

BLOGGING FOR GOLDEN:

"The Hy-flex Classroom: Tips for Instructors "

Paula Smith-Hawkins, Ph.D.

What is a Hy-flex classroom?

The University of Buffalo Educational Design Collaborations describes a Hybrid-Flexible or HyFlex course as a “student-centered model of class delivery that can integrate in-class instruction, online synchronous video sessions, or asynchronous content delivery. As an instructor, you deliver the class as you would in a regular classroom, but students may attend in person, participate in the class through video conferencing, or watch a recording of the class session.” <https://www.buffalo.edu/edc/AcademicPreparedness/HyflexModel.html>

I tend to feel like I am on television in the Hy-flex classroom, as the host of a live audience show. Positioned in front of the camera, microphone base clipped to my clothes, I speak to both to the students in the classroom and those on the large smart board behind me. It is a new experience for me in this pandemic era.

Trained in the “sage on the stage” model, I know how to do lecture hall teaching. Standing in front of a group of students feels natural now. I have also witnessed the advent of more inclusive classroom design in which we cluster students around tables to facilitate discussion and collaboration, or circular set-up to facilitate class discussions. I have taught online for years, both asynchronous classes and real-time through various videoconferencing software.

But the Hy-flex classroom configuration is new. It emerged during the pandemic as a solution to challenges institutions faced in accommodating those students on-campus, while reaching those who for numerous reasons could not come to the physical campus. Teaching in this Hy-flex setting can feel daunting and disorienting. I have a few suggestions on how to manage this new teaching space.

My tips for success in the Hy-flex classroom include consideration for such challenges as preparation, audio and visual arrangements, pedagogy, and class practices and policies. This list is neither exhaustive or exclusive but aimed to provide readers with some tools and insights into the challenges and benefits of Hy-flex teaching.

PREPARATION: I always check out my room a day or so before the semester begins, just to get oriented. I found changes in rooms where I taught in for years: new furniture (different configurations), new projection and lighting systems, checking out the sound. Even slight changes in a classroom set-up alter the way I teach and influence my comfort level and the

Dr. Paula Smith-Hawkins for GOLDEN; find me at: <https://paulasmithhawkinsphd.com/>

students' experience. However, the Hy-flex classroom constitutes a change on a whole new level.

The Hy-flex classroom requires a serious time investment to prepare you for teaching prior to the start of the semester. Your IT staff will prove crucial in conducting test runs of how to long in, orient cameras, train you on sound equipment, and test the smart board meeting interface. It is worth your time to practice before the semester begins, experimenting with lighting, camera angles, sound, and how you plan to incorporate videos, lecture documents, attendance an engagement.

For example, how do you plan to take attendance? Downloading the online attendee list is easy but you need to know how to do it. Some systems require downloads before the meeting has ended. You may need to set aside time to merge the traditional sign-in sheet (passed around to on-campus students) with the downloaded attendee list. Or will you require all students to log into the videoconferencing software available on their phones? What constitutes participation for both on-campus and on-line students in the Hy-flex classroom? Consider policies carefully and articulate these clearly to students at the start of the semester.

VISUAL: Confession, I do not care as much about hardware as software. As a person with vision issues, I have never been good with a camera. However, the camera position, angle, and lighting in a Hy--flex classroom influence both online and on-campus experience for everyone. Make familiarizing yourself with the system part of your pre-semester orientation. Prepare yourself to alter how you move in the classroom. I like to walk around and talk to students. Between the camera and audio, I now make certain that the online students can see me. I speak to them directly and ask them to interact, much like speaking to different parts of a large room. I am also constantly soliciting feedback to ensure my students can see me.

AUDIO: One of my favorite Deans called me into her office during my first teaching year. "Your students complain that your voice is too soft, and you talk too quickly." I took voice lessons and learned to project better, as well as slow down and make certain I articulated words clearly. It improved my evaluations and students' work. The Hy-flex classroom adds a new challenge for any of us struggling to make sure that students can hear us. University classrooms were not generally designed with acoustics in mind, let alone televised experiences. Speak clearly and at a volume that students can hear you.

I had to consider another factor with sound in teaching in the Hy-flex classroom. Students still struggled to hear me even when I spoke quite loudly and clearly. Our excellent IT Team found that portable mics work best for the online students; and mics do not negatively affect those in the classroom. My mic attaches easiest to a lapel and the unit to a waistband, so I carefully consider my wardrobe in the Hy-flex classroom. A jacket with a lapel and a solid waistband anchors the mic. In other words, the Hy-flex classroom changed my clothing choices. Who knew?

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Another audio consideration: for safety I wear masks in the physical classroom. This can make it even harder for students to understand me, and for me to understand what they say. I found that repeating student comments and questions improves comprehension for everyone (online, on-campus, and me!). Think about how you will get feedback from students about visual and audio issues in the classroom, and how you will adapt.

PEDAGOGY: How do you want the class to feel and flow? This depends on several factors: class size, discipline, pedagogy, and subject. It also depends on how many online vs. on-campus students sit in your classroom. I found a different class atmosphere when most of my students came to campus, than last year when most joined online. I use our videoconference software chats extensively. For example, before each class I begin by sending the agenda to students in the online chat. Online students would not see any writing I placed on the classroom whiteboard, so I use the chats and projection systems within the videoconferencing software. I encourage the use of emojis and GIFs from online students to match the in-class responses I solicit from on-campus students.

Do you consider your requirements for student camera use? If your university requires cameras on, do you offer support for creating avatars for students who do not wish to appear on camera? These easy add-ons can help students feel more comfortable turning on their cameras.

Some faculty will project materials on the online system. This can feel complicated, in that screen sharing doesn't always work smoothly so I advise preparation here as well as confirming that online students can see what students in the classroom see. I ask my online students to display materials I have placed in the Learning Management System (LMS) for those of us in the classroom. This not only involves online students but helps the in-class students see where they can find the material. You may wish to upload your lecture slides, then un-hide them right before class. Or, try toggling screens – with feedback from online students that they can see everything.

'Less is more' in the Hy-flex classroom. Because I supplement the in-class discussions/lectures with materials in the LMS, I spend less time displaying lecture material in my classes. Allowing the class to vote on a "record the class sessions" also makes our discussions available to students for review, so I focus on an oral presentation in class. I can supplement things online in the LMS for reinforcement, even adding additional videos. Decide what works best for you and be prepared to adjust during the semester.

Plymouth State University Open Learning & Teaching Collaborative offers this excellent resource for considering how to configure the Hy-Flex classroom for teaching. [Four Models for HiFlex Course Design - The Ace Framework \(plymouthcreate.net\)](#) Again, class size, content, discipline, and your pedagogy all play a role in your decisions. These links offer considerations for promoting group work and lab work online. Leaders in digital pedagogy encourage instructors to make time for quiet work and reflection during the class session, too.

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STUFF I DID NOT ANTICIPATE: Students can be on your campus, in other spaces and still come to your class. I understand that many students, deprived on interaction with peers for so long during the pandemic, relish time together on-campus. They attended different classes together. I do not see this as a problem; it is just something I did not anticipate.

Most faculty have a late arrival policy. Would you consider a student who joined online while traveling to campus in-class or late? I count the student as on-time because they are listening. My first few minutes of class typically involve review, instructions, or a discussion of the agenda so a late arrival doesn't miss much if they listen in. I decided that because I allowed students the option of coming to campus and returning to online modality during the semester that I will not count them as tardy.

Remember that the Hy-flex classroom affords flexibility for you as well, should you be unable to attend on-campus. Make sure you have arranged with sometime to turn on the in-class system so you can join your online students in the on-campus classroom. Hey, instructors get flat tires, too!

Finally, do not be surprised if you find yourself a bit more tired than usual after a Hy-flex teaching session. I now appreciate how much energy it takes to host a talk show, speaking to different constituencies experiencing the event through different mediums. Soliciting feedback from students and colleagues helps me a lot. I can make micro-changes when necessary, and transparency with my students helps us overcome challenges. While I might miss snow days, I have found the Hy-flex classroom an engaging and flexible environment for learning.