

## **A CASE STUDY OF HYBRID LEARNING FOR SKILLS-BASED COURSES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the development, teaching and evaluation of a hybrid public speaking course offered at the undergraduate level in a major research institution in the United States. Drawing on student feedback and instructional perspectives the paper assesses the implications for future offerings of skills-based courses through the hybrid delivery mode.

### **Introduction**

Online education is currently experiencing unprecedented growth both in terms of the number of courses that are delivered at least partially online and in terms of enrollment. Specifically, according to Allen and Seaman (2013), in the fall of 2011 approximately 6.7 million students in the United States alone were enrolled in at least one fully online course. Allen and Seaman further pointed out that this growth represents an increase of approximately 9% compared to the year before and indicated that currently online enrollment comprises 32% of the entire population of registered students. Illustrative of the importance of the continuous growth of online offerings in higher education is that overall enrollment figures for higher education in the United States dropped by approximately 0.1% as indicated in Allen and Seaman's report.

A closely related mode of online education is hybrid learning. While no universal definition of hybrid learning is readily available, in most educational institutions hybrid courses involve some form of a 'mixed' delivery between the online and face-to-face modes. The breakdown between the online and face-to-face delivery modes also varies widely; according to Allen and Seaman (2013), the online component of a hybrid course can range between 30 -79% of the content. Hybrid offerings have also been increasing in popularity; according to a report by the Instructional Technology Council (Lokken, 2012), more than half of the community colleges that were surveyed indicated that they offered hybrid courses. In many instances, hybrid courses are perceived as a more plausible alternative to the fully online and face-to-face modes of instruction. Frequently, a hybrid course is considered to be a delivery mode that can draw on the strengths of the online and face-to-face modalities.

A major challenge for faculty and administrators pertaining to the development of an effective hybrid or blended course has to do with the lack of widespread

agreement in terms of concrete criteria of quality in the academic community. In a widely cited opinion piece, Driscoll (2002) defined the term of **blended learning** to mean four different possible combinations (technology modes, pedagogical approaches, instructional technologies and a mix of instructional technologies with workplace assignments). In other words, Driscoll (2002, p.1) noted, “Blended learning means different things to different people... in reality these definitions illustrate the untapped potential of blended learning.” At the same time, Oliver and Trigwell (2005) made the case against the current way in which the term blended learning is used and argued for a re-conceptualization that would more closely link this mode of delivery to established learning theories. Garrison and Kanuka (2004), contended that blended learning can be transformational in higher education and correctly predicted that the blended offerings would be adopted widely in the not too distant future.

Given the above, establishing best practices for developing and teaching a hybrid course will be essential for programs that want to expand their offerings beyond the traditional face-to-face course. Accordingly, this study examines the process of developing and teaching a hybrid version of the basic public speaking course and provides an assessment of the associated results. There is certainly a fair amount of research that has attempted to establish the effectiveness of offering the basic public speaking course in non-traditional formats (Clark & Jones, 2001; Nicosia, 2005; Linardopoulos, 2010). A public speaking course presents a unique set of challenges when it comes to offering it in a hybrid or online format. In addition to emphasizing the development of a specific skills set, the assessment of the public speaking course involves great emphasis on the synchronous feedback from the audience during the delivery of the speeches. It is essential to consider how can the audience feedback requirement be best met in the public speaking course. In addition: Is synchronous/face-to-face speaking the sole or main objective of the 21<sup>st</sup> century basic public speaking course? Can the hybrid delivery mode be effective in terms of meeting the core objectives of the specific course?

### **A Hybrid Public Speaking Course**

In an attempt to answer some of the questions listed above, two hybrid versions of the basic public speaking course were offered for the first time in the author’s department during the summer term of 2012. It is important to note that summer offerings typically include an accelerated time frame (6 weeks versus 15 weeks of the regular term). In other words, not only were the hybrid versions of this course offered for the first time, but also this was done in an accelerated time frame. Furthermore, the curriculum of our basic public speaking course includes a few additional components. Specifically, students are required to complete a minimum of three speeches of which at least one must be in a mediated setting, conduct an interview also in a mediated setting and submit a number of written assignments pertaining to the core content of the course (such as peer reviews and outlines). Finally, due to the hybrid nature of the course, students were asked to

participate in asynchronous text-based discussions outside the face-to-face sessions using eCollege, the course's Learning Management System (LMS).

The two sections included the same learning objectives and associated assignments, used the same instructional materials and LMS and were taught by the same instructor. In addition, the two course sections ran over the same time frame of the summer semester and consisted of the same total number of contact hours. Every week, students were provided with a detailed list of activities that had to be completed, which were posted in the overview page of each corresponding learning module/week of the LMS. During the face-to-face sessions the instructor went over the checklist of the tasks that had to be completed. Face-to-face sessions were primarily used for student presentations and group-related projects including tests. The online component, which was completed asynchronously, was used primarily for discussions, submission of the written assignments, the posting of instructional materials (handouts, supplemental readings, etc.), and brief lectures, as well as the platform for the mediated speeches. The key difference between the two hybrid versions of the course had to do with the breakdown of the content between the online and face-to-face components. In an attempt to establish an effective balance between those two delivery modes, in the first section (Section 1) the breakdown between the two instructional modes was evenly split, whereas in the second section (Section 2) the online component consisted of 60% of the content. Indeed, determining which part of the course content should be delivered during the face-to-face session and which one through the LMS was one of the greatest challenges in terms of developing the hybrid version of the public speaking course. The typical breakdown of the activities in the face-to-face and online components of the two course sections as provided to the students via the course syllabus follows.

In general the face-to-face activities will include:

- Reminders/updates
- Team presentations on assigned content
- Instructor-led content summary
- Quizzes
- Speech presentations/ discussion
- Speech evaluations/group activities

In general, the online sessions will include:

- Lectures
- Exercises/ activities
- Review of supplemental materials
- Discussions
- Quizzes
- Submission of written assignments
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### Results

At the end of the course, students were asked to share feedback regarding their course experience through a supplemental web-based survey that was set-up specifically for that purpose. Students were asked to reflect on their hybrid course experience and indicate among other things:

- Their rationale for completing this course in a hybrid/accelerated format
- Their perceived level of understanding regarding the key public speaking variables as a result of taking this course
- Their perceptions regarding the relevance and effectiveness of the assignments and the LMS
- Their level of apprehension prior to beginning the course given its accelerated and hybrid format
- Their perception of the most and least favorite aspects of the course
- An overall evaluation of their experience with hybrid learning in public speaking
- Their preferred delivery mode for the specific course assuming they had a choice and could start all over

A total of 30 students participated in the survey (18 from Section 1 and 12 from Section 2), which translates to an overall response rate of approximately 77%.

The survey’s key findings were:

- Convenience (having to come to class only once a week and completing the course requirements in six weeks) was the primary motivation for students to enroll in the hybrid and accelerated version of the course. See Figure 1 and Figure 2.

What was the primary reason that you chose to take this course in an accelerated and hybrid format?

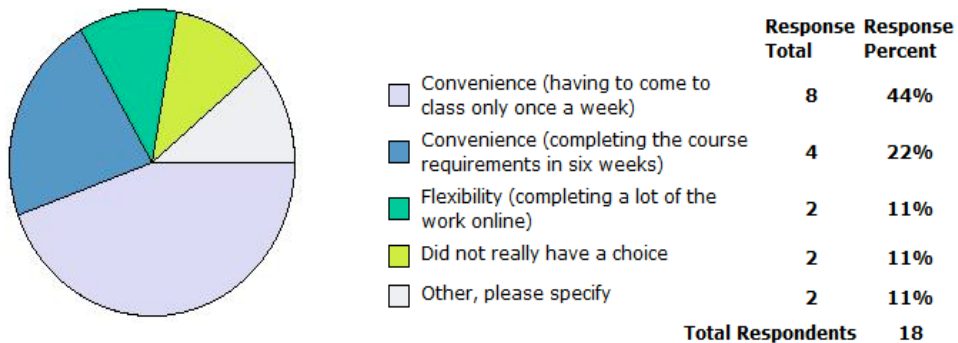


Figure 1. Rationale for taking the course-Section 1.

What was the primary reason that you chose to take this course in an accelerated and hybrid format?

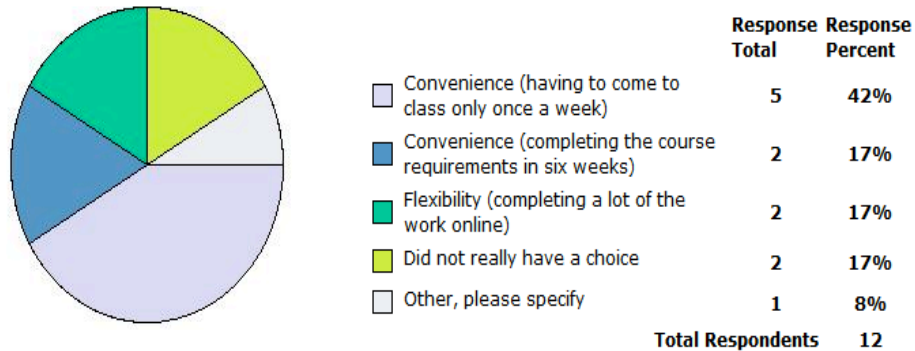


Figure 2. Rationale for taking the course-Section 2.

- Most students reported being at least mildly apprehensive when it came to taking a public speaking course in an accelerated format and to a lesser degree (but still apprehensive) due to the hybrid delivery mode.
- By the end of the course, more than 80% of the students indicated that they had a solid understanding of the variables associated with public speaking as a result of taking this course.
- About 80% of the students found the different formats of the speech assignments to be useful when it came to meeting the objectives of the course. Students were less enthusiastic for the written assignments associated with the course even though the majority still felt that they helped fulfill the key objectives.
- There was a lot of skepticism regarding the LMS (eCollege) with barely half of the students rating it as effective. Students’ criticism regarding the LMS was even more evident in the qualitative feedback of the survey. According to one student:

My least favorite part of the course was the way that eCollege was set up, there were like 10,000 links for everything and crazy instructions that were hard to follow.

- The delivery of the speeches and the online component of the course were listed by most students as their favorite aspects. On the flip side, the workload associated with the course was clearly the least favorite part of the students’ experience as illustrated in the qualitative feedback.
- Overall, more than 50% of the students would recommend this version of the course to a fellow student or colleague.

- More than half of the students would choose to take this course in a hybrid format once again, whereas slightly over 40% indicated that they would choose the hybrid and accelerated format once again. See Figures 3 and 4.

Upon reflecting on your course experience and assuming you had a choice, you would complete this course:

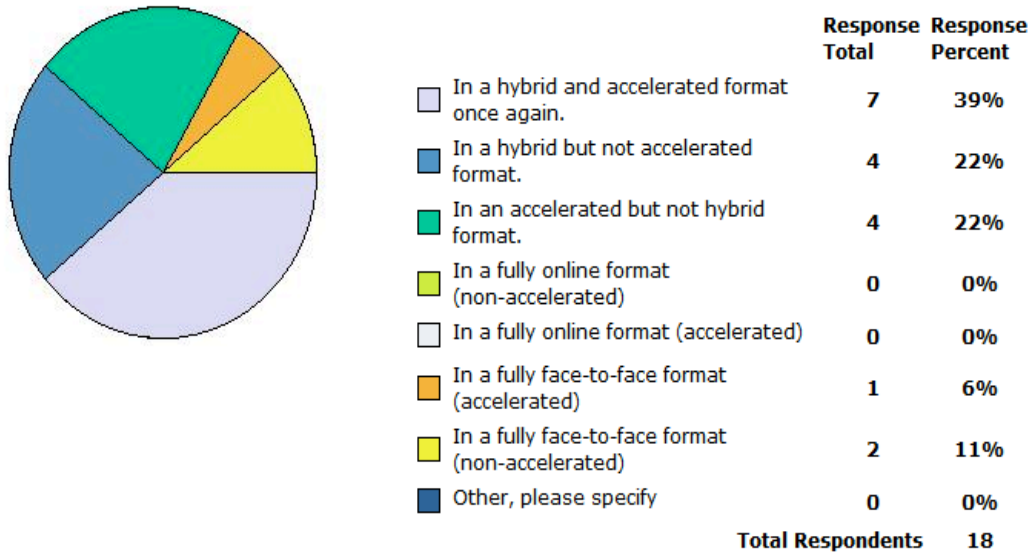
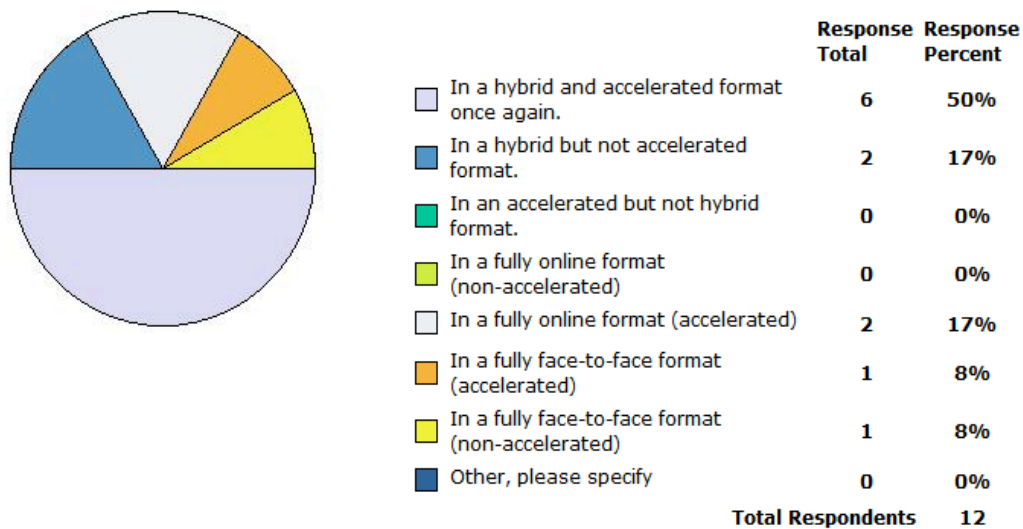


Figure 3. Retake choice-Section 1.

Upon reflecting on your course experience and assuming you had a choice, you would complete this course:



*Figure 4. Retake choice-Section 2.*

### **Discussion**

The end-of-term survey results clearly indicated that students felt that the hybrid format of the public speaking course was a worthwhile experience that helped them fulfill the core objectives of the course. At the same time, students did deem the workload to be excessive and the technology aspects of the course were often a challenge. The accelerated nature of the course certainly contributed to the intensity of the workload. From an instructional perspective one of the key challenges is how to fulfill the same course objectives in less than half of the time frame allotted during the regular semester (6 weeks versus 15 weeks). Utilizing the benefits of the online and face-to-face delivery modes to deliver the course effectively is the second challenge associated with hybrid learning. Furthermore, a major component regarding the use of the online and face-to-face modalities in a hybrid course is the decision on how to distribute the content and assignments as indicated in the beginning of this paper. Finally, the students' ability to easily access and efficiently navigate the LMS is an absolute requirement for a successful hybrid course. There is certainly evidence in the research literature according to which there is some relationship between the web environment in which the course is delivered and the student perception of the learning outcomes (McNaught et al, 2011). Unfortunately, the LMS features can only be controlled by the instructor and/or the instructional design team to a limited degree.

Based on the experience with the hybrid version of the Public Speaking course the following changes will be implemented the next time the course is offered in this mode:

1. The nature and number of assignments will be reviewed in such a way as to ensure that only the ones that have a direct effect on the learning objectives of the course will be required. The outcome of this review should alleviate some of the workload concerns.
2. The instructional content will be assessed in order to determine if the online or face-to-face module would be more suitable. For example, should the lectures be held in class and some of the group activities be completed online? Or should the lectures/theory be covered online and then class time can be utilized for group-work related activities? If so, how can the instructional team ensure that the students will actually view the lecture/theory component by a designated deadline?
3. The design of the LMS will also be examined closely to ensure that, to the degree we are able to control, the online content is designed according to the most current principles of instructional design.

### **Conclusion and Further Research**

The results from the hybrid version of the course described above show that it is possible to develop and teach the basic public speaking course in this format. However, the successful implementation of any hybrid skills-based course is an on-going project that requires constant adjustments and responsiveness to student feedback. Students deemed that the hybrid and accelerated version of the course did fulfill the stated course objectives. At the same time, the workload that had to be completed in a relatively short amount of time and the perception of a non-user friendly LMS were considered to negatively affect the students' experience. Indeed, pedagogical concerns associated with the adoption of specific e-learning platforms should be a key consideration for faculty and administrators (Birch & Burnett, 2009). It remains to be seen if the design, content and assessment revisions outlined above would result in a more positive student perception. Since the likelihood of the hybrid delivery mode being utilized across more academic institutions is rather high, future research should look at skills-based courses that are offered in hybrid format at a more comprehensive level. Additional studies on this topic will enable us to collect additional evidence regarding the variables that affect the efficient use and implementation of hybrid learning for skills-based courses.

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### **Appendix A: Assignments Used in the Public Speaking Course**

Speech 1-Self-Introduction-50 XP  
Speech 2-Informative Speech-100 XP  
Speech 3-Persuasive Speech -200 XP  
Speech 4-Mediated Speech-150 XP  
Weekly Group Presentations-100XP  
Mediated Interview Reflection Paper-50XP  
Peer Reviews-100XP  
Discussions-150XP  
Quizzes-100XP

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