Hyflex Modality – We Came! We Saw! But Did We Conquer?

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The message we hear from the SUNY college administration, in their strategic plan, is to improve enrollment and retention. How can we improve enrollment and retention? Well, the answer is pretty clear: if SUNY colleges can offer solutions that benefit both traditional and nontraditional students, we will be ahead of the game.

SUNY was proactive in the delivery of beneficial solutions to student engagement in the classroom. Through an IITG grant in 2022, SUNY faculty were encouraged to participate and implement the Hyflex modality in their classrooms in a Course Resiliency and IITG grant. The grant was executed over a year (Fall 2022 and Spring 2023 with some Summer 2022 offerings). Hosts for the grant deliberations were from the Hyflex Learning Community which included Brian Beatty, a Professor of Instructional Design and Technology in the Department of Equity, Leadership Studies, and Institutional Technologies from San Francisco State University.

The hosts have a wealth of information in the Hyflex Learning Community at www.hyflexlearning.org that answers a lot of the questions that faculty may have about implementing a Hyflex modality in their classrooms. The definition of a Hyflex modality is that "A Hyflex course provides both a classroom and at least one online participation option, or mode, to students. Students are free to choose which option to use for each class section." www.hyflexlearning.org. A more elaborate definition was proposed by AI (Brian Beatty of the Hyflex Learning Community provided the prompts to AI): "Hyflex courses are courses that offer flexible learning options to students, allowing them to choose how they participate and engage with learning. Students have the option to attend on-campus, participate online, or a combination of both. The goal is to provide students with the most convenient and beneficial learning experience possible." (Beatty, 2023)

I was honored to participate in the IITG grant in the Fall of 2022. Being a novice faculty, I pondered over ways to make my teaching more enriching to the students. The class that I chose for this grant was a Cost Accounting course. In the Course Modality section of my syllabus, obtained from other sources, I advised the students that "This course is delivered in a "Hyflex format". Students may attend class in person each week, or alternatively participate in online activities. This choice may be made on a weekly basis. (This is the flexibility part of Hyflex.)"

Donna Shelton, the SUNY Polytechnic Institute project manager for the grant prepared the Course Resiliency Initiative Report in June 2023 (Shelton, 2023). Goal #3 for the resiliency project was to retain more students in redesigned courses in comparison with the same courses offered in previous semesters because of increased flexibility and resiliency (Shelton, 2023). An end-of-semester survey of students in Hyflex courses was conducted. With 79 students responding in the Fall of 2022, and 96 students responding in the Spring of 2023, the following findings were noted (Shelton, 2023):

1. 52% and 64% of students in the Fall of 2022 and Spring of 2023 respectively were very likely to take another Hyflex course if they had a choice between Hyflex and a traditional face-to-face course.
2. 68% and 65% of students in the Fall of 2022 and Spring of 2023 respectively were very likely to recommend a Hyflex course to another student

The EDUCAUSE report of 2023 highlighted students' perspectives on flexibility, choice, and equity concerning IT and technology-based college offerings (EDUCAUSE, 2023). There were 2000 respondents from 10 US institutions of higher learning. A key finding that I thought was worth noting, was that "When students are permitted to choose their own modality for engaging in course activities, they are significantly more satisfied with their hybrid course experiences than students who are not permitted to choose." (EDUCAUSE, 2023) Also, "Students who are empowered to "choose their own adventure" with their course modality engagements are more satisfied with their course expectations than those who don't get to choose." (EDUCAUSE, 2023)

There is a recurring theme with these findings, namely Student Empowerment. Empowering students on where and how they want to learn. There are some challenges though. More resources should be provided to instructors, for example, teaching assistants. In my Hyflex class, I was multitasking trying to satisfy the needs of all learners in their different modalities. While trying to lecture to the in-person class, I had to view the computer monitor occasionally to check for 'hands up' and the chat room for the synchronous students. At the same time, I was video recording the class for the asynchronous students, thus, I had to stand in one spot, with barely room to move at the front of the class so that I could be in full view of the video. Having a teaching assistant for each faculty member would most definitely eat up the budget resources that SUNY administers.

But what is most important? We need the students, to boost our enrollment and retention numbers. How can we boost these numbers? By empowering students in their learning. It is a double-edged sword. Damned if we do, damned if we don't. There is a tight balance whose outcome we are yet to see.

Bibliography

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