Teaching in a Digital World – How do We Create Learning Opportunities in Hybrid Settings?

Pedagogiskt docenturarbete

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Background

Most teaching in higher education use technology to some extent and teachers communicate with students via e-mail, digital platforms and sometimes even the telephone. However, the pandemic forced us to quickly learn, use and depend on technology in a new way. I am responsible for a doctoral course at Linköping University where students have traditionally been travelling to attend the course from all over the world. Due to the pandemic, I became responsible for the planning and delivery of the course using a hybrid teaching model where students could choose to attend the course on campus or online. This short reflection aims to address challenges that I encountered during this experience.

The term “hybrid learning” or “blended learning”, refers to teaching that use multiple delivery modalities within the same course for example, online materials, in-person lectures or group discussions [1]. However, the course mentioned above and the objective of this short reflection is hybrid learning in terms of using online and in-person course elements simultaneously [2,3]. This type of hybrid teaching has been referred to as Hybrid-Flexible or Synchronomodal learning in the research literature [1]. Thus, students can choose to access all the course modules either online or in-person.

This hybrid model of teaching has several strengths and could, at best, combine the benefits of two very different modalities by offering the flexibility and convenience of distance learning at the same time as offering opportunities for teachers and students to meet in person to discuss and reflect [4]. However, there are also numerous challenges.

This paper therefore specifically aims to discuss and reflect on challenges unique for the hybrid teaching situation and factors that could promote learning in these settings. The text is based on literature found in peer-reviewed journals and personal experience of attempting to plan and perform a hybrid delivered doctoral course.

Findings

Three key challenges are listed below: (1) Promoting student engagement, (2) Balancing multiple acts, and (3) Achieving equal learning opportunities. These are challenges that I encountered through personal experience of hybrid teaching. I have explored further in peer-reviewed journals to position these challenges in the research literature and theory in order to gain knowledge on how to overcome these challenges and ultimately promote learning opportunities.

Promoting student engagement

In the hybrid setting, it was specifically challenging to maintain engagement among online and in-person students simultaneously as the two groups often required different teaching strategies. Limited engagement increased the risk of exclusion or isolation among students and hence an increased risk of reduced learning. For example, students that accessed the classroom online sometimes became more of an audience rather than an active participant in lectures and discussions.

To overcome this challenge, we used several activities that I think contributed to an increased engagement among both online and in-person students. For instance, we incorporated polls and small group discussions throughout the lectures which, at least partly, improved the
learning environment. Interestingly, students attending the course in-person often accessed the course online in order to engage in these activities.

Recent qualitative research suggests several factors to influence student engagement, for example, students’ sense of community, support networks, work-life balance, confidence, and learning approaches. Furthermore, the same study highlights that online engagement among students can be facilitated by both psychosocial factors (e.g., feeling part of a peer community, an engaged teacher and personal confidence) and by structural factors (e.g., course design) [5]. Thus, student engagement needs to be considered during course planning and delivery as well as in course structure and process. Furthermore, Halverson et al [6] highlight the importance of both cognitive (e.g., attention and effort) and emotional (e.g., interest and happiness) aspects of engagement and that these are specifically important for hybrid teaching.

Balancing multiple acts
In the hybrid setting, the teacher must be able to adopt multiple roles for instance, teacher, tech-support (for students with limited experience of online learning), moderator (between online and in-person students). In addition, the teacher must balance multiple sources of information. I remember during one lecture, having five screens in front of me, two screens behind me at the same time as students were communicating with me in-person, via a chat-function and on the screen by raising their hand. This environment was overwhelming, and it was easy to lose sight of the “human student” among all this technology. How do you create learning opportunities in this environment?

A strategy we tested to overcome this challenge was to have two teachers present to share roles and responsibilities. We found that having a resource teacher that worked as a moderator focussing on e.g., questions was helpful. Being two teachers present created an almost panel-like interaction which seemed to make lectures more dynamic promoting further student interaction.

Achieving equal learning opportunities
Learning online and in-person is not the same experience. Although the students could choose how they accessed the course, the pandemic made this less of a choice as some groups of students were not allowed to travel. As a teacher you must, simultaneously, appraise and respond to students’ learning processes which differ between students and between delivery modalities (in-person and online learners). Although this can also be a challenge for online teaching in general, there is an added dimension for the hybrid setting as students within the same course are exposed to different deliveries.

We did not manage to overcome this challenge in a productive way. Research on equal opportunities in online and hybrid teaching at graduate level propose that inequality can influence student performance either by which courses that are accessed or by inequalities in the actual learning environment [7]. Making our doctoral course accessible online opened opportunities for students worldwide, that did not otherwise have the financial or other means to travel to Sweden. This has been illustrated by the increased applications to the course during the pandemic, and still. Only offering the course in-person in the past has evidently favoured a specific group of students. Increased access may be the upside of hybrid learning. However, the challenge of creating equal opportunities across delivery modalities remains.
Recent research has found that a stronger “teaching presence” was perceived during in-person learning compared with online learning [8] illustrating the challenge of equal learning opportunities between delivery modalities. “Teaching presence” is a key domain in the Community of Inquiry theoretical framework. The framework posits that students’ educational experiences, or learning opportunities, are promoted by high perceived social presence (e.g., group cohesion, trusting inter-personal relationships), cognitive presence (e.g., opportunity to construct meaning through discourse and reflection), teaching presence (e.g., ability to deliver clear instruction and facilitate discourse) [9].

Personal reflection and implications

Regarding student engagement, this reflection has highlighted the importance of including course elements that promote perceptions of peer community and emotional facilitators such as interest and curiosity. One of the most commonly cited strengths of our doctoral course has in the past been opportunities to meet and discuss with peers from all over the world. It is clear that the peer community is central for both student engagement as well as the learning environment of the course. For future courses this could be addressed through scheduled informal peer-meets and merging online and in-person learners in groups discussions.

Similar, an increased sense of peer-community and learning among students in the course could contribute to equal learning opportunities for different learners. Indeed, theory propose that social presence in terms of trusting relationships can promote learning in hybrid settings. Thus, this would suggest that any activity that would promote interaction between online and in-person students (such as the ones mentioned above) could contribute to equal learning opportunities. Furthermore, the findings in this reflection stress the importance to optimise the teaching presence and accommodate to both group of learners by perhaps using different strategies for online and in-person students. For example, instruction could be given through several channels to cover students’ differing needs (video, reading material or “live”). Finally, the strategies already put in place e.g., having multiple teachers present for course elements could further contribute to teaching presence by facilitating discourse as well as overcoming the challenge of balancing multiple acts.

References


