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Finding Flexibility with HyFlex: Teaching in the Digital Age

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Teachers knew in the summer of 2020 that the next school year would be a new venture in education. After experiencing a rapid shift in delivery of their classes in the spring, teachers across the country sought the best ways to engage students meaningfully in a variety of modalities, knowing that shift might continue to happen in the coming year. As summer gave way to fall, teachers returned to their schools with great anticipation and a bit of uncertainty. Some teachers returned to their classrooms in a virtual environment with all of their students online. Others returned with all of their students in person. Still others returned with a blend:

some students online and some students in person. For those classes that have a blend of online and in-person students at any given time, a flexible approach is needed, a hybrid-flexible or HyFlex model of teaching is the answer, particularly if the students have choice in how they attend and engage in class and they have access to the necessary technology (Beatty, 2019; Ferrero, 2020; Nave, 2020).

The HyFlex learning model is a combination of the hybrid learning model and a flexible learning classroom (Beatty, 2014). The typical hybrid classroom combines both online (whether synchronous or asynchronous) and face-to-face learning. This model pushes students to be independent and self-directed for their own learning (Cybinski & Selvanathan, 2005). As students make decisions about where, when, and even how they will access instruction (a HyFlex approach), they also need to develop this independent and self-directed model of learning. The HyFlex model is student-centered, student-directed, multimodal, involves students in active learning in person and online, and requires full student engagement (Beatty, 2019; Ferrero, 2020).

There are four "fundamental values" in the HyFlex model: learner choice (in the modality), equivalency (in learner outcomes regardless of modality), reusability (of content and activities for the different modalities), and accessibility (to the technology and skills needed to engage; Beatty, 2019; Nave, 2020). This model is similar to the choice board model of instruction that teachers have been using for years. The primary difference is that the choice comes from how the instruction is delivered: in person, online synchronous, or online asynchronous delivery.

Through personal experience, a high school English teacher and one of the authors of this article, started teaching this fall using this model and immediately found the benefits of offering instruction in all three ways: in-person, online synchronously, and online asynchronously (see article and video of her teaching using the HyFlex model at https://www.rcschools.net/apps/news/article/1298279) . She noticed that students in the classroom get the immediate benefit of in-person instruction. They are able to work in groups and are able to engage with one another. Students in distance learning are able to choose how they receive instruction. She found that there is an even split in how students are approaching the instruction with some choosing to attend lessons synchronously and others choosing to attend lessons asynchronously. When students are asked why they have made these choices, some reply that they need the "in person" synchronous instruction to understand what to do and how to engage with the work. Students who attend via online synchronous lessons are also able to participate in "break out" rooms with in-classroom students and "on-line" discussions in "real time" so that they still get the group work experience that happens in a classroom. Students who participate in synchronous instruction generally report feeling more engaged in what is happening even in the online setting because they are present when the instruction occurs. However, students who participate in the work asynchronously are able to work at their own pace. Furthermore, some high school students using asynchronous instruction have found the model allows them to work during the day and participate in school at night. Some students who work in the asynchronous online environment struggle if they are not highly self-motivated to

ensure that videos and instruction are watched and that they are fully participating in all work. She has had to find ways to ensure engagement in videos and instruction that help these students be successful. For example, giving students access to class discussions through video recordings and through using technology tools such as Playposit, an ed-tech tool which requires student engagement with the video rather than passive viewing of the video, or Edpuzzle, a web-based interactive video tool that allows teachers to target specific learning objectives by cropping video. One middle school student who is learning using the HyFlex model via asynchronous and synchronous participation, and who is the daughter of the English teacher/author, shared that access to teacher videos helps her better understand content because she can "rewind" and "rewatch" until she knows she has "gotten" it. By recording and sharing lessons with all students, they have access to what is being taught when they go back to review or do practice homework assignments after the class ends.

When contemplating using the HyFlex model, there are several things that the creator of the HyFlex model, Brian Beatty (Nave, 2020), suggests to consider. For example,

- Can the objectives and learning outcomes of the course be met online?
- Can the students be engaged in all three modalities (in-person, online synchronous, and online asynchronous)?
- If using the Hyflex model in a University setting, does the course have to be designed like a certified online course? (Not necessarily conducive to the Hyflex model)

If the HyFlex model is chosen, it is of utmost importance to record in-person lessons for asynchronous learners. This allows them to have access to in-class discussions. All learning activities and materials need to be digitized or an equivalent made available, which benefits both online and in-person students. When in-person and online synchronous students engage in small group work, summaries can be provided and digitized for asynchronous students to enrich their experience. Additionally, students working at home will need accountability to ensure that they are accessing instructions. Teachers may find tools like Playposit and EdPuzzle, mentioned earlier, beneficial wherein they can assign videos and embed questions into the instruction so that students know that they must still watch the information being given. Furthermore, in-person students need to be encouraged to engage with online content too. They, along with the online students, can post weekly in a learning journal whereby they respond to their own thread in a discussion board (Nave, 2020). By encouraging in-person students to engage with online content, the teacher is able to further establish a strong classroom community so that in-person and online students still participate in sharing ideas and learning together.

Teaching in the HyFlex environment requires advanced planning, constant preparation, a commitment to flexibility, and comparable engagement with students (Beatty, 2019; Ferrero, 2020; Nave, 2020). Students attending class in person must know that the teacher is present and working with them while also attending to the students online at the same time. All lessons and class instruction must be recorded and posted in a timely manner for the asynchronous learners. Assessments must be appropriate for online and in-person learners. It may be important to rethink traditional assessments in favor of projects, student video recordings, blog posts, Socratic

seminars, and Backchannel discussions, which may already be part of the learning activities (Ferrero, 2020). These assessments are performance based thus allowing demonstration of group and individual student knowledge and understanding.

Currently, at the university level there is little research on the effectiveness of using the HyFlex model. One study suggests that when comparing students who attended mostly in person and others mostly online (all in the HyFlex group), students who were in person had higher grades on homework, midterms, and final course grades, though the result was not significant (Miller, Risser, and Griffith, 2013). However, other research found that the mode of delivery does not impact student performance (Rhodes, 2020). For most primary and secondary teachers, this fall (2020) is the first encounter with options in mode of delivery, including teaching in a Hyflex model, so outcomes are yet unknown, however, the evidence from post-secondary education models shows that student performance overall should not be greatly impacted either positively or negatively. Still, this begs the question that if students are given choice in their mode of instruction, could they then have a greater desire and motivation to work towards success?

Teachers of all grade bands have entered a new world of education during the fall of 2020. Technology now extends student choice not only in how they demonstrate mastery of content, but also in how they receive their content. Teachers are now called upon to engage students in this new form of education to help ensure that all students have opportunities regardless of their situations and regardless of their chosen mode of instruction. While it is a challenge, it is also a great opportunity to be part of a movement that could change the face of education for the future.

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