

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Gothenburg
Sustainable and Accessible Learning Environments (HTL) Project
Sub-project: Student-Centered Flexibility
Final Report, December 21, 2022

Prepared by: Professor Gregg Bucken-Knapp, School of Public Administration

Objective and funding:

The objective of the sub-project has been to develop and implement a HyFlex approach in the undergraduate School of Public Administration course, *Communication in Public Working Life*. Funding was provided by the EUTOPIA University project in the equivalent of 20% of a full-time position for five months during autumn term 2021, and has been granted by the Sustainable and Accessible Learning Environments (HTL) Project at the Faculty of Social Sciences at University of Gothenburg. An additional equivalent of 20% of a full-time position for three months was granted in December 2021 for development of a second HyFlex course (*Managing Migration*) to be part of the University of Gothenburg Summer School in Sustainability during summer 2022. Owing to a COVID-19 outbreak during the Summer School, as well as the instructor's own absence due to the virus, the majority of the course was offered on Zoom or via pre-recorded lectures. As such, this report only takes up the course *Communication in Public Working Life*, offered as a HyFlex course in spring term 2022. *Managing Migration* is expected to be offered as a HyFlex course in summer 2023, and a supplemental report can be filed reflection on those experiences can be filed afterwards.

The HyFlex Approach:

The HyFlex approach to course design is commonly defined as one that combines a hybrid approach to teaching with exceptional flexibility in terms of the choices provided to students for attending sessions and gaining access to course material: “*Hybrid learning is incorporated as class content is offered in both face-to-face and online modalities. Flexibility is introduced since the power to choose what blended learning means is placed in the hands of each student who can choose on a continuous basis whether to attend online or in the traditional face-to-face classroom*” (Beatty 2014).

HyFlex courses will generally allow for the delivery of course material in three ways:

- Face-to-face (F2F): On-campus live sessions, in which the instructor and students are physically present
- Online synchronous (OS): Live online sessions, in which students who are not present are able to take part in the sessions simultaneously to those present in the classroom
- Online asynchronous (OA): A set of online materials and activities, including recorded F2F/OA sessions, additional documentation, and discussion forums, allowing for students to engage with the complete course material at times other than scheduled “live” sessions.

Taken jointly, HyFlex course design provides students with a significant amount of recurring choice when faced with how course curriculum is delivered. As Malczyk (2019) notes, “Students not only can choose to come in a traditional face-to-face modality but may alternatively choose to join synchronously, but remotely, via a video-conference platform. In addition, they may choose to complete asynchronous online learning exercises throughout the week. Furthermore, after making this choice for a given class session, students are given the same option for each future class session.”

That is, students are free to choose which of the three options suits them best on any given day. Students are of course welcome to attend the entire course in person (F2F), or to take part in all sessions online synchronously (OS), or even to take part in the course entirely online at a time of their choosing (OA). However, students need not limit themselves to one of these choices for the duration of the course, nor do they need to inform the instructor ahead of time what their choice will be on any given day. Students are welcome and encouraged to combine the three options as they choose, reflecting their own preferences and personal circumstances (i.e. employment, care of family member, lack of transport, etc.)

The advantages of the HyFlex approach for reducing the barriers to student participation and engagement with course material should be apparent. Indeed, Samuel et al. (2019) stress that HyFlex course designs are especially well-suited for enabling “higher student retention and completion than single delivery modes”, with a logic that allows students to take their own learning needs and personal schedule into account: “With HyFlex design, students can attend as they need or prefer without penalty for missing an in-person class. If a student is falling behind or wants in-person support, they may come to class in person. If they need to be away or are comfortable with the concepts that week, they may elect to complete work online. (Samuel et al. 2019)”

Course Background: *Communication in Public Working Life*

Communication in Public Working Life is an obligatory undergraduate 7.5 ECTS course in the School of Public Administration, offered in the autumn and spring terms. The aim of the course is to familiarize students who plan to work in the public sector with a range of different communication tasks that they would likely encounter in their first years of employment. Students must complete four communication assignments, each with a different target group, all of which emphasize the importance of providing relevant information in an accessible way.

On this first day of the course in autumn term 2022, students were presented with a fictitious scenario, in which they have been hired as a junior integration staffer in Ovanåker municipality. Ovanåker is a small, rural municipality in central Sweden that has garnered publicity for supporting initiatives to welcome an increased number of refugees to the European Union.

The five-week course is divided into four blocks, one per communication task, and with the final task allotted a slightly longer time for completion. All of the tasks are associated with municipal initiatives to foster meaningful integration of Ukrainians who have arrive in

Sweden and been granted temporary protection as a result of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The four tasks are:

- Preparing documentation for an internal meeting of colleagues who are brainstorming project ideas based on a mix of research articles focusing on integration and practitioner reports addressing the situation of Ukrainians with temporary protection.
- Writing a consultation response to be submitted following the publication of a Swedish National Legal Council assessment of a legislative proposal focusing on housing allocation models for Ukrainians with temporary protection in Sweden.
- Delivering a presentation at an international meeting of municipalities interested in applying for surplus funding made available via the European Social Fund for assisting Ukrainians with temporary protection.
- Preparing a short social media post about specific municipal initiative for assisting Ukrainians with temporary protection, and which can make use of languages other than Swedish in reaching diverse audiences.

Communication in Public Working Life: A HyFlex Version

Each block is comprised of three components: a block introductory session consisting of pre-recorded mini-lectures plus an associated question and answer session, a supervision session where students receive feedback on the week's assignment, and a presentation opportunity for the weekly assignment.

Mini-lectures are generally shorter than ten minutes and address specific steps along the way to learning about the communication tool and how students can structure their own work in successfully completing it. The example below from the course teaching platform shows the videos for the first communication task, having to do with preparing documentation for an internal memo. In order, the videos provide: an introduction and overview, tips for reading journal articles and reports, suggestion for synthesizing material, contextualizing the key point, and a final summary of assignment details.

Verktyg I: Mini-föreläsningar (Titta på dessa först!)

Mini-föreläsningar:

- Introduktion till uppgiften + litteratur:



- Okej, jag har valt ut tre artiklar. Vad gör jag nu? (Läs och analysera...)



- Okej, jag har läst och antecknat allt som kan vara en del av min analys. Vad gör jag nu? (Dags att fundera på syntetisering...)



- Och detta med kontextualisering?



- Sammanfattning av detaljer: inlämningsuppgift, olika alternativ och deadlines...



As detailed in the chart below, students can freely choose between face-to-face, online synchronous and online asynchronous option for each of the block components: students may attend live on campus, choose to partake in the same session via Zoom, or watch the recorded material at a convenient time. For all students, and not just those opting for the online asynchronous option, a discussion forum is actively moderated throughout the week, allowing students to get feedback on their work, plus answers to other questions on a daily basis.

For each block: Watch pre-recorded mini-lectures		
Block-intro	Supervision	Weekly assignment
F2F: Live Q&A about mini-lectures	F2F: Live feedback about ongoing work	F2F: Live presentation/feedback in groups Full class discussion
OS: Live Q&A about mini-lectures	OS: Live feedback about ongoing work	OS: Live presentation/feedback in groups Full class discussion
OA: Recorded F2F/OS Q&A Written Q&A Open to all students	OA: Recorded F2F/OS feedback Written Q&A Open to all students	OA: Submission of assignment and video Written feedback for other students Recorded full class discussion

Students who choose to attend the presentation session at the end of each week, either live or on Zoom, will be able to share their work in real time with other students and to receive feedback immediately. Online asynchronous track students, in addition to submitting the assignment, will also be expected to pick one assignment from the recorded sessions and prepare a short, written feedback text. Students who opt for the online asynchronous presentation session have until the final day of the course to submit their completed assignment if they do not intend to postpone to a future term.

Student participation:

The tables below detail student participation for each session of each course block, based on whether students opted for campus (F2F), Zoom (OS) or the online course platform Canvas (OA). A total of 84 students were registered in the course.

Q&A session

	F2F	OS	OA
Block 1: Internal Documentation	16	31	4
Block 2: Consultation Response	2	35	2
Block 3: ESF Financing Presentation	3	32	3
Block 4: Social media	7	28	6

Supervision

	F2F	OS	OA
Block 1: Internal Documentation	10	9	4
Block 2: Consultation Response	13	3	2
Block 3: ESF Financing Presentation	6	29	3
Block 4: Social media	3	7	6

Assignment submission and seminars

	F2F	OS	OA
Block 1: Internal Documentation	33	33	18
Block 2: Consultation Response	19	50	15
Block 3: ESF Financing Presentation	19	40	28
Block 4: Social media	25	43	14

The Zoom (OS) option was the most opted for during the block introduction / question and answer session, with between 33% and 45% opting to take part in this fashion. After the first week, fewer than ten students attended this session on campus, and there were few questions posed on the course learning platform Canvas. While no question was put to the students as a whole regarding this on the course evaluation, several students did point out in conversation that the mini-lectures and other course material made all instructions clear, resulting in there being less of a need to attend this first session.

In contrast to the introductory question and answer session for each block, comparatively fewer students took part in the campus (F2F) or Zoom (OS) options for supervision. The one exception was during the third course block – focusing on preparing a pitch to be part of a consortium applying for ESF funds to assist with the integration of Ukrainians with temporary protection. 34% of the students attended the Zoom (OS) option, with several explaining during the session that it was a convenient way for them to ask questions quickly when working with an assignment that did not resemble formats from previous program courses.

For assignment submission and seminar options, students chiefly chose the Zoom (OS) option, ranging from roughly 40-60% per course block. Unlike previous blocks, larger groups of students opted for both campus (F2F) and the course learning platform (OA). Of interest to note is that between 20% and 33% of students opted for the purely online submission option, which involved an additional written component in the form of feedback on another student's assignment. That between roughly 70-80% of students took part in the live seminars suggests that students did not view the course as a purely distance course.

Student evaluation and course completion rate:

The course evaluation featured one open-ended question addressing HyFlex design and student impressions. Students were informed that their anonymous responses may be included in reports and presentations. 37 of the 84 students (44%) answered this question:

This course has had flexibility for students in terms of implementation (for example, being able to choose between participating on campus or on Zoom, or participating on Canvas at each opportunity; submitting assignments and participating in campus/Zoom seminars, or submitting assignments and video presentations as well as commenting on assignments from other students.) What do you think about this kind of flexibility in courses?

Only two students highlighted what they saw as potentially negative aspects with one noting that the course itself might not have been suitable for HyFlex, stating that "It felt much more like a course where you profited from conversing with others and I think it would have been

good if everyone was there.” A second student made a similar point regarding the comparatively few students who attended several block sessions, stating that “I personally think it's a bit sad that there have been very few people in the halls during the seminar, I think there will be better discussions than when people are on Zoom.”

All other comments were uniformly (and in many cases enthusiastically) positive to having experienced a HyFlex course. Shorter comments (“Super!” or “Really good!!” are excluded. A selection of the more substantive responses are presented below:

Great setup, wish more courses and teachers used this system!

I think it's absolutely fantastic!! Never been so happy with a setup. I sincerely hope that more teachers start with this! It increases the participation for me something so incredibly. Especially when you suffer from depression and social phobia and can rarely motivate yourself to go to lectures. So good to still be able to participate from the comfort of your home if you don't manage to be there physically.

I liked this flexibility very much and it's something we haven't experienced before, I didn't feel as stressed as in other courses at the same time that I learned at least as much if not more with this arrangement compared to the traditional arrangements.

Superb, couldn't be better. Days when you don't have time to get to school, you do it from home, and days when you need help or want to take part in the seminars on site, you get there.

I thought the option to choose was good because it made the course more adapted for everyone. If you e.g. unable to attend due to illness or the like, you did not have to wait for a make-up assignment to be issued, and instead had the opportunity to write 300 words of feedback the same day. I thought this was positive.

Extremely good! It gave great freedom in setting up the course in your own way and being able to adapt it based on what suits you best and how you learn best. Big plus for the flexibility. I also felt that it gave me a greater opportunity to find/maintain a common thread throughout the course and to be able to connect the different tools to each other. Hope this can be integrated into more courses.

Very good, gives more freedom to the student and not so square. Everyone does what suits them best, be it by attending lectures or doing things on their own in Canvas.

I think it has been great in this particular type of course as the lectures have been very voluntary as needed. Then it has been nice to be able to sit both at home or on location.

Suits me 100%. Can't complain about anything. Would have liked all other courses to be as flexible.

It is an enormous security to know that there are more ways to carry out a task if, for example, you should get sick. Also, everyone is different and this course has really given room for everyone to do what they are most comfortable with.

It is clear that students were highly supportive of their first HyFlex course experience and valued the flexibility and control that it gave them over the learning process. It is especially rewarding to know that students who might have otherwise not participated – because of short term illness, work or mental health issues viewed HyFlex as a tool that enabled their participation.

Of the 84 students registered in the course, 79 (94%) completed the course in time for final grade submissions to departmental administration. In contrast, 87% completed the Zoom version of the course in spring term 2022, and 77% completed the course in 2019, when the instructor last taught it before the pandemic.

Reflections

A Hyflex course design has its appeal, its advantages and is valued by students. But, as researchers note, there are also challenges associated with implementing a HyFlex course design:

HyFlex courses might also require more time investment in tracking and assessing student engagement across different learning pathways. At the institutional level, there are direct and indirect costs. The technology (hardware, software, support expertise) required to host synchronous classes online and in-person requires direct institutional investment. Instructors must also be supported to undertake the additional workload to create and implement HyFlex-designed courses, which may require indirect costs associated with technical upskilling or expert resourcing, hardware and software, workload buy-out, etc. (Korson 2022)

Taking this observation into account, this report concludes by reflecting on the use of technology to support student-centered flexibility, challenges associated with course syllabi or other regulations, and the amount of teacher input necessary to implement a HyFlex course design successfully.

On the use of technology to support student-centered flexibility

The key challenge during autumn term 2022 in providing a HyFlex course experience with a high degree of student interactivity for those taking part on campus or Zoom was the lack of a sufficient number of screens in the classrooms. If instructors are to be able to see Zoom students just as they would see students in the classroom, then there need be multiple screens of a sufficient size either above or behind the campus students so that faces can be clearly seen. Additionally, a large screen should be dedicated for chat. Of course, a large screen facing students in the classroom should be available for PowerPoint. One challenge

also exists in terms of audio. The current audio controls available in the classrooms assigned to this course are not always easily accessed, and it would be easier to adjust volume between videos being shown during sessions and comments from students on Zoom if there was some way to have a simple audio mixer that could allow for adjustments to be made independently of touch screens.

Challenges associated with course syllabi or other regulations

The key challenge in terms of regulations is ensuring that HyFlex is compliant with GDPR. During the design phase for the course, the plan had been to record all sessions and upload them to the course learning platform to allow students taking part asynchronously. However, through meetings with colleagues and presentations about the course design, it soon became clear that doing so would be in violation of GDPR, as students would need to give their consent for their face and voice to be recorded and distributed. Of course, this has been easily dealt with through not recording any of the sessions for upload. It does, however, put a special burden on the instructor to ensure that any information presented live is somehow also made available to students taking part through the course learning platform, for example through the use of course-wide emails. Second, course plans will need to be updated in the case of a HyFlex course design to indicate that there are no mandatory seminars to be attended, only mandatory assignments that can be completed in a number of different ways.

Amount of teacher input necessary to implement a HyFlex course design successfully

A standard 7.5 ECTS course in the School of Public Administration is allotted a total of 75 working hours (25 contact over a five-week period), plus an additional 13 hours for course administration. 15 extra hours are made available for grading assignments because of course size. As noted at the outset of this report, 20% of the instructor's time for a period of five months was generously financed by EUTOPIA through the Faculty of Social Sciences through EUTOPIA. Certainly, the design of the course would not have been possible without this additional financing of hours. However, with one HyFlex course designed, the curve to implement the next should become less steep, assuming similar practices are followed. Moreover, it is possible that if the HyFlex design were of interest to other instructors in the faculty, that presentations and some guidance could greatly reduce the amount of initial planning time that was necessary. The overall time spent on the course in autumn term 2022 once designed was as follows:

Recording mini-lectures and uploading:	20 hours
Block introduction, Q&A (F2F & OS):	4 hours
Block introduction, Q&A (OA):	2 hours
Supervision, Q&A (F2F & OS):	8 hours
Supervision, Q&A (OA):	4 hours
Assignment / seminars (F2F & OS):	12 hours
Assignment / seminars (OA, Administration)	4 hours
Grading:	32 hours
Updating assignments, readings, general administration:	20 hours
TOTAL:	106 hours

References

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