

Meeting Students Where They Are: The Opportunities of Hybrid Writing Courses

Project Description

Because our students and our culture increasingly communicate using technology-mediated practices, we need writing courses that help students to critique, practice, and shape these composing processes. At the same time, research demonstrates that students succeed when they have meaningful, face-to-face interactions with faculty and each other. Hybrid courses allow us to do both. As an ASSETT Faculty Fellow, my goal was to look beyond the “latest and greatest” technologies to find intersections between the enduring and the emerging—how might a hybrid writing course help students develop a durable yet nimble framework for communication?

My project involved revising a science-writing course using a “block model” hybrid format to purposefully rotate between F2F and online learning. Unlike the typical framing of online/hybrid courses, the course actually increases faculty/student interaction by using the online blocks as an opportunity to provide individual coaching to students while maintaining a manageable workload for the teacher.

As pressures mount to increase institutional efficiencies by decreasing personalized instruction, I believe this course demonstrates that—with carefully designed pedagogy—we can keep the focus of our courses on what matters: our students. By developing this course, I aimed to establish a model that the PWR might follow with other upper division writing courses. While it is institutionally impractical to adopt this model for all writing sections, we can offer a percentage of sections using this model to give students interested in the hybrid format the opportunity to explore a wider range of composing strategies.

The project came to fruition in Spring of 2018 when I and another colleague taught pilot sections of the hybrid course. The curriculum was designed so that the first four weeks of the semester were spent in a traditional classroom setting, allowing us to develop a sense of community and discuss the key learning goals for the course. The next three weeks were scheduled around online learning with students working in small groups and individually on various writing assignments. But the centerpiece of this online block was a 45-minute individual conference that I held with each student. Students came prepared with a writing self-assessment and drafts of assignments for discussion. Research in composition demonstrates that students need targeted, individualized feedback to improve as writers, but this kind of time-intensive work is often difficult in a traditional classroom. The block hybrid format allows a pedagogical approach that both challenges students to complete writing assignments using a range of communication channels when they’re completing their online work and also makes time for the individual conferences. The rest of the semester followed that same rhythm of a blocks of in-class then online learning with the result that I was able to have in-depth discussions with each student about their particular writing goals, strengths, and areas of improvement.

Lessons Learned

Based on my observations and on student feedback, it’s clear that the curriculum will need some revision to adjust the workload in the first four weeks of the semester—we simply tried to do too much in the first unit. That issue can be remedied by moving some of the readings into the first online block and requiring that students post online responses. Additionally, the lines of communication during the online block need to be strengthened through more clearly defined class communication protocols. While students were in regular contact with me and with each other during the online block through email, D2L, F2F conferences, FlipGrid, and texting (students texted each other to set up group meetings for group projects), the addition of regular email “bulletins” from me will help to build class cohesion.

Students' Responses

Students' responses to the course were overwhelmingly positive. While some students offered suggestions for improvement in specific areas, all 15 who completed the course reflection questions (there were 17 students enrolled) indicated that they believe the hybrid format contributed to their improvement as writers:

"This format works particularly well for a course designed around communication as it challenges students to interact with each other in different ways as well as interact with the professor individually."

"[The hybrid format] allowed students to have a reference when they needed help (the professor) but also showed them the importance of independence (the online portions). The shift between having class and learning online also strengthened the theme of the course (agile communication)."

"I think this format allowed the class to explore different mediums of communication, like the video post. The course brought us out of our comfort zones and encouraged us to be more flexible communicators."

Conclusion

Because the block hybrid format offers the opportunity for students to practice and critique a variety of communication channels and because it also increases student/teacher individual interaction, I believe it offers significant opportunities for the PWR to enhance and advance its mission of providing effective and innovative writing instruction across campus. The ASSETT Faculty Fellows program, through our discussions around learning goals, sample class activities, faculty learning groups, and simply sharing project updates with each other, offered the support and resources that made this hybrid model possible. I will be teaching the revised version of this course Fall 2018, and the PWR may potentially expand the number of sections available Spring 2019. In addition, I will be presenting results of this project at a national rhetoric/composition conference in October 2018, a useful opportunity to expand the impact of this project beyond the boundaries of CU Boulder.