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“Maximum Student Engagement, Minimum Instructor Setup: UDL versus HyFlex Design Models”

OLC Accelerate

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Since we can't be together in real time, we also can't engage in the HyFlex model today. That would require the option of a live in-person experience alongside a synchronous or asynchronous participation option. Darned pandemic.

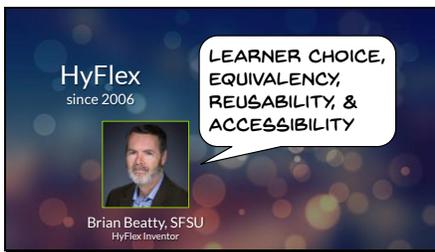
But we can still follow the principles of universal design for learning. And that's one of the big take aways from this session: greater flexibility for students correlates with more rigid structures and planning by institutions, designers, and instructors. Don't worry: this will still be an engaging and interactive session, and you'll still leave with practical ideas for how—and how much—you offer your students choices, voices, and agency in your course offerings.

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On the screen is an image from the 1923 silent film *Safety Last*, where the start Harold Lloyd dangles from the face of a rapidly-disintegrating clock high above the street. As you are looking ahead, what is your biggest concern about the interactions that you have with your students?

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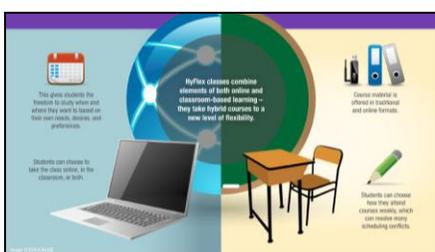


So, some quick definitions to get us started. The hybrid-flexible, or HyFlex design model was created in 2006 by Brian Beatty. It's sometimes called blend-flex, poly-synchronous, or other names, but the core elements of HyFlex are that learners can choose from among at least two equivalent ways to “attend” our courses: discussions, class sessions, lab work, writing, examinations, activities, assessments, you name it.

From a design standpoint, HyFlex courses are highly structured, reuse or repurpose content across structural elements, and require extensive pre-planning to offer access options for as many course interactions as possible.

The HyFlex model privileges student choice of participation format as the most important design element. All of the other elements—equivalence across experiences, reusable content and structures, and accessible materials—serve to support such learner choices.

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The HyFlex model provides maximum flexibility for learners, who decide how they wish to engage for each interaction offered in the course, or at least how they will participate from week to week or unit to unit.

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Before the COVID-19 pandemic, HyFlex was something of a niche format, adopted in programs where learner barriers related to work, family, distance, and time were common. Many community and technical colleges were well positioned for HyFlex design because they had long experience with remote-video courses using dedicated connected-video rooms throughout their service areas.

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Once the pandemic shifted everyone into remote instruction, HyFlex got a lot more visible. Many college and university administrators heard the “flexible” and rushed to adopt HyFlex, with mixed results.

[Kevin Gannon](#): “The flexibility afforded to students by HyFlex courses has been evident this semester, but the style of teaching required has proven more difficult to maintain than anticipated. Moreover, that same flexibility has been the proverbial double-edged sword when it comes to student success. Given a choice, students aren’t necessarily opting for the mode that would best advance their own learning, and the criteria that they’ve used to choose how they’ll ‘attend’ class have not been the most effective.”

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[Kevin Gannon](#): “HyFlex courses were initially developed for graduate students in an educational-technology program. The students tended to be full-time educational professionals (i.e., they already had day jobs), and were pursuing graduate work from a variety of locations and experiences. For that type of cohort—a self-selected set of experienced learners, familiar with a variety of technologies—HyFlex is a perfectly tailored mode of teaching and learning.”

For first-year college students, HyFlex courses are more challenging. For discussion-based or student-led fields and approaches, HyFlex tends to fit poorly. Expository and directed-lecture courses tend to fare better.

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Let’s take a moment now as we’re wrapping up our examination of the HyFlex model. What questions do you have? What’s on your mind? Have you done a HyFlex program? We’ll put 2 minutes on the clock. Please share your thoughts via the *Chat* feature, or, at the end of the 2 minutes, use the *Raise Hand* feature and we’ll bring you onto the live microphone to be part of the conversation.

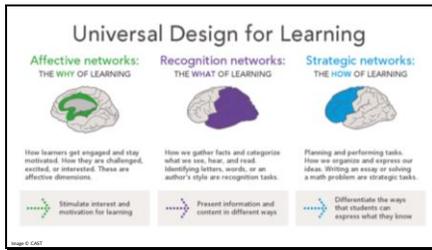
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So, what’s the verdict about HyFlex? It offers useful choices and flexibility to learners, but it requires a lot of intentional design work, significant technology setup and administration, purposeful effort to include all students, requires support and training for instructors, and works best with specific guidance to learners about how to decide about their best options.

Before we gavel HyFlex down, though, let’s compare it to another inclusive-design framework that contains many of the same elements: universal design for learning, or UDL.

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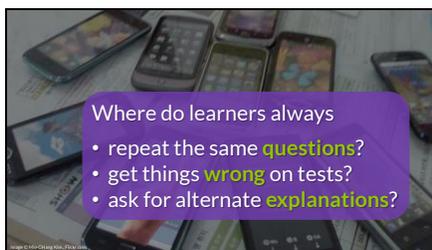


UDL is a design framework that recognizes that when we learn anything, we have to activate three chemical pathways in our brains: we need a reason to pay attention, the content itself, and ways to practice and express our knowledge.

UDL asks us to design interactions that learners have with materials, each other, instructors, and the wider world so that they can take part in multiple ways. This is giving students text-based and audio versions of course announcements, putting captions on video resources, and designing assessments to allow students to write the traditional essay or submit a selfie video as though they were reporting on the same learning objectives for the activity.

At first glance, UDL seems as labor-intensive as HyFlex design: it appears that every interaction, every piece of content, every activity must have a "plus one" option for how students engage with it. So, how is UDL different from HyFlex design?

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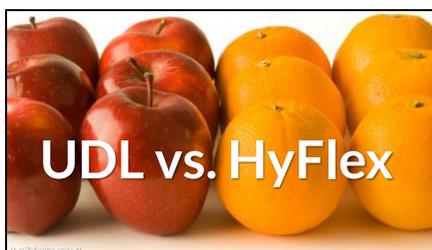


The most important difference is that UDL doesn't require the entire course experience to shift all at once. HyFlex is so powerful precisely because students have equivalent options for how they interact every single week. A HyFlex course that provided options in early weeks but required in-person participation later on would quickly create angry or frustrated learners. HyFlex is an all-or-nothing design approach.

Conversely, UDL's goal is to create expert learners: "purposeful and motivated, resourceful and knowledgeable, and strategic and goal-directed." While making every interaction accessible is the end goal of UDL, the approach works well whether all interactions use UDL or only a few targeted ones, and students don't need to be self-directed yet in order to benefit from the +1 design options in UDL.

Another way to contrast UDL and HyFlex is that HyFlex offers multiple simultaneous "attendance" experiences of the same content or interaction. UDL offers multiple ways for individual students to take part in the same experience. This is a key difference for program leaders, designers, and instructors: rather than the multiplicity of teaching three separate ways at the same time (HyFlex), UDL shifts the multiplicity away from the instructor and toward the learners.

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On the surface, a total UDL approach seems very much like a HyFlex class: there are learner options throughout. In UDL, though, the options have to do with how learners encounter ideas, take in information, and show their skills. HyFlex offers options in how learners "attend" class sessions. These are two kinds of flexibility that are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, we can practice both UDL and HyFlex teaching at the same time.

My conclusion after practicing both approaches, though, is that it makes more sense for most of us to start with the plus-one design approach of UDL. It doesn't require us to have our entire course re-designed before we begin the implementation. UDL doesn't require us to divide our instructor or student attention simultaneously among various live and asynchronous audiences. And UDL allows us to focus our design attention on the "pinch points" where things routinely don't go as we'd planned.

In fact, in Brian Beatty's guide to designing HyFlex courses, there is a section on UDL. After having the pleasure of interviewing Dr. Beatty, I can advocate for UDL as a first step that will tell you a lot about the fit of your subject matter, course level, and teaching resources for continuation into the HyFlex paradigm.

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Here is when you should ignore my advice.

Four years ago in Wisconsin, Blackhawk Technical College's new president made a big bet by declaring that the mission of the college was to offer maximum flexibility and support for the adult learners who made up the majority of people in their service area. The entire college invested time, resources, training, and program design into creating what they call poly-synchronous offerings (it's HyFlex). Their programs today are fully on-demand, triggered by student need, and "in-person, online, evenings, weekend classes" share common curricula, materials, environments, and time frames (blackhawk.edu).

The reason that Blackhawk Technical College's HyFlex programs work smoothly is because everyone at the institution made the shift: expectations for instructors were rewritten in job descriptions, student-services staff re-designed their work hours and ways of interacting with students, and even the tutoring, registrar, and financial-aid staff reconfigured how they talked to and supported learners.

Our colleagues at Blackhawk Technical College created their poly-synchronous programs to offer student maximum time flexibility. I am working with them in 2021 to help them now to address ways to offer their students choices about staying engaged, getting information, and showing what they know—the UDL approach.

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Now that you have a better grounding in the basics of the HyFlex model and the universal design for learning approach, what is your biggest take-away from our session today? What's one thing that you want to try out, one myth that you want to bust with your leadership team, one practice you're already doing that we've underlined as important?

Take a moment to share your one biggest take-away in the *Chat* feature, or if you're watching the recording, pause here and note your take-away for later action.

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I speak and consult about how we use technology to mediate teaching and learning interactions. If you enjoyed this session and would like to continue the conversation, I'd love to hear from you. You can see how I work with colleagues on my web site, thomasjtobin.com.

Also, don't forget to [rate this session on the OLC session page](#); thank you for making time to share your experience!