Hybrid learning for post COVID-19 – why it matters

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Introduction

It is unfortunate that the COVID-19 has generated enormous challenges to higher education institutions (HEIs) particularly for those whose revenue heavily rely on international students thanks to the dramatic decline of enrolment numbers due to border closure, various restrictions on international mobility, and the Government’s rules and policies in regard to national safety concerns. It is also a challenge to international students with constant changing conditions and an uncertain future to pursuing their dream of gaining an Australian higher education degree. With the newly development of COVID-19 and the Government’s initiative of reopening border, it is the time to plan a sustainable learning model that can mostly satisfy international students’ needs and help HEIs position to gain the competitive advantages in the global market for the post COVID-19 future. According to various surveys of asking students about their preferences for keeping online or back to face-to-face (F2F) course delivery, most students like to keep current online learning model - which confirms a strong need for a workable and effective hybrid solutions for HEIs to consider in the context of post COVID-19 (Whateley 2021; Miroshnikov 2021).

What we know about hybrid learning

Things are and will never be the same thanks to the changes caused by global COVID-19 pandemic. The world is entering a hybrid era in a scale and degree we have never expected and experienced before: hybrid teaching and learning for schools and students, hybrid working for office workers (in office and working from home), and hybrid socializing for people engaging and attending social events and activities. For example, I recently attended a social event – a memorial service via online (due to COVID-19 restriction rule) together with a group of people presented on site – the service was carried out in a hybrid mode simultaneously.

However, the definition of hybrid learning is often confused with blended learning due to the existence of ambiguity owing to the absence of clear criteria and clarification. It makes difficult to distinguish one from another – as they both adopt a combination of F2F and online learning components. For example, one of the most popular definitions is form Graham (2006) who defines blended learning is the system that combines “face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction”. Friesen (2012) further suggests that blended learning combines internet and digital media with established classroom forms that require the physical co-presence of teacher and students. Hall and Davison (2007) describe hybrid learning as combining some of the features of a traditional taught class with access to online learning tools. It is difficult to draw an analogy between blended learning and hybrid learning to get a unique characteristic from both of them as the two different approaches share the common concepts - online and F2F. As the result, it inevitably triggers confusion with misunderstanding of being either with the two concepts are covered by one definition, or one concept has two terms to be practiced interchangeably - merely depending upon the context and purposes of the applications.
What do we mean by hybrid learning?

Since the post COVID-19 era is not far from our sight along with the border reopening is also on the way, a clear and workable hybrid learning mode should be considered as a priority and one of the key factors in seeking institution’s competitive advantages in the context of a very competitive international education market. A clear understanding of hybrid learning must be established as a foundation to help higher education providers in planning and developing a hybrid delivery mode to accommodate international students both onshore and offshore in post COVID era.

To distinguish the concept of hybrid delivery from blended delivery, Whateley (2021) pointed out that the 'hybrid' delivery is a simultaneous activity requiring no more preparation or time than F2F teaching' as both modes (online and F2F) are delivered simultaneously, and it is for student to choose the mode that suits them the best. There are three key elements here, I would suggest, in contributing the uniqueness of hybrid learning in terms of time, space, and student’s autonomy:

- **Time**
  Hybrid delivery is synchronised – lecturer presents and delivers the content from the classroom in front of the students either attend F2F in the classroom or participate the same class through online (facilitated with information communication technology (ICT) e.g., video, audio, and other cyber components) at the same time. There is no difference between F2F attendants and online participants in regard to lecture delivery, class activities, intercommunications, and interactions between lecturers and students, and between students in two different settings – F2F and online. The characteristic of synchronicity of the hybrid learning mode could also provide the workable solution of delivering course to the students in the situation such as multi-campus or ‘satellite-campus’ alike in terms of utilising institution’s limited resource (staff, space, finance, and administration etc.) effectively and efficiently.

- **Space**
  Regardless of geographical aspect, being close to school or from remote place; and being onshore or offshore – there is simply no ‘space’ restriction for hybrid learning - thanks to the digital technology to keep internet speed to its limit and mobile technology to bridge the spatial distance. Basically, this is just a 'hybrid classroom' as when teacher delivers their subject content from a technology equipped classroom to the students either physically attend in class (F2F) or take part through online in a remote virtual ‘classroom’ (e.g., in any room of their home place, worksite, public transport or even inside of a parked car etc.). Further, there is no restriction to the students with a virtual and mobile ‘classroom’ in their hands regardless of the geographical barrier and distance concerns thanks to the development of digital and cyber technology.

- **Student’s Autonomy**
  The hybrid learning mode will significantly enrich the concept of student-centred learning in their journey of completing a higher education degree in Australia from the perspective of international students. It gives freedom and power to student with the sense of appreciation in charging their own learning process by exercising the preference of their choice in participating either on campus F2F class or online. It certainly also enhances student’s engagement in which ‘requires a psychological investment on the part of the learner as well as persistence in understanding the learning task’ (Blakey, 2015). The freedom and power derived from hybrid learning
would enlarge international students’ satisfaction in particular in terms of having more flexibility in allocating their time and budget, in balancing their commitment towards study, working, family, and other social activities comparing with fully online mode or fully F2F on campus mode. The exercise of student’s autonomy also provides international students with the varieties of socialising with their peers either in campus or through online.

The co-exist of F2F and online components helps students to build up their ability and comfortability to meet their needs of sense of belonging – to their class/school community as opposed to either a complete online or F2F delivery mode. This is especially important to international students who live and study in a foreign country which is a totally new cultural environment - to have the varieties of communicating and socialising with their classmates in seeking an enjoyable learning experience. It in turn, would enhance student’s psychological willingness in engaging actively in their learning activity both in class and outside of campus.

**Hybrid learning and student learning experience**

The benefits and opportunities that hybrid learning could generate are obvious and encouraging from the perspective of international students. The co-existence of opportunities and challenges for hybrid learning in future has attracted popular attentions from academics and other stakeholders. It triggers broad discussions on the topics from various perspectives (e.g., academic, management, technology, and pedagogy etc.) however, it is also worth to examine how it would enable student to gain positive outcome from their learning experience during and after the implementation of hybrid learning.

It is suggested that the delivery of positive student experience heavily relies on the highly collaborate effort from academic, administration, IT, student service, and management of the organization with a strong customer focused initiative at all levels. It includes to facilitate students working comfortably with the key technology applications particularly in using institution’s learning management system and/or learning platform (e.g., online/F2F lectures, assessments including exams, tests, group assignment, and quiz etc. by using Moodle, Blackboard, and other systems in hybrid context.). It is also crucial to let students be well aware of the basic requirement of technology readiness (including a reliable computer, internet speed, web-tech, common/personal technic know-how etc.). It is especially important to the first-year international student for them to have a good start of their learning experience in a completely new environment.

HEIs and students have experienced rapid changes and are facing considerable challenges driven by COVID-19 pandemic. There is no going back to the traditional century old learning model and yesterday’s ‘status quo’ to meet the future challenges of post COVID-19 era in the context of the world of digitalization and mobilization. Any challenge comes with opportunity, hybrid learning is not an exception. It doesn’t matter what challenge is and how many there are - what matters most is how we manage to transform the challenge into opportunity and convert opportunity to success.
References

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