



FLEXIBLE HYBRID LEARNING APPROACHES FOR EQUITABLE STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCES

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1. Background and Context of the Project

Teaching public relations, digital marketing, social media, and advertising at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) is where I work as an associate professor at the Department of Strategic Communication. A socially just education, I believe, has the power to change lives and bring about social change. In my journey to become a good teacher, my mission as a change agent is to be an advocate for inclusive learning environments by using innovative technologies that make learning fun. My role is to dismantle barriers to learning that marginalise and exclude students.

Considering the unprecedentedly high unemployment levels, loadshedding stages, crime rates and rand-dollar exchange rates, our students are vulnerable to overlapping barriers to learning. Increasingly, students miss out on classes as they cannot always attend traditional, face-to-face lectures. In a struggle for survival, some must work to make ends meet for themselves and their extended families, stay at home to care for children or don't have transport money to travel to campus. Consider, for example, how students' daily struggles to survive are impacted by South Africa's unemployment rate of 32,9%, among the highest in the world (Stats SA, 2023). Also, 71.3% of underprivileged students in the Faculty of Humanities rely on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (DIPEM, 2022). Therefore, there is a need for greater flexibility in the delivery mode of classes at contact universities to include vulnerable and marginalised students.

As an advocate for socially just education, my project brings about change by influencing my university peers to adopt hybrid learning as a flexible, inclusive approach during this trying time of chaos. At a contact university, hybrid learning is an inclusive approach for post-graduate students. Correspondingly, I advocate for hybrid learning as a flexible delivery mode designed to provide both distance and face-to-face students with an equal opportunity to engage with their peers and the lecturer simultaneously (Abdelmalak and Parra, 2016). Hybrid learning is defined as the use of electronic equipment in a physical classroom to facilitate effective streaming and interaction among in-person and online students attending the same class (CAT, 2022). Hybrid learning is also called HyFlex (hybrid-flexible) learning since it accommodates contact and online students in the same class by combining synchronous and asynchronous online participation options for students who choose not to, or are unable to, participate in traditional classroom instruction (Beatty, 2020).

The flexibility of hybrid learning holds the potential for socially just education since it allows for every student to attend class regardless of their physical location. More difficult to achieve, however, is to design hybrid learning experiences that provide both distance and on-campus students with an equal opportunity to engage with their peers and the teacher. As indicated in Table 1, my students and I had to overcome several barriers equitable hybrid learning (Abdelmalak and Parra, 2016; Kohnke and Moorhouse, 2021; Moorhouse and Tiet, 2021; Raes, 2022).

Table 1: Barriers to equitable, comparable, and engaging hybrid learning experiences

Design and pedagogical barriers	Students' barriers to learning
Being naturally comfortable with traditional place-based classroom methods, I initially resisted the change to complex, hybrid designs. I disliked teaching in impersonal online environments. Integrating the best of both modes was initially very daunting.	Remote students may feel they don't have the same peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher engagement opportunities as their on-campus counterparts, therefore feeling excluded and less motivated to learn.
Excluding online students by reducing hybrid learning to merely switching on a webcam during a lecture. Although easier to do, it merely provides students with a backup recording of a lecture for those who missed it.	Online students become a passive, unengaging audience to which a lecture is broadcast. Often than not, students don't really find the time or interest to watch recorded lectures that they missed.
I lacked the confidence and experience with complex live streaming technologies and contingencies. I have never taught hybrid classes before and was out of my comfort zone.	Remote students may feel forgotten and isolated from their peers when a lecturer naturally focuses on tried and tested face-to-face pedagogies.

In the beginning, I felt exhausted and overwhelmed by technological glitches since hybrid teaching requires tech-savvy teaching competencies.	On-campus students are excluded when lecturers become too occupied and focused on solving technological glitches.
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When reflecting on the barriers to learning indicated in Table 1, it is evident that the TAU project provided a meaningful opportunity to explore how these barriers could be dismantled.

2. Project Aim and Deliverables

To investigate how hybrid learning can be designed to enable equitable, comparable, and engaging learning experiences for a diverse student body at a contact university.

Deliverables: A framework for hybrid learning design principles.

3. Alignment with UJ's Teaching and Learning Priorities

Being responsive to the full diversity of students' socio-economic backgrounds is evident in pedagogies committed to "teaching the students we have", as prioritised in UJ's Teaching and Learning Policy (DVC: Academic, 2022). In so doing, the policy encourages agents for social change to develop inclusive approaches to redress historical injustices while being "fit for purpose". More specifically, hybrid learning supports UJ's Strategic Objective 2, which focuses on achieving excellence in teaching and learning (University of Johannesburg, 2021).

Being responsive to students' socio-economic challenges and designing inclusive hybrid learning experiences for all students, regardless of their physical location, my TAU project was clearly aligned with UJ's teaching and learning priorities.

4. Outline of the Initial Planned Activities and Timeline

The three-month project followed a design-based research approach to strengthen Scholarship in Teaching and Learning (SoTL) (Amiel and Reeves, 2008; McKenney and Reeves, 2012). Planned project activities between 18 July 2022 and 21 October 2022 are indicated in Figure 1 below:

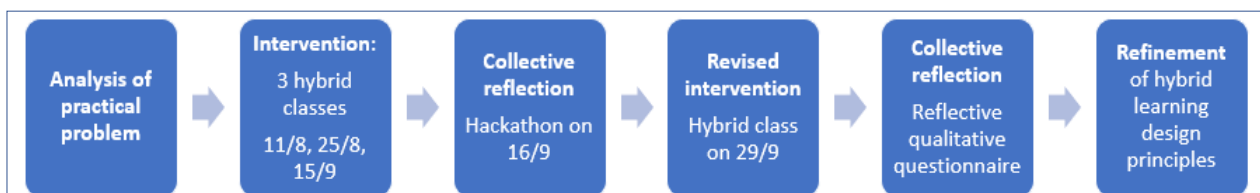


Figure 1: Initial design-based research timeline

The project was conducted in the Department of Strategic Communication. Hybrid learning classes were held for nearly 100 students enrolled in the Advanced Diploma in Communication Management in the module Digital Contexts.

5. Stakeholder Consultations and Collaborations

Technical advice, continuous co-reflection, guidance, and evaluation when using a Future-Fit classroom with a smart whiteboard for live, hybrid classes:

- TAU Fellow at UJ and Director at Centre for Academic Technologies (CAT), Dr Hemali Joshi. Dr Joshi also did a welcome and orientation session with students.
- CAT instructional designer, Ms Emily Mthembu and Senior Specialist (Instructional Design), Dr Arno Louw.

Institutional support and permission to gather data and present project progress to school and faculty peers:

- Faculty of Humanities Ethics Committee.
- The Vice Dean of Teaching and Learning at the Faculty of Humanities, Prof Suzy Graham.

- The HOD of the Department of Strategic Communication, Prof Elizabeth Lubinga.
- The Head of the School of Communication, Dr Sifiso Zondo.

Continuous co-reflection, initial help to manage chat rooms, and help with data collection:

- Colleague Prof Corne Meintjes, Department of Strategic Communication.
- Tutor, Ms Matshepo Tladi

6. Changes to the Project Plan and Revised Approach

Initially, the plan was to teach only four hybrid classes in a Future-Fit venue, as indicated in Figure 1 earlier. After listening to student voices who experienced challenges to attend classes in-person, 13 hybrid classes were taught instead, as shown in Figure 2. Of these, nine classes took place in an ordinary venue without a smart white board.

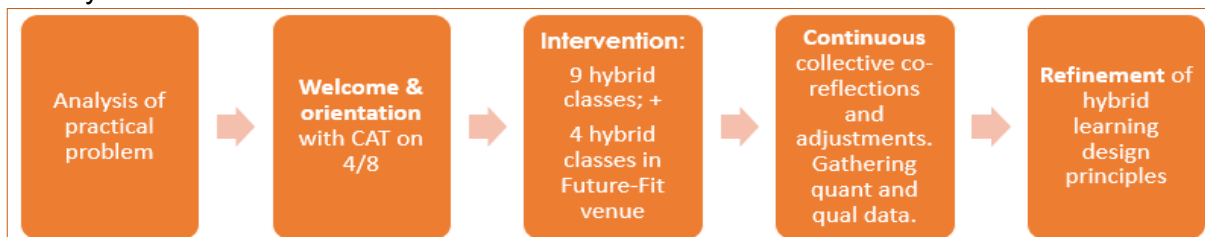


Figure 2: Revised and executed design-based research timeline

Another change to the initial plan indicated in Figure 1 earlier is evident in Figure 2. Owing to being overwhelmed by the challenges of the current environment, as explained in Section 1, students could not find the resources to attend the planned hackathon. Instead, co-reflection was done seamlessly during class time, offering rich insights and spontaneous discussions. In addition, links to quantitative questions were shared with students to gain statistical data for a future SOTL manuscript. The hackathon was also replaced with a co-reflection session with CAT colleagues on how hybrid learning can be designed overcome barriers to learning for social justice.

7. Conclusions and Contributions to a More Socially Just Teaching and Learning Context

The project brings about change by influencing university teachers and designers to adopt hybrid learning as a flexible, inclusive approach as follows:

- Achieving project deliverables: hybrid learning design principles are documented in a multi-media website and a video that I created for university teachers [See the website and video [here](#)]. The website is integrated with the TAU digital artefact project.
- Achieving project deliverables: hybrid learning design principles were included in two presentations to the entire university on 26 October 2022 [See the video [here](#)] and again on 2 February 2023 [See the video [here](#)]. I also delivered a presentation to my department and sister department in the School of Communication on 19 August 2022 [See the video [here](#)].
- Achieving project deliverables: hybrid learning design principles are documented in an article accepted for a publication titled 'Teaching Innovation for the 21st Century: Showcasing UJ Teaching and Learning 2022'. [See the manuscript [here](#)].
- Being an outspoken voice for socially just hybrid learning during meetings and advising peers in my department and further afield about hybrid learning. I held a workshop in my department in the Future-Fit venue to demonstrate how to use hybrid technologies.
- Data was gathered for a SOTL manuscript, of which the draft is in progress.
- Increase in success rate: 91.4% in 2022 when I did not teach this module. 99% success rate achieved in 2023 when I took over the module, teaching hybrid.
- Refined hybrid learning design principles can be seen in action in my hybrid classes in the Future-Fit venue [See the video [here](#)] and an ordinary venue [See video [here](#)].
- The project aim was achieved since hybrid learning was effectively designed to enable equitable, comparable and engaging learning experiences, as indicated in Figure 3 and Figure 4 below.

Student's emotional engagement (cont.) with the hybrid class based on whether they attended online or in-person (7-point Likert scale reduced to three categories)

Scale items adapted from Gunuc, S & Kuzu, A. (2015)	Online N = 29			In-person N = 14		
	Disagree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Agree	Undecided
I am able to show respect for my classmates during a hybrid class	7.6%	92.4%	0%	0%	93%	7%
I like my lecturers more because of the hybrid mode in which class is offered	11.5%	84.5%	3.8%	7%	79%	14%
I feel anxious when I don't attend the hybrid class	27%	42%	31%	21%	65%	14%
I feel part of the class irrespective of whether I attend online or in person	7.6%	84.6%	3.8%	21%	72%	7%
I like communicating with my lecturers during a hybrid class	11.5%	84.5%	3.8%	0%	93%	7%
I like seeing my friends in class irrespective of whether I attend online or in-person	11.5%	69.3%	19.2%	14%	86%	0%

Gunuc, S & Kuzu, A. (2015) Student engagement scale: development, reliability and validity, Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 40:4, 587-610, DOI: 10.1080/02602938.2014.938019

Figure 3: Online students feel slightly more included in hybrid classes

Inputs collected via Qualtrics and Microsoft Forms

These quotes sum up the sentiment from students:

"Hybrid classes really encourage me to study more since I can't afford to rent a room due to financial problems.....being part of class online really means everything to me since it helps me cope with depression since I'm going through a lot."

"The hybrid class is an eye opener for me, it's also interactive and engaging"

"The learning experience has been really fun and I felt I could participate better having my devices in front of rather than reading from the projector as I have an eye problem."

"Hybrid learning is the future and allows me time to do other things"

"Hybrid class is very accommodative, if I knock off late at work I am still able to join class. It is also accommodating to travel, we are able to access class from which ever city we are in at the moment. Hybrid ensures attendance"

"Online hybrid class motivate me to attend classes more than onsite classes"

Figure 4: Student comments appreciating hybrid learning as a socially just pedagogy

- The module teaching evaluation suggests that student satisfaction for hybrid learning is positive, being mostly higher than the departmental and university averages as indicated in Figure 5 below.

Module:	(222SC07X02) DIGITAL CONTEXTS
Lecturer:	Prof Maritha Pritchard
Department:	DEP OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION
Faculty:	Faculty of Humanities

Question*	Lecturer	Department	Faculty	University
The lecturer made learning materials available in an accessible format	3.71	3.56	3.46	3.47
The lecturer provided clear guidelines on how I should participate in learning activities	3.63	3.49	3.41	3.39
The lecturer provided clear guidelines on how to submit assessment tasks	3.54	3.47	3.45	3.46
The lecturer provided feedback to help me achieve the module outcomes	3.46	3.39	3.26	3.22
The lecturer used tools and resources that supported my learning	3.42	3.43	3.33	3.35
The lecturer used tools and technology to explain concepts	3.38	3.38	3.25	3.27
The lecturer made the purpose of learning in this module clear	3.38	3.43	3.40	3.41
The lecturer gave timeous feedback on assessments	3.29	3.38	3.28	3.25
The lecturer supported my learning during consultations	3.14	3.36	3.28	3.31
Overall Teaching Evaluation	3.44	3.43	3.35	3.35

*Ranked in descending order

N = 24 N = 163 N = 1 062 N = 9 952

Figure 5: Above-average student satisfaction with hybrid learning

To conclude, I was able to enact transformation by redressing some of the historical and lingering effects of colonisation through humanising pedagogies providing a welcoming, inclusive pedagogical space for equal participation and inclusive access to learning that does not discriminate against students' individual attendance preferences during troubled times (Greyling and Wentzel, 2008; Zembylas, 2010, 2018; del Carmen Salazar, 2013).

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