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Hybrid Learning and the Residential Liberal Arts Experience

By Loni Bordoloi Pazich, Martin Kurzweil, and Daniel Rossman

In Short

- Institutions should consider how hybrid learning approaches can enrich the curriculum, facilitate course-sharing between institutions, and make learning opportunities available to students that would otherwise be prohibitively expensive.
- Faculty engagement with technology in a consortial project prompted them to reevaluate their role and responsibility as instructors and helped them feel reenergized about their teaching—in both hybrid and traditional formats.
- Faculty need significant support to adopt hybrid approaches to learning beyond investments in technology and professional development.
- Students, like faculty, may need encouragement to participate in hybrid courses—but it pays off by enriching and diversifying the classroom experience.
- Successful hybrid course-sharing arrangements need a strong consortial backbone to identify strategic areas for cross-campus collaboration, to coordinate multiple stakeholders, and to supply centralized support for training and instructional designers.

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“This [Hybrid Learning] work really has been one of the highlights of my professional life. It has improved my teaching, period, regardless of the hybrid or more traditional format. It has increased my intentionality in the classroom and made me a much more thorough and thoughtful course developer. I think we are making a very positive difference in higher education.”

Faculty Participant, American Association of State Colleges and Universities’ National Blended Course Consortium Project

What is the place of online or hybrid learning in liberal arts colleges, settings that promise their students deep engagement with faculty? The excitement about massive open online courses (MOOCs) in the early 2010s prompted many liberal arts colleges to consider whether technology would or could play a role in their own institutions. No college has the human resources to offer an endless variety of courses and programs, and the smaller the institution, the greater the constraints. Hybrid learning—a combination of online learning and face-to-face classes—could enable colleges to enrich their curricula by joining forces with other institutions and offering new possibilities for active learning (such as through flipped classrooms) without eroding the quality of the education they offer.

In fact, some liberal arts colleges had been experimenting with teaching and resource-sharing mediated by technology long before MOOCs burst on the scene. One early and influential example was the virtual classics department pioneered by the Associated Colleges of the Midwest in 1995 (Abraham, 2016; Center for Hellenic Studies, n.d.). The member colleges' classics departments were small, with few faculty members and few majors. As part of the Sunoikosis project, participating departments expanded opportunities for learning about the ancient Greek and Roman worlds by making courses available to students from other campuses through audio and video while ensuring they were supported as needed by classics faculty at their home campuses.

The template established by Sunoikosis of sharing courses inter-institutionally through creative use of technology has since been adapted to other contexts. For example, the members of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges recognized that they collectively have the faculty resources of a large research university and came together to support distance-mentored undergraduate research where students and faculty are matched across institutions based on their interests (Albuja & Greenlaw, 2014). The program promotes undergraduate research, which has been shown to be a valuable experience for many students, building their ability to work independently and manage their time. The flexibility of this template of resource-sharing enables teams of campuses of varying sizes to participate, from the five members of the Five Colleges Consortium cross-listing lesser taught languages (Abraham, 2016) to over 40 members of the Council of Independent Colleges teaching online humanities courses (Brown & Marcum, 2016; Joo, Marcum & Rossman, 2017).

Of course, cross-campus course-sharing arrangements are meaningless if the quality of student learning suffers under hybrid approaches to instruction. As technology-enabled instruction has become more common, the empirical base of research comparing student learning outcomes under different modalities of instruction has grown. A series of studies conducted in diverse institutional types and focused on a range of subject areas and course levels using a mix of methods, including random assignment experiments, have shown that, on average, learning outcomes in online courses

are statistically no different from learning outcomes in face-to-face courses, and learning outcomes in hybrid or blended courses are as good or better than those in face-to-face courses (Means et al., 2010; Lack, 2013; Wu, 2015).

These average findings do contain significant variation—in particular, students who require developmental education, students from certain underrepresented backgrounds, and students who attend community colleges have been found in several studies to fare worse in online courses than in face-to-face courses (Xu & Jaggars, 2013). Overall, the research literature suggests that for academically prepared students, hybrid or online courses do no harm to student learning, but the picture is more complicated for students who are less prepared for college-level work.

The question of whether there is a place for hybrid learning in the residential “high touch” model has taken on greater urgency over the past decade. This is especially salient for private liberal arts colleges, which are under significant financial pressure in the face of declining enrollments and rising costs. Hybrid approaches could enable more colleges to share resources—and their associated costs—that would otherwise not be available to students and to enhance the classroom experience in ways that deepen student learning. Over the long term, hybrid learning has the potential to generate cost-savings from efficiencies in faculty classroom time, in reduced duplication of faculty lines and expertise, and in scheduling facilities. In the process, colleges can concentrate on developing distinctive programming that takes advantage of their strengths and helps differentiate themselves in a competitive marketplace.

THE “HYBRID LEARNING AND THE RESIDENTIAL LIBERAL ARTS EXPERIENCE” INITIATIVE

To spur more experimentation with technology in liberal arts settings, the Teagle Foundation launched the “Hybrid Learning and Residential Liberal Arts Experience” initiative to support the integration of online or hybrid approaches in ways that speak to both the quality of the educational experience and institutional capacity-building in residential liberal arts settings. The initiative supported a series of demonstration projects at over 35 institutions and engaged over 180 faculty and staff between 2014 and 2018. One-sixth of the participating campuses were based in rural locations, underscoring how resource-sharing may be especially salient to geographically remote institutions.

Faculty perceptions of student learning indicated that gains in Teagle-funded hybrid or online courses were comparable to the gains in traditional classrooms. These perceptions were consistent with research suggesting that for academically prepared students, learning outcomes in hybrid or blended courses are as good or better than those in face-to-face courses.

One typical project supported by the Teagle initiative: a subset of members in the Lehigh Valley Association of Independent Colleges (LVAIC) jointly developed a minor in Documentary Storymaking as part of their film and media studies offerings. The three participating campuses—Lehigh

University, Lafayette College, and Muhlenberg College—co-designed required components for the minor, which is delivered in a hybrid mode and on a schedule that rotates among the campuses through cross-registration. As a result, the three participating members were able to give their students access to a niche program that would be too challenging for a single institution to mount on its own.

And students appreciate the effort as well: a graduating senior at Lehigh University who completed the minor reflected on how before college, a career in documentary storytelling seemed inaccessible, but the minor helped to break through those barriers and expose her to a field she hopes to be a part of one day (Ward, 2018). The student observed that the joint minor also provided an important opportunity for community-building: “There aren’t that many students who are doing what I am doing in terms of visual storytelling at Lehigh...it has been so great to find students at other schools and be able to tap into resources we don’t yet have at Lehigh” (Ward, 2018).

COUNTERINTUITIVE FINDINGS

The Teagle Foundation worked with Ithaca S+R, a not-for-profit research group, to evaluate the Hybrid Learning initiative (Kurzweil & Rossman, 2018). The evaluation revealed other findings about both faculty and students participating in the initiative that were counterintuitive. For example, faculty members are often stereotyped as reflexively opposed to technology, particularly in liberal arts colleges, where it is common to view instructional technology skeptically, with concern about its potential to undermine quality classroom teaching and close mentorship of undergraduates. Yet faculty participating in the Teagle-funded projects emphasized that engagement with technology prompted them to reevaluate their role and responsibility as instructors and helped them feel reenergized about their teaching—in both hybrid and traditional formats.

In contrast, students—who are often seen as digital natives—can view hybrid courses as falling outside their comfort zone, even though research has found that gains in learning outcomes in well-designed hybrid courses are comparable to traditional face-to-face courses. At least in liberal arts college settings, students may be less likely to enroll in such courses, undermining the redesigned courses’ longer-term financial viability. While faculty turned out to be friendlier to technological innovation than expected, students were warier than expected.

Other lessons we learned involve what it takes to sustain approaches that blend technology and in-person instruction are relevant for the broad array of colleges concerned with maintaining educational quality in the face of mounting financial pressures. The challenge is in creating the conditions for positive change: identifying the right curricular “hooks” for cross-campus collaboration, supporting faculty with using unfamiliar technology, successfully attracting and engaging students, and ensuring technology-mediated curricular and pedagogical approaches are financially sustainable.

LESSONS LEARNED

Identify the right curricular “hook” for hybrid approaches. Institutions should consider how hybrid learning approaches can enrich the curriculum and make opportunities available to students that would otherwise be prohibitively expensive. The key is to choose program areas that take advantage of institutions’ strengths while filling a need shared among the cooperating colleges. Institutions often use small course development grants to entice faculty to participate in a new initiative, tapping into the enthusiasm of early adopters and nurturing a culture that embraces experimentation and change. But using this particular strategy to promote hybrid learning is counterproductive if the locus of change resides with individual faculty members rather than with programs or departments. Ideally, hybrid learning arrangements are formalized as joint inter-campus programs, with participating campus partners developing a coordinated slate of courses that can be shared or rotated.

Technology thoughtfully deployed to advance program areas strategically selected by campus partners may bend the cost curve in the long run. For example, a number of fields and disciplines are of immense value to the academic enterprise and yet suffer from under-enrollment. Languages like Arabic, Mandarin, and Portuguese have both intrinsic and labor market value, but it is difficult for a small college to offer even one of these languages, let alone all three, especially since enrollment in such courses is typically low. However, such courses can become financially viable if they enroll students across multiple campuses. In the process, the

“The challenge is in creating the conditions for positive change: identifying the right curricular ‘hooks’ for cross-campus collaboration, supporting faculty with using unfamiliar technology, successfully attracting and engaging students, and ensuring technology-mediated curricular and pedagogical approaches are financially sustainable.”

PROJECTS FUNDED UNDER THE “HYBRID LEARNING AND THE RESIDENTIAL LIBERAL ARTS EXPERIENCE” INITIATIVE

- The **American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)** created the National Blended Course Consortium, an initiative aimed at addressing “three pressing issues in higher education—cost, access, and quality—through the development and dissemination of technology-enhanced, interdisciplinary courses for first-year undergraduates.” This project focused on developing four courses designed to be used as part of first-year experience programs. <http://www.teaglefoundation.org/Grants-Initiatives/Grants-Database/Grants/Hybrid-Learning/National-Blended-Course-Consortium>.
- **Bryn Mawr College** and its seven campus partners—Albright College, College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University, Saint Mary’s College of California, Santa Rosa Junior College, Swarthmore College, and Wesleyan University—developed online instructional materials and modules related to research methods and statistics topics typically covered in introductory coursework for psychology and other social sciences. <http://www.teaglefoundation.org/Grants-Initiatives/Grants-Database/Grants/Hybrid-Learning/Modeling-Collaborative-Curriculum-Development-Psy>.
- A subset of four members of the **Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC)**—University of Alberta-Augustana, SUNY Geneseo, University of Minnesota-Morris, and University of North Carolina-Asheville—all with a tradition of serving Native American students and offering courses in that field, worked to develop hybrid and interdisciplinary Native American Studies courses as part of an effort to establish a “virtual” department. <http://www.teaglefoundation.org/Grants-Initiatives/Grants-Database/Grants/Hybrid-Learning/Hybrid-Course-Sharing-in-Native-American-Studies>.
- The **Five Colleges Consortium**, involving Amherst College, Hampshire College, Mount Holyoke College, Smith College, and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, sought to develop and test hybrid resources in the humanities developed by multi-campus teams. <http://www.teaglefoundation.org/Grants-Initiatives/Grants-Database/Grants/Hybrid-Learning/A-Consortial-Plan-to-Explore-Hybrid-Learning-in-th>.
- The members of the **Lehigh Valley Consortium of Independent Colleges (LVAIC)**—Lafayette College, Cedar Crest College, DeSales University, Lehigh University, Moravian College, and Muhlenberg College—supported cross-campus teams of faculty interested in developing online or hybrid modules, courses, and programs ranging from media studies to chemistry. <http://www.teaglefoundation.org/Grants-Initiatives/Grants-Database/Grants/Hybrid-Learning/Hybrid-Course-Sharing-in-the-Lehigh-Valley-Associa>.
- Hope College and its campus partners Albion College, DePauw University, Grinnell College, Lawrence University, and Wabash College came together as the **Midwest Hybrid Learning Consortium (MHLC)** and sought to hold joint workshops to learn hybrid principles and methods and then develop hybrid modules and courses with faculty working in teams across the six institutions. <http://www.teaglefoundation.org/Grants-Initiatives/Grants-Database/Grants/Hybrid-Learning/Hybrid-Liberal-Arts-Network-High-Touch-Learning-f>.
- **St. Norbert College** and its three campus partners Augustana College, Elmhurst College, and Illinois Wesleyan University, focused on creating online modules in core competency areas such as evaluating sources and communicating complex information that could be embedded in a wide variety of courses. <http://www.teaglefoundation.org/Grants-Initiatives/Grants-Database/Grants/Hybrid-Learning/Launching-an-Online-Competencies-Curriculum>.
- **Texas Learning Consortium (TLC)**, consisting of Schreiner University, Concordia University-Austin, Lubbock Christian University, Texas Lutheran University, and Texas Wesleyan University, used the grant to share world languages courses and is now in the process of establishing similar arrangements in other disciplines. <http://www.teaglefoundation.org/Grants-Initiatives/Grants-Database/Grants/Hybrid-Learning/Working-Together-in-the-Lone-Star-State-Operation>.

“virtual departments” created for faculty who might not otherwise have colleagues in their field at their home campuses can help them feel less professionally isolated.

Framing technology as a means of advancing the liberal arts teaching and learning mission, rather than as a means of

standardizing the educational experience, encourages faculty buy-in (Kezar, 2015). For instance, a subset of four members in the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges developed a shared roster of courses in history, literature, philosophy, and religious studies that emphasize the knowledge and

experience of indigenous peoples in North America. The course offerings of this “virtual department” gives students access to a broader range of faculty expertise and diversifies course offerings to fulfill requirements for majors and minors in Native American and Indigenous Studies.

Moreover, the arrangement encourages experimentation while mitigating risk. Because of strong institutional interest in offering more affordable domestic “study away” opportunities, project leaders mounted hybrid courses in the spring followed by in-person “field schools” in the summer. In one year, students took an anthropology course and then participated in an excavation for indigenous artifacts led by the one archeologist on staff across the campus partners; in another year, students studied the history of indigenous education in the spring and then visited now-closed boarding schools for indigenous students and reservations in the Midwest. The spring hybrid course served as a prelude to the “study away” program, preparing students to make the most of the experience while ensuring that the summer programming was financially viable as interested students were being recruited across multiple campuses.

Successful hybrid approaches require significant support for faculty. It goes without saying that institutions will need to invest in videoconferencing and other technical capabilities, so faculty and students can focus on course content without distraction. High-quality picture and sound are especially important when studying languages with unfamiliar scripts and tones. Institutions also understand that faculty need professional development to use new tools and platforms. Some projects surveyed faculty in advance about their level of knowledge and expertise to ensure they pitched workshops and other gatherings at the right level—too basic would bore faculty but too advanced would lead to confusion and impede successful implementation (Kezar, 2015). As one faculty member from the COPLAC project observed, “I am not technologically savvy, so I worried that the course would not go well. But because I had excellent training and support, I found that I could teach it as well as my face-to-face classes.”

However, the level of support that faculty often need goes beyond technical capability, training, and even ongoing support through faculty learning communities and similar peer-to-peer mentorship programs. Faculty highly valued working with instructional designers or technologists because they assist in choosing the right tools and provide ongoing support, freeing them to direct their energy to delivering their subject matter expertise. A recent national survey of faculty attitudes toward technology found that 23 percent of faculty have worked with instructional designers (Lederman & McKenzie, 2017). In the Teagle-funded projects, that figure exceeded 90 percent; further, over 77 percent of faculty in the Teagle projects reported needing 25 hours or less of an instructional designer’s time in developing and teaching their courses over the course of a semester, while a subset of 44 percent of faculty needed fewer than ten hours of time. Institutions may need to invest in an instructional designer



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or technologist to assist faculty in designing their courses; the position can be shared consortially to be more financially viable.

The work of helping departments set up hybrid course-sharing relationships and identifying new areas of collaboration and growth also requires time and attention. Campus presidents and chief academic officers should establish a memorandum of understanding for their ground rules (e.g., handling cross-registration, tuition exchange, transfer of credit), set shared targets for growth, and rotate responsibility for a coordinator charged with attending to administrative matters (e.g., a faculty member provided with partial release time).

Students need encouragement to participate in hybrid courses—but the effort pays off by enriching curricular offerings and the classroom experience. Faculty participating in the hybrid learning projects were pushed outside their comfort zone—and so were their students. Faculty found that aspects of hybrid courses placed more demands on students, thereby strengthening their skills, deepening their knowledge, and encouraging them to take responsibility for their own learning. For example, one instructor from the LVAIC project reported, “I believe this type of course delivery challenges students to work outside of their comfort zone. If successful, students can enhance their communication skills and become more adept at using a variety of technological tools. Students can also increase their individual agency through these types of courses.” In a similar vein, another instructor from the MHLC project observed, “Students moved asynchronously back and forth through online activities (readings, videos, etc.) and discussions of what they were seeing. I found the asynchronous design led to far more in-depth and thoughtful discussions because posts developed over time, with time for students to gain new perspective and find additional relevant materials. We also used online peer editing with good results; students did

a better job of editing thoroughly with good comments than they often do in an in-class workshop setting.”

Faculty were also pleased by the unexpected diversity in students’ backgrounds and experiences in their hybrid courses. One instructor from the COPLAC project indicated that her course enrolled “perhaps the most diverse group of students I’ve ever taught, and they gained much from interacting with classmates representing various geographic regions, ages, gender identities, ethnicities, etc. Their level of engagement and rapport with one another exceeded my expectations.” Similarly, another faculty member in the same project reported, “I was most satisfied by teaching in an online/hybrid format that brought students together from different campuses and locations and seeing how that diversity enhanced the course. It was also quite satisfying to see every single student’s voice equally represented in the online/hybrid format, as opposed to the traditional classroom discussion where not all students participate on a day-today basis.”

Build a partnership with shared goals and clear lines of responsibility. Successful hybrid course sharing arrangements need a strong consortial backbone to identify strategic areas for curricular collaboration, to coordinate multiple stakeholders from registrars to department chairs, and to supply centralized support in the form of access to training and instructional designers. For example, student recruitment needs attention; ensuring students across campuses are even aware of the availability of hybrid courses is a significant hurdle. The level of distance enrollment in hybrid courses might vary but it must reach a minimum class size agreed on by the consortial partners to be financially viable.

The task of publicizing hybrid learning opportunities and recruiting students across campus partners requires coordination across multiple levels, from chief academic officers, registrars, advisers, department chairs, and individual instructors. Consortial leadership—whether that takes the form of dedicated staff or a faculty member or administrator given a partial release to attend to consortial matters—is key for successful hybrid learning projects. Leaders maintain momentum, help the campus partners learn from each other’s successes and setbacks, and keep the campuses accountable to one another (Beltz & Dotola, 2016, Kezar, 2016).

Some Teagle grantees leveraged their existing consortial memberships. For instance, in launching the Documentary Storymaking minor described above, Lehigh University, Lafayette College, and Muhlenberg College benefited from the infrastructure provided by their longstanding membership in the Lehigh Valley Association of Independent Colleges (LVAIC). LVAIC was established in 1959 to nurture professional development among faculty and staff and expand educational options for students. Similarly, the members of the Five Colleges Consortium are geographically close and had longstanding norms and procedures to establish joint academic appointments and facilitate cross-registration in traditional in-person courses. Technology made cross-campus course registration more appealing for students, obviating the need to make short bus trips from campus to campus.

The faculty teams could focus on adapting humanities courses for hybrid delivery without worrying about the infrastructure to transfer credits and tuition between campuses.

Other groups were in a nascent stage in their collaboration and used the grant initiative to establish an administrative core to support their course-sharing arrangements on an ongoing basis. For instance, Schreiner University, Concordia University-Austin, Lubbock Christian University, Texas Lutheran University, and Texas Wesleyan University came together in 2012 under the umbrella of the Texas Language Consortium (TLC) to pilot hybrid course-sharing for lesser-taught languages and gauge the level of faculty and student interest. They sought to formalize their partnership with support from a Teagle grant secured in 2014.

In contrast to other consortia, TLC partners had little prior history of working together, and so one of their first tasks under the grant was to establish a memorandum of understanding. They also regularly convened chief academic officers, department chairs, and faculty members to learn from others’ efforts and build trust and collegiality. Their positive experience with jointly mounting language courses has encouraged the group to expand their curricular offerings; they are currently experimenting with adding engineering courses to their shared catalogue and decided to change their name from the Texas Language Consortium to the Texas Learning Consortium.

The payoff in terms of cross-campus student enrollment in the hybrid courses is sufficient for the partners to justify funding a consortial coordinator (a faculty member with a partial course release) and annual faculty professional development institutes. Their work is also drawing attention from other institutions, putting the TLC on a path where they may add more members and distribute the costs of consortial activities on a broader base of support.

A CONTINUING JOURNEY

Whether the work of hybrid learning gets its start through an existing consortium or the partners have to start from scratch, campuses need to establish open lines of communications, set shared objectives and operating norms, demonstrate the commitment of senior leaders, and ensure buy-in among departments. One faculty participant from the MHLC project made a trenchant remark about the challenge of sustaining hybrid courses:

I have no doubt that people who approach online teaching as a pedagogy challenge, as a new medium through which to create valuable liberal arts-style learning experiences, can do fantastic (even better than face-to-face) work. My concern is that most people I work with and talk to have no concept of the level of redesign this takes, nor do they have the courage to tackle it. So they use online tools in uncoordinated and unsatisfying ways, to themselves and to their students, and rightly feel it weakens the liberal arts experience. But it isn't the online that does that. It is the design of the learning experience in the medium that does that.

To this we would add that the design of the consortial infrastructure to mount hybrid courses matters as much as the design of the courses themselves. Consortial coordinators attend to the day-to-day matters of ensuring that hybrid courses are developed by faculty, publicized to students, and supported administratively. In doing so, they help challenge the status quo and establish new norms of how campuses can learn and engage with one another.

One strong indicator that hybrid approaches are becoming embedded in the culture of institutions that participated

in Teagle's Hybrid Learning initiative is that the majority of faculty participants indicated they planned to teach in that mode again in the coming academic year. What may be even more important in the long run is that such approaches demonstrate to faculty and to institutions that engaging with tools that are seemingly antithetical to the liberal arts experience can in fact strengthen liberal arts education. □

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