Online, Blended, Flipped, and Hyflex Learning Environments

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Gone are the days of wondering which campus building your class meets in for a face-to-face lecture or wondering which office conference room hosts your mandatory work training. This is because virtual learning is now a very common way of taking classes and conducting training. In fact, Bose (2017) mentioned that about 98% of all companies planned to use virtual learning by 2020. In addition, the number of students enrolled in at least one virtual class was 5.8 million just a few years ago (Allen & Seaman, 2016). With these numerical figures conducted before Covid, those numbers are likely much higher today. After the Covid pandemic, there was a rapid increase in various types of online classes (Na et al., 2021) all over the world. To keep up with growing learning demands, there are different types of environments for learning such as online, blended, flipped, and Hyflex learning environments. This paper will explore the various learning environments, advantages, and disadvantages of these environments.

Learning Environments

Some notable differences exist among these learning environments, with only one, Hyflex, including a face-to-face class option. Although, to fully understand all the differences, it is important to start with an understanding of the synchronous and asynchronous learning types. Synchronous remote learning occurs through various online technology and media where the learner and the instructor or trainer are online at the same time (Hrastinski, 2008). Asynchronous remote learning occurs though various online technology and media without the learner and instructor or trainer being online at the same time (Hrastinski, 2008). These descriptors are important for defining these virtual learning environments.

The online learning designation simply means all virtual learning for that class or training is held fully online, typically through asynchronous methods or a mixture of asynchronous and some synchronous exams (like proctored exams) based on the class description (New, 2023). The blended learning designation means there is an established frequency of online, asynchronous learning and synchronous, remote learning throughout the class or training length (Yang, 2021). The flipped learning environment consists of both online, asynchronous learning and synchronous, remote learning, but with the requirement of viewing some online materials before the synchronous session (Margulis, et al., 2021). Finally, the Hyflex option, also known as Blendflex, is when the delivery of learning allows students to choose any mode based on their preference in a particular week, either face-to-face, synchronous-remote, or asynchronous (Lieberman, 2018).

Advantages of Learning Environments

There are some clear advantages to the different types of learning. The advantage of a fully online course is that no planning for in-person meetings is required unless there is a synchronous event, which the learner should know about prior to beginning the class or training. The advantage of the blended method is when topics become confusing, active discussions with the instructor can take place. Therefore, the blended learning method is considered a student-centered approach and is aligned with the constructivist learning theory (Yang et al., 2021). The advantage of the flipped classroom is a more engaged environment promoting higher order thinking through the reflection period scheduled before the synchronous meeting (Margulis et al., 2021). Finally, the advantage of Hyflex is flexibility of choice in learning modality based on the student's personal needs in a particular week and the student's learning style (Lieberman, 2018).

Disadvantages of Learning Environments

Just as there are advantages to various remote learning types, there are also disadvantages. A disadvantage of a fully online course is that not all students are used to pacing themselves appropriately without face-to-face or synchronous interactions (Yang et al., 2021) and thus may lack in appropriate time management to manage the class successfully. A disadvantage of the blended method could happen if collaboration efforts from the instructor, instructional designer, and subject matter expert (SME) are faulty. Targeted collaboration will ensure their institution has the best layout for their student population. This is because research is scarce in a definitive conceptual framework for blended learning environments promoting optimal student learning (Yang et al., 2021). The disadvantage of the flipped learning environment is that it requires a different mindset from the teacher, extra time to prepare resources, notes, and lectures to ensure the asynchronous and synchronous periods work together harmoniously, and engaged IT support for the technical needs (Margulis e al., 2021). Lastly, the disadvantages of Hyflex go back to choosing the right instructor who can manage the larger class, creating appropriate training for the technology required, and the cost of creating the classes (Leiberman, 2018). In fact, Lieberman (2018) mentioned the cost of a short-term project at Central Georgia Technical College at $40,000 which may concern some budgeting managers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both higher education and corporate training have increased use of virtual learning to teach and train both students and employees. Understanding the various types of virtual learning environments can be helpful in choosing the most appropriate for the learning audience and company culture. Therefore, a comparison chart (see Appendix) may be useful in this decision process. In the end, spending some time comparing these options may be useful for optimal learning, for budgeting, and for other planning purposes.

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Appendix

Mind Map Tool for Learning Environments