sign up for, I think that rings this level of challenges because I imagine that our liberal college institution, students are expecting a full face-to-face type of instruction, they were not signing up for HyFlex Instruction, there was something that was done because of the pandemic, and managing the number of students that were in the classroom. So, I feel that that already brings on many different challenges. This is not what I signed up for.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

There's really two conversations here. There's how effective was HyFlex as a practice in these emergency times? And I don't think there's a lot of doubt that it was really mixed at best. Hard for instructors for all the reasons that you guys have cited and not a good experience for students. And I don't think we can underestimate what you talked about, Enilda, about sort of expectations. None of us do particularly well when we're thrown into situations that weren't of our choosing. And that's what a lot of the pandemic-era education was all about. So, it's fine to think and talk about the use of HyFlex going forward. But we are moving ahead. And the question I'm most interested in is, to what extent is HyFlex a viable instructional mode going forward? And there will certainly continue to be times when

colleges might benefit from using this format as one strategy in those situations in an era that isn't characterized first and foremost by emergency situations. One of the things I've been thinking about a lot is student choice.

Even many of the students who didn't like what they experienced educationally during the COVID-driven last couple of years, liked the flexibility of when and how they learned. And do you think there's gonna be more interest among students and at least having options? And HyFlex is obviously one way of giving students flexibility, but only if it's a good option. So, I'd love it if we could shift a bit in that direction.

ALANNA GILLIS:

Yeah, absolutely. So, one of the things that I think about going forwards, HyFlex, I think, made sense in some of the conditions that we had in the pandemic. But one of the big questions that I do have going forward is, does this truly bring something that we need that goes beyond the tools that we would have otherwise? So, for instance, if we're thinking about, OK, if the response is we create community among the remote students and then among the in-person students, why is that answer not just you teach some courses in-person and some courses remotely? Like what does HyFlex bring that a fully remote course couldn't bring that level of flexibility when it's needed? Because in that case, I think from the instructor standpoint, it feels kind of like teaching two different classes. You're having to manage different styles, different modalities of learning, you're having to basically manage different classroom communities all within one class, which is not only more difficult for the instructor, it also just takes a lot more time.

Time that's generally not compensated extra. And so I think one of the questions that I think about is what does this truly offer something that can't be had with just continuing to refine our existing modalities in terms of remote instruction for students who need to be attending remotely?

DOUG LETTERMAN:

It sounds like what you're saying is you think it would be preferable to just say, in this course, we're gonna have a section or sections that are in-person and a section or sections that are taught remotely, and you can do one or the other, putting aside those who are gonna continue to have true need COVID disability whatever, for flexibility. I guess one of the things I'm trying to get at is, how much should institutions be expected to provide or this more skeptical view might be catered to students who just want to be able to decide on a particular morning I don't wanna commute 20 miles to class today, I'd rather attend remotely? And I think we've seen institutions largely return to the pre-pandemic days of just saying, this course is at 10am, be there or be square. And I don't know. That's one of the things I'm still uncertain of is whether and how much student expectations have changed, and how much institutions are gonna be expected to respond to it. So, Enilda how do you think about some of this stuff?

ENILDA ROMERO-HALL:

My perspective is a little bit different because, in my experience, HyFlex can provide opportunities and experiences for students, not for just students that want to decide in the morning of do I wanna go in-person or do I wanna attend from my home, but it provides opportunities for students who may be in Alaska and wanna take a class from the University of Tennessee Knoxville. It can provide opportunities for students who are abroad for military service or something and wanna join your class at your institution in the United States. So, it's not just for students who are there locally, is for students who are literally in other geographical regions in rural areas where they may not have access to the type of

course or program that maybe offered at those institutions. So, I think that there's a different perspective that we need to consider, as well. I do agree that it does require a tremendous amount of work on the part of the instructor. And I also think that there's a lot of resources and support that institutions need to think about.

So, I think moving forward, the conversation really needs to be at the institutional level as to how do we want to envision HyFlex at our institution? What are the resources that our faculty going to need? What are the resources that students going to need in order to make this happen? And again, those resources can be infrastructure that is gonna need to be allocated for this type of instruction. Some of those resources may need to be professional development for faculty. It may be additional instructional design staff that needs to be hired to support faculty that are gonna be teaching in that format. And it may also need to be instructional technology support that are you going to ensure that students who are remote can join in that can ensure that classroom are properly equipped and are functionally adequately when classes are in session. So, I think those are the conversations that we need to have moving forward.
(SOFT MUSIC)

SPEAKER:

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DOUG LETTERMAN:

I'm speaking today with Alanna Gillis of St Lawrence University and Enilda Romero-Hall of the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Enilda, the benefits that you ascribe to HyFlex in terms of access for people who are place-bound, et cetera, are some of the historical benefits that we've long linked to online learning generally. So, one solution for the student you described being in Alaska is just making sure that there's an online section or online course available for students like that. What we're really talking about, to me is a sense of purposefulness. Are we doing HyFlex for a reason because we think it's got either pedagogical or access learning advantages as opposed to a fix that we think may or may not be the right fix or the best fix? Alanna, thoughts about that?

ALANNA GILLIS:

So, I'm thinking about this in terms of exactly what you're just raising is what is the problem that we're facing, and is HyFlex the right answer? Because I think we can make HyFlex work well enough but does that mean that it should be something that we're investing money into? I mean, we know that we're in a huge era of austerity for higher education. And so having discussions about the ideal training and technology that's necessary for HyFlex, that's a lot of money that universities would not be investing in something else. And so to me, it's really important that we don't just say, what do we need to make HyFlex work? But we take a step back and say, what are the problems that our students are facing, and what are the best ways to solve them? And if HyFlex is the answer, then we need to make sure we're investing all of those very things that she was just talking about. But if instead, those lead us to different solutions, then I think that jumping on the bandwagon of saying technology can solve these problems without considering whether they should be solved a different way, there already is somewhat, and there's gonna be an increase in tendency to use HyFlex to over enroll courses that typically met in-person, you're bound to the number of students who could sit in that physical space.

And instead, with HyFlex you can dramatically increase the course size, and still have that professor teaching the same number of courses. The number of courses isn't gonna change but now they're essentially just teaching two classes but only getting paid for one. And so it worries me that HyFlex could be a way to continue to actually promote austerity in ways that are going to be worse for students' education rather than better if we're not focusing on what is the problem that we're trying to solve here.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

So, Enilda I wanna... So, the situation you described about your doctoral program sounds like the optimal use of HyFlex in many ways. You all went in knowing what it was all about and had made that choice. It provided access to people who were potentially far-flung. I don't know, you can tell us that. And it was done right with the technology, with the training, et cetera. Certainly seems like that use of it makes sense going forward to the extent it's all sort of plan. The larger question and the reason I wanted to have this conversation, 'cause it's something I've been thinking about a lot is the problem that HyFlex clearly is a solution to is the one I was describing before of students wanting flexibility and institutions trying to find a way to provide it. That may or may not be a good enough reason to do it. And it's certainly not gonna be a good solution if it's not done well. So, anyway, I'm just curious how you're thinking about that.

ENILDA ROMERO-HALL:

First of all, I wanna say that I never see technology as the solution. I am always the kind of person that is skeptical, and always thinking about different paths. So, technology is definitely not always the solution to all of our problems. I do think that when we think about HyFlex, it really is what you just mentioned. It's just giving that student that flexibility, and that option of considering the ways in which they can come into their learning experience. I believe for some students, it just provides that additional level of social presence. Not all students want asynchronous instruction. Many students have given their opinion, and what they really want is some sort of balance in between asynchronous and synchronous sessions, in which they can come together with other individuals, whether it is virtually or sharing physical space and interacting with them because again, they just want to have that level of social presence in the classroom. So, I think that that really is the reason why we engage in HyFlex because it provides access because it provides social process for students, it gives them flexibility.

But I also think that instructors, institutions need to think about whether that is something that they are prepared to offer to the students and whether it fits for their student body. Some institutions, that may not be the format that they need to go because that's not why students go to that specific institution. In that institution, students go for they want the face-to-face instruction. In other institutions, in other contexts, students want online asynchronous instruction. So, again, there needs to be an understanding of what are the needs of the students, and what are the possibilities and support that the institution need to provide to their faculty.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

And they certainly need to decide if they're gonna offer it. They need to do it right, and they need to do all the things that both of you have talked about in terms of the right technology in the classrooms, the right preparation of instructors, the right preparation of students. And Alanna back to you.

ALANNA GILLIS:

I think another thing if we're thinking about what do universities need to do it right is not just thinking

about the technology that's needed in the classroom, but also the technology that students need access to. To me, it's totally impractical to think about doing HyFlex if your students don't have access to the technology that's necessary. And to me, I mean, does this mean we need to be providing technology stipends to students? It depends entirely on your student body. But I work at institution that has a generally wealthy student body, and even some of those students, I mean, their computer breaks, their internet goes out, they have power outages that my area doesn't have, 'cause they're in a different area. And so even among a more financially well-off student body, I had significant technology issues that usually happened on student and not my end in addition to having a space where they could actually join class that was private and quiet enough to do so. And so students who were sharing rooms with roommates, or who were in their family homes where the dog is barking in the background, their younger siblings are working in the background, they then felt like they couldn't participate in class because it was so loud and it wasn't private.

And so I think that we also have to make sure that students actually have the resources, both technology and spaces where they can meaningfully join class. I mean, every student in my class remembers the infamous time where there was a student who all of a sudden his roommates are walking in the background in his underwear. And that student then didn't engage well. For several weeks he was so fierce about it. And we have to think about do the students have the resources they need. And instead of institutions assuming they do, we would need to build that into any policies.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

Do you think institutions like St Lawrence and others need to be thinking more about different modes of instructional delivery if we should be providing students with more options for when and how they get their learning? I guess maybe, first of all, do you think we should? And if so, what might be better options for providing that, and then I'll go back to Enilda.

ALANNA GILLIS:

So, I do think that this vary so much by institution type. And so I can speak to what I've experienced at a small liberal arts college, again, it has a residential component, except during the pandemic year, students are required to live on campus all four years. Students are paying enormous amounts of money to come here. And they do expect the in-person education. And so I think for institutions like mine, I think the question is more so how can we adapt the modalities that we have so that we're actually meeting student needs better. And so professors who still have attendance policies that say, if you miss two classes, your letter grades gonna drop by this much, if you miss three classes, it's gonna drop by this much, are absolutely not reflecting the realities that students have today. And so I think that we do need to be thinking about additional ways that our students can engage and learn. And we need to be building those into our policies so that we're creating equitable policies so that students of all opportunities, all resources, all health statuses, are able to meaningfully engage.

And so when my students have to miss class for several weeks because one of them is having heart issues and is potentially about to have heart surgery, I mean, the answer for her isn't HyFlex, the answer for her is she needs to take some time off of class, and then have meaningful ways to be able to make that back up. I mean, a lot of these traditional policies were never equitable to begin with. But we're finally recognizing that and I think that we need to do more to push to make sure that we have more flexibility within our in-person instruction because there's really not demand at institutions like St Lawrence for remote learning. That's not why students are there. One of my worries about the

increasing expansion of HyFlex is the worry that it's gonna reproduce ableist assumptions that students should always be in class because the idea is if you can join class from anywhere, a lot of professors are treating that as, OK, well, then there's almost no good reason to miss class. And so students across the country have tried to join HyFlex classes from their hospital beds, from family homes, at funerals because they feel like they're supposed to be joining class because there's this opportunity to.

And I worry that by providing this increased access, it's creating this mindset where just because you're not physically able to be in the classroom doesn't mean there's not an excuse for you to be here. And of course, individual instructors, I mean, I can tell my students again and again, please focus on your recovery don't come to class. But overwhelmingly, these students are receiving these pressures from somewhere that they're still supposed to be trying to join regardless of their circumstances. And so I think one of the things we have to be careful about is making sure that we still provide an opportunity to say, there's actually still times where you shouldn't come to class.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

Enilda, last word.

ENILDA ROMERO-HALL:

I've looked into the literature of HyFlex Instruction significantly, and I think that Alanna brought in a great point about the number of students that would be allowed to be in a HyFlex classroom, and what decisions institutions are making about what classes are we gonna have. How many students are we going to allow? Do we increase the number of students? And I feel that those are conversations that need to occur between administration and faculty and there's definitely a strong need to do further research. Institutions that are doing HyFlex are doing it right, and what are they doing that can be replicated at other institutions? What can we take from their experiences? And what are the challenges that they face? We're having this conversation because we have a lack of research, and that's what we need to do. We need to do more research on this topic. So, I think that there are many challenges that we have still yet to understand and to clarify. We need to think that this is an approach that all institutions need to take.

I definitely think that that's not it. We need to think about context and we need to think about how different contexts can consider HyFlex. And others, it may not be what they need to do.

DOUG LETTERMAN:

That was Enilda Romero-Hall, Associate Professor in the Learning Design and Technology Program at the University of Tennessee Knoxville, and Alana Gillis, Assistant Professor of Sociology at St Lawrence University, discussing their experiences with HyFlex learning, and their suggestions for when and how colleges might use it effectively going forward. I'm finding myself a bit obsessed with questions about what students want from their colleges and universities educationally now and in the future, and what institutions can and should be providing. I have way more questions than answers. And I'm hoping that putting these questions out there, and inviting those of you who have thoughts of your own to share them with me, is helpful as you work through all of these issues on your campuses. Whether you're an individual faculty member thinking about whether HyFlex is the best approach for your own classroom, or campus administrator or staff member trying to plot your institution's strategy, I hope this discussion has provided a little bit of insight.

That's all for this week's episode. I'll be back next week with a conversation with Anya Kamenetz taking a look back at her 2010 book 'DIY U'. Until then, I'm Doug Letterman. Stay well and stay safe. (UPBEAT MUSIC)