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Student Perceptions and Experiences in Hybrid Courses

An Action Research Report

By Diane Perry

Student Perceptions and Experiences in Hybrid Courses

Submitted on May 22, 2015

in fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree

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Abstract

This study was intended to look at how student perceptions of and experiences in hybrid courses affect their performance. It was performed at a private university in the Midwest where hybrid courses are defined as any course with at least 30% of the class meetings are held in a traditional, face-to-face setting. Eighteen students participated in the survey, and two in a focus group. Results on whether or not students thought they performed better in a hybrid or face-to-face format were mixed, though they did point to overall dissatisfaction with the discussion capabilities of the hybrid format. This suggested that the best way to make a hybrid course more effective would be to focus on a way to increase discussion.

Keywords: hybrid courses, student perceptions, performance

As technology advances, there is a drive to integrate that technology into the classroom. This leads to the question of whether or not the increased use of technology is helpful or harmful. Everyone agrees that it is important to find a balance between tried and true techniques and the cutting edge of the technological world, the world into which students will be moving. Many different strategies have been devised, one of them being the hybrid course: a course which divides course time between traditional, face-to-face meetings and on-line work.

The action researcher and her classmates were among the first wave of students going through our hybrid program, and many of them were confused and disoriented. Conversations between students before and after class had people questioning what was expected of them, whether or not their professors were comfortable with the format, and whether or not they would prefer to surrender two nights per week for face-to-face class sessions rather than having two classes on alternating Monday nights. In addition, technological teething troubles caused assignments to disappear from the drop-box and discussion posts to disappear from the discussion board. Then, at a staff meeting at the action researcher's student teaching placement, the school president proposed the implementation of the hybrid format for some of the classes available to students. Having experienced this course type for herself, she immediately began to wonder: how effective is the hybrid format?

Since most of the action researcher's hybrid worries and woes were shared with her fellow students, she wanted to examine the hybrid format from a student's perspective. Knowing that she and her classmates were essentially guinea pigs for the format, she knew that the academic institution would be having teething troubles and that

her class had been the ones who had to deal with that. She wondered if students continued to have these troubles now that the hybrid format was more common. The action researcher chose to study at a private, university in the Midwest. Their Evening, Weekend, and Online (EWO) program had moved completely to the hybrid format. According to the department's definition, a hybrid course is any course which had at least thirty percent of its meetings in a traditional, face-to-face setting. Eighteen EWO students participated in an on-line survey, and two participated in a focus group to help her try to answer this question: how so student perceptions of and experiences in hybrid courses affect their performance?

Literature Review

People say that we live in the digital age. Thus, it should come as no surprise that there has been a push towards moving education into a digital forum. As of 2013, sixty-three percent of academic institutions believed that on-line offerings were an important part of their marketing strategy (Frimming, Bower, and Choi 2013). This first began with on-line classes, which were meant to give students with tight schedules a greater degree of flexibility. The only schedule which on-line students need to follow is a series of assignment deadlines. However, it is theorized that a lack of interaction between teachers and students as well as amongst the students themselves has a detrimental effect on learning (Jackson, 2013). This, along with other considerations led to the creation of 'blended' or 'hybrid' classes. These classes take place partially in a traditional classroom with face-to-face interaction between students and professor, and partially on-line. The on-line component may consist of assignments turned in to digital drop-boxes, online discussion forums or chat rooms, and possibly video-information from the professor.

This class style is meant to blend the best of both worlds: the flexible scheduling of on-line classes with the quality interaction time of traditional learning.

Since their conception, hybrid classes have increased in popularity. Many colleges have introduced a number of hybrid classes, and there has been some discussion about introducing hybrid courses into high school settings. Early reception of the concept was mixed. Hybrid classes require a number of face-to-face meetings, so the scheduling freedom of an on-line class is somewhat lost. From a different perspective, attempts to move classes onto the internet have been perceived as an attempt to turn an educational institution into a “diploma mill”; institutions which do not care about the educational value of the class so long as the student can earn a certificate (Katz, 2008). Perceptions of an institution aside, there are factors involved in a hybrid course which might affect students’ ability to learn and perform academically in such a class setting.

Research to date has shown contradictory results as to which formula of learning is most beneficial to students. Aly (2013) ran a comparison study between hybrid and on-line versions of a business course in which he concluded that on-line courses were superior due to cost-effectiveness after students showed no significant difference in academic performance between these sections. Gonzales (2014) disagreed, concluding after a six-year study into the differences between traditional face-to-face, hybrid, and on-line sections of her Core 1 biology class. Her results showed a higher rate of performance success from hybrid students than the on-line students, though both showed a higher success rate than the traditional face-to-face students. It is possible that the differing lengths of their studies affected their results. Aly (2013) examined two hybrid and one on-line section of a course over the span of one year. Gonzales (2014) examined

trends over six years' worth of classes. According to Gonzales, while the hybrid students showed the highest success rates, they also showed the widest range of academic performance. Research shows a need to further investigate this phenomenon (Gonzales, 2014). It would be interesting to see how student perceptions of the course as well as experiences while taking the course affect the academic performance outcomes. If a student does not feel that their learning is important to their educational institution, they might not put as much effort into the class. They might think that the course matters less than a traditional face-to-face lecture. In addition, technical difficulties could interfere with students' ability to successfully complete course work on time during the on-line portion of the class.

Most studies focus on the differences in performance between hybrid and traditional face-to-face students rather than hybrid versus fully on-line courses. Gonzales' (2014) study showed a higher success rate among her hybrid students than her traditional face-to-face students. However, she noted that somehow her hybrid students spent more time on location than the traditional section, which may have affected her results. Frimming et al. (2013) also studied the differences between hybrid and traditional classes, though this study was conducted in a physical education course. Four sections of the class were traditional face-to-face lectures, and one was conducted as a hybrid. Statistical analysis showed no significant difference between the academic performances of students in the face-to-face section versus the hybrid section. However, their study dove a little deeper, looking at differences between the perceptions and experiences of the students in the different class types. Frimming et al. (2013) were not the only researchers to examine this. Multiple different studies have examined student

perception and experience in hybrid courses in comparison to traditional face-to-face classrooms.

Much like the studies about academic performance, results of studies on student perception have also been inconsistent. Frimming et al. (2013) examined students' reports of their course perceptions –the teacher's organization, passion for the subject, care for the students, etc. – and their personal experiences gained from the course format. While statistical analysis showed no significant difference in student self-reported perception, there was a significant difference in student self-reported experiences. The researchers came to the conclusion that traditional face-to-face lecture was more beneficial to the students than hybrid classes (Frimming et al., 2013). The students in the study cited close interaction with the teacher and their peers as being most beneficial. By contrast, a different study in 2013 using surveys about student satisfaction in another physical education class concluded with significant difference that the hybrid class was more effective for student learning than traditional face-to-face classes (Elsissy, 2013). Students in Elsissy's study showed that the hybrid course gave a better venue for critical reflection on the subject matter than a traditional lecture setting. The students in the hybrid course also claimed a greater ownership of their own learning generated by being responsible for information that needed to be learned during the on-line sessions of the class. Other research has shown that students performed significantly better in a hybrid version of a course despite reporting negative experiences and disapproval of the course setting (Wichadee, 2013).

Simpson and Benson (2013) created a study of online students across several universities looking at sources of student satisfaction with on-line classes. These factors

should be taken into consideration while looking into how students perceive the on-line portion of their course work. According to Simpson et al. (2013), access to peer review tools and materials as well as training in how to do peer review work had no outcome on student satisfaction with their courses. In addition, Simpson et al. (2013) looked at the setup of the courses, comparing courses which had undergone strict peer review during their creation to those which had not. Again, results were not statistically significant. When looked at alongside the results from the study by Frimming et al. (2013) in which students credited their satisfaction with the course to consistent interaction with their professor in which they got to see the professor's enthusiasm, it is possible to gain an insight into what factors students may view as being most important about the on-line portions of a course. Courses held completely on-line do not allow for consistent face-to-face interaction with a professor or other educational professional. If the rigorously designed course structure and access to peer review tools do not affect levels of student satisfaction with an on-line education, perhaps interaction with the professor causes the difference. It should be noted, however, that despite research being run at several different higher learning institutions, the sample size of the Simpson et. al (2013) study was limited. The students involved were all in graduate school, and only one hundred fifty-seven of the students solicited by the study agreed to participate.

Despite the improvement of student scores in a hybrid class over the traditional face-to-face format, students in Wichadee's (2014) study reported a lack of access to the necessary technology, or faults in the technology as the largest component of their negative experience. In addition, they claimed that group projects and assignments were much more difficult to schedule and complete when students were not consistently

meeting on campus (Wichadee, 2014). Coordination for group projects may well have been complicated by faulty technology. It should be noted, however, that Wichadee's (2014) study took place in Thailand; where I think it is possible that fewer students would have access to functional technology, and where their school might not have the funding for the appropriate technology to aid them in completing their course. Most of the students' complaints of technological malfunction were centered on school-provided equipment (Wichadee, 2014). The availability of technology is an important component to understand before moving to a hybrid class system.

Looking at Wichadee's (2014) study in comparison to the study completed by Simpson et al. (2013) provides another potential insight into what students think is the most important aspect of a course with an on-line component. Access to technology can vary depending on time, money, and geographical location. Since an on-line class component requires access to the internet, specific software programs, and sometimes specific hardware, students may find it difficult to obtain access to the tools they need. Add in other potential problems with technology gone wrong, and there is another strong factor which might play into how a student perceives the course. While technological glitches can directly affect performance, a student's perception of their ability to perform around these issues may cause an indirect affect as well. Another study by Foulger, Amrein-Beardsley, and Toth (2011) looked at various student perceptions which they felt had positive or negative effects on their course experience. In the open-ended responses section of the study, one of the major student concerns was about how technologically savvy the professor was. Professors who were unclear and inconsistent in their communication were detrimental to the learning process. In addition, students felt that

they had to put more effort into their on-line sessions which required lengthy typed responses to readings which would have been discussed in a face-to-face class (Foulger et al., 2011). It is notable that, despite these students concerns, their opinion of hybrid courses was positive, and on-line learning was determined to be preferable to face-to-face traditional lecture.

In the end, there are many considerations that need to be taken into account while attempting to implement hybrid classes. The first is the availability of technology, something that is not necessarily as problematic in some places as in others. The plain and simple fact of the matter remains that hybrid classes have an on-line component which requires access to technology, specifically the internet. In addition, students may have to procure software packages or additional hardware devices such as headsets. There are, however, other things to consider. It is difficult to make personal connections and build trust without meeting face-to-face, or with fewer face-to-face meetings (Gleason, 2013). It is difficult to determine the inflection that someone intends behind their words in type, particularly if that person is an unknown entity. Misunderstandings caused during on-line sessions could potentially cause barriers in face-to-face settings. On the other hand, shy students might be more comfortable contributing to discussions in an on-line setting (Gleason, 2013). Even in live-time discussion on-line, there is a certain kind of anonymity from communicating through text. Typing a comment into a discussion forum feels different than speaking out in a classroom setting. The possibility of adding a certain number of discussion comments and responses as a graded component of the class can cause students to enter into discussions who might otherwise have remained silent. Another major consideration is scheduling (Gleason, 2013). While

fewer face-to-face meetings can benefit some students, others will have a harder time with scheduling which could affect their performance.

Thus far, data on hybrid courses remain largely inconclusive. Many people consider that the success of the course format depends on inclinations of the students involved. It is important to continue to study the effectiveness of hybrid courses in order to understand how they fit into the world of modern education. It is very important to understand how students' experiences in a course affect their ability to perform, particularly in comparison to a traditional face-to-face classroom.

Methodology

The action researcher collected data through a survey and focus group to find out how student perceptions of and experiences in hybrid courses affected their performance. Data was collected at a Midwestern, private, all-women's university. At this institution, the weekend student program is held in hybrid format, with at least 30% percent of classes taking place in a traditional, face-to-face setting. The other segments of the courses take place either as on-line meetings via face-time software or contributions to online discussion forums. The ratio of face-to-face versus online meetings can vary, with some classes balancing evenly at 50% face-to-face and 50% online. Working with the Evening, Weekend, and Online (EWO) department, the action researcher sent her consent forms (Appendix A), surveys, and focus group invitations to the EWO students. Eighteen students agreed to participate in the survey, and two in the focus group. It is unknown how many students received the invitations, since the EWO department was not at liberty to release that information. Students had one week to complete the survey and agree to the focus group.

The survey (Appendix B) consisted of nineteen questions. The action researcher asked students to rank their level of agreement with statements about hybrid courses on a scale of one to five, one being “strongly agree” and five being “strongly disagree”. There were also several short answer questions asking students to relate their own experiences. She asked that the students reflect on their most recent hybrid course as they answered most of the ranking questions. Because hybrid courses are so reliant upon technology, she asked them to think about all of their hybrid courses for technology-based questions in hopes of gaining as broad of an idea as possible about what kind of technological issues might impact students as they proceeded through their educational process. Statements and questions on the survey were primarily aimed at gaining insight into students’ perceptions and experiences, and made up the bulk of the survey questions. For those students who had participated in both hybrid and traditional face-to-face courses, there were two questions asking them to compare their performance in a hybrid setting as opposed to a face-to-face setting. The action researcher asked students who had only taken one semester worth of hybrid courses to write about their expectations going into this new type of course. The final two questions asked students who had already taken multiple semesters worth of hybrid courses to explain how their previous courses had changed their expectations for their most recent courses.

The action researcher collaborated with the Evening, Weekend, and Online (EWO) department heads to ensure that all of the questions were pertinent and unbiased. The ranking statements could be broken down into sections. Based on themes encountered during her research, the questions were divided into four sections. The first section pertained to student perceptions about specific aspects of the course, such as the

schedule, discussion, and sense of community. The second section asked the students about their perceptions of the effectiveness of their professors. The third section asked about the technological aspects of the course. The final section asked students who had participated in both hybrid and face-to-face courses to compare their performance in both.

The questions in the focus group (Appendix C) delved into how students felt that these perceptions and experiences affected their performance. The focus group consisted of a semi-structured interview. As with the survey, the action researcher worked with the heads of the EWO department to make sure that the questions were relevant and unbiased. The action researcher arranged to meet with the volunteers at the college campus. They had a two hour conversation about hybrid courses over dinner. Both of the volunteers were returning to school later in life. The first had given up on a biology degree and was returning to school to earn a degree in a field which she found interesting: theology. The second was returning for a major in business and economics. Her daughter was a graduate of the university, which was why she chose this institution to resume her academic career. In order to gain an education despite their schedules, they enrolled in the EWO department. Both had enrolled before the EWO department transitioned to the hybrid course format.

As with the survey, the questions for the guided interview could be broken into questions. The first section was aimed at perceptions, asking how the students felt upon learning that their classes would be conducted in hybrid format and how they tried to prepare for the course. The action researcher was curious to see if students went about this preparation any differently due to different expectations. The second section asked

about how the students dealt with their assignments. What were their views on the on-line discussions? What did they think of the timing of the assignments? The third section asked about their opinions of the professors. Did they seem comfortable with the class format? What kind of feedback did they provide? What kind of support? The fourth section asked them about how they felt the format affected their performance. Which aspects of the hybrid course were most helpful for their learning? Which were least? What did they do to ensure their success in the course, and was it different than a face-to-face course?

Since the research thus far has proven highly inconclusive, the action researcher had a sneaking suspicion that student responses might be all over the board. Many researchers up until this point had concluded that the effectiveness of a hybrid course depended upon the inclinations of individual students. As she began to examine student responses, the action researcher saw the expected diversity in the answers.

Data Analysis

Most of the students who responded to the questionnaire were nearing the end of their degree program. The number of hybrid courses that each student had taken, however, varied widely. One student had taken as many as eighteen hybrid courses, though the most frequently reported number of courses taken was five. When asked if they would actively choose hybrid over traditional face-to-face courses, the majority of students answered yes (Table 1).

Table 1.
Students who actively chose hybrid courses versus those who did not

<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
13	5

For most of the questions, students were asked to rank whether or not they agreed with a statement; 1: Strongly Agree, 2: Somewhat Agree, 3: Neutral, 4: Somewhat Disagree, 5: Strongly Disagree. This ranking tool will be used for all of the following figures.

Asked about the freedom granted to their schedule by the hybrid format, nine out of eighteen students strongly agreed that they liked the degree of freedom it provided. Asked in short answer about their expectations of hybrid courses, multiple students responded that this freedom was essential to completing a degree due to other schedule commitments. In the focus group however, one of the participants claimed that the amount of work she had to do for her hybrid classes was easily double what she had to do for traditional, face-to-face classes. The other agreed, saying that she had to write a paper for every on-line meeting. They said that it was easier to schedule life around classes, but that it was difficult to find time for the extra work. In addition, most of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that the schedule of face-to-face versus on-line meetings were clear (Figure 1).

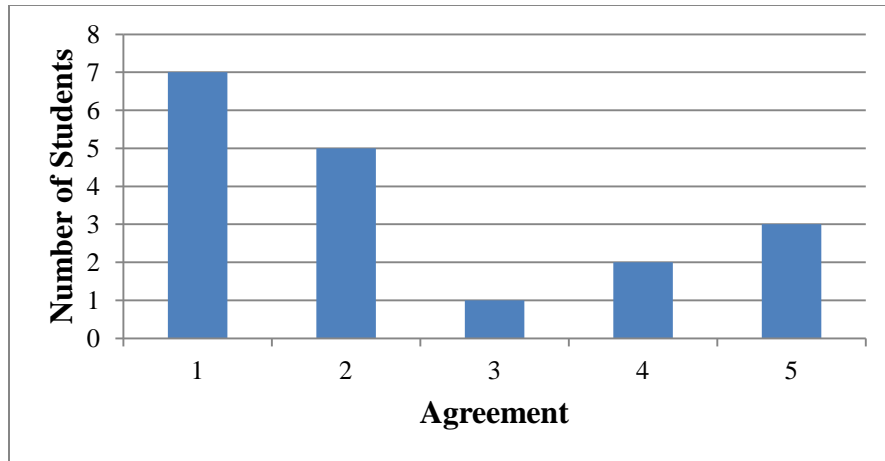


Figure 1. The schedule of face-to-face vs. online sessions was clear to me. This figure shows that the majority of students understood the schedule of face-to-face versus on-line class sessions.

A common component of a hybrid course is student interactions via on-line discussion boards. The mode response when asked if on-line discussion was as meaningful as face-to-face was “strongly disagree”, with the overall trend of the graph pointing to disagreement (Figure 2).

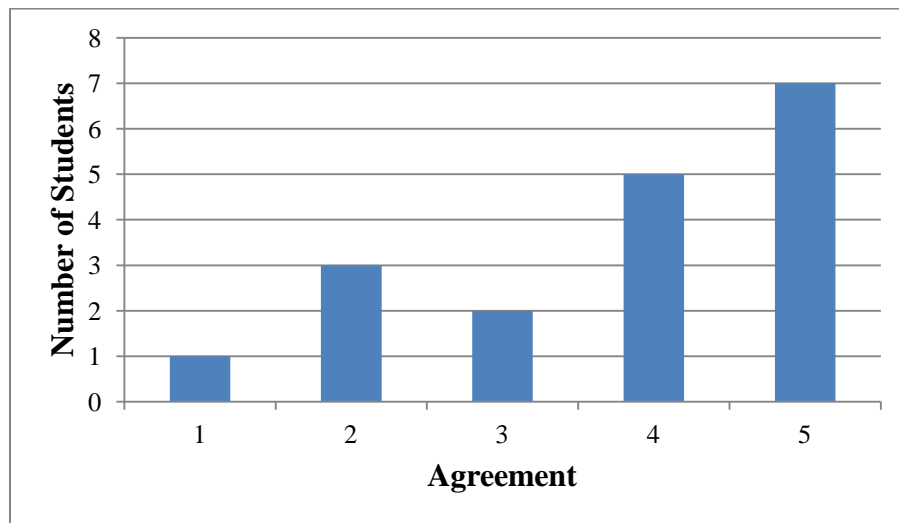


Figure 2. I think that online discussion is as meaningful as face-to-face. This figure shows that the majority of students do not find on-line discussion as meaningful as face-to-face.

In short-answer questions, some students made the comment that it was difficult to hold online discussion because other students waited until the last minute to post their

assignments to the discussion board. Both participants in the focus group expressed an extreme distaste for the online discussions. When asked if they had similar problems to those mentioned in the short-answer questions, they said it was definitely an issue. Both stated that the online discussion posts held several issues. The biggest factor that they cited was that it was not really a discussion. One claimed that in her eyes, she wrote a paper every other week, read two other people's papers and wrote a response. Both agreed that there was no real back-and-forth that characterizes a true discussion. I asked if it might be better to have some sort of chat or face-time meeting on on-line class nights. Both agreed that it might improve the discussion, but would defeat the purpose of scheduling. Both of the participants also agreed that it was difficult to judge other students' inflections and intent in on-line discussion posts. However, the mode response to the statement that the face-to-face class sessions were an excellent way to grow a sense of community was "strongly agree" (Figure 3).

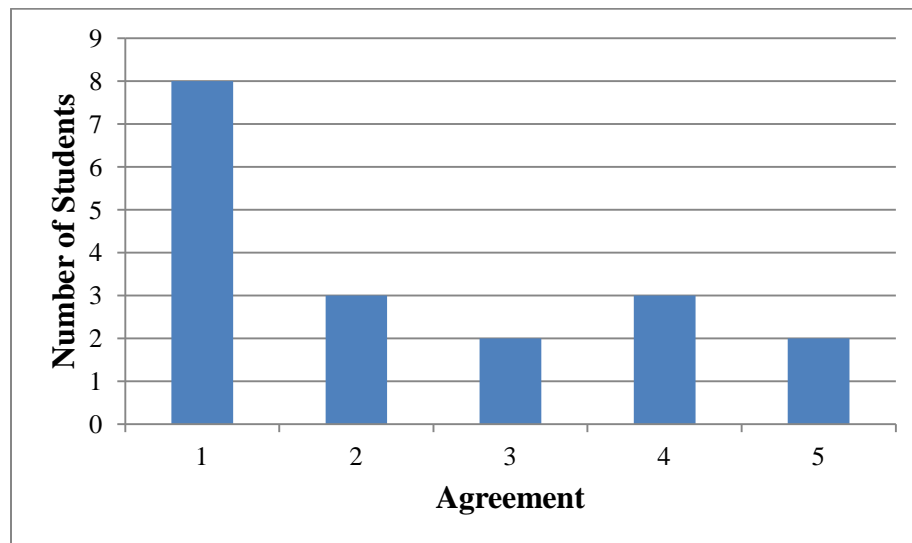


Figure 3. The face-to-face sessions were great for getting to know my classmates and forming a sense of community. This figure shows that most students gained a sense of community through face-to-face class sessions.

Asked if they were satisfied, with the amount of face-to-face discussion provided by their most recent course, there were two mode responses: “strongly agree”, and “somewhat disagree” (Figure 4).

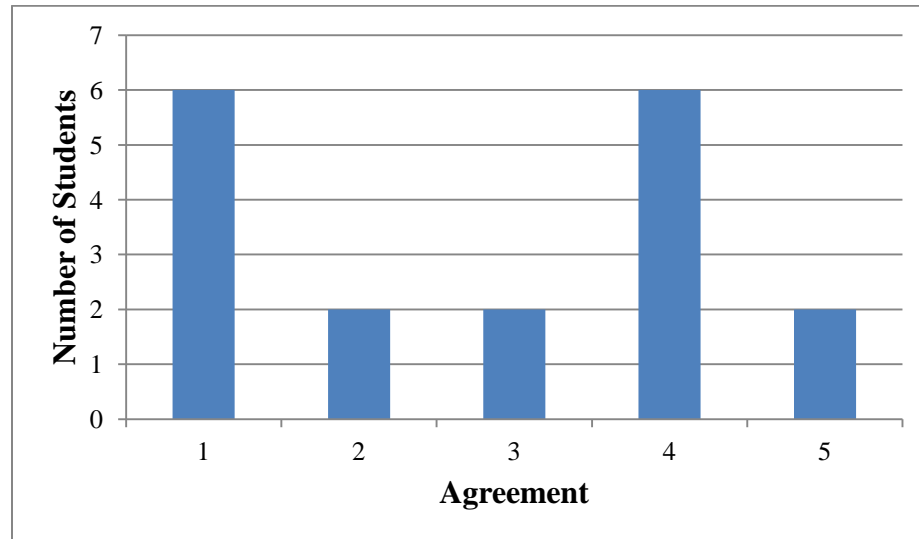


Figure 4. I am satisfied with the amount of face-to-face discussion allowed by a hybrid course. This figure illustrates the divide in student responses between being satisfied and dissatisfied with the amount of face-to-face discussion in hybrid courses.

The majority of students were more comfortable discussing things in a face-to-face setting than online (Figure 5).

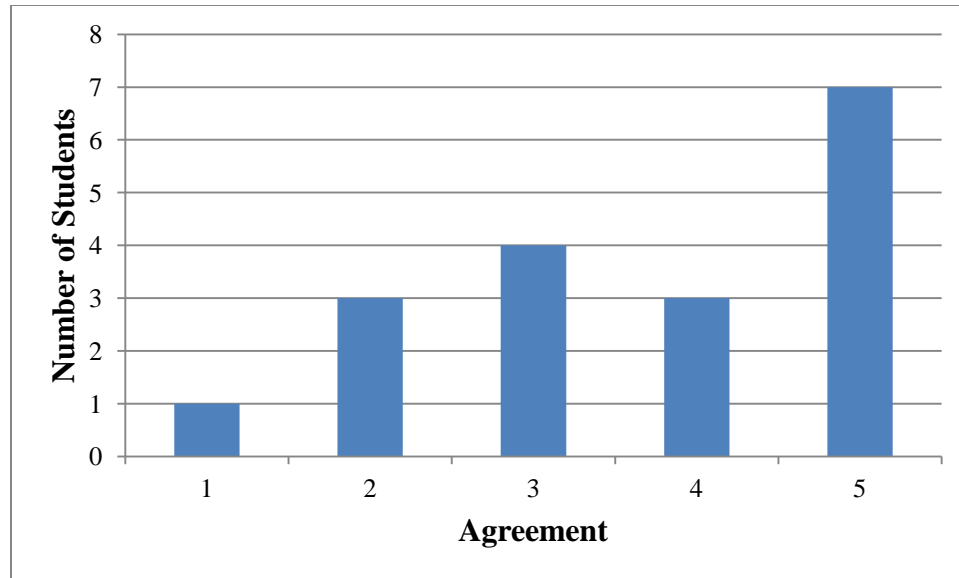


Figure 5. I am more at ease discussing things online than I am discussing them face-to-face. This figure shows that most students are more comfortable discussing things face-to-face.

Multiple students responded in short answer that they much preferred the discussion possibilities of a face-to-face course over those of a hybrid course. One student even stated that if it were not for the freedom of schedule, she would take face-to-face courses rather than hybrid courses. Between the short answer questions and the focus group, the greatest area of dissatisfaction with hybrid courses was with the lack of face-to-face discussion. Both participants in the focus group cited lack of face-to-face discussion as the greatest hindrance to their learning.

The next set of questions asked students about their professors. Most of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that they received adequate feedback on their assignments from their professors in their most recent hybrid course (Figure 6).

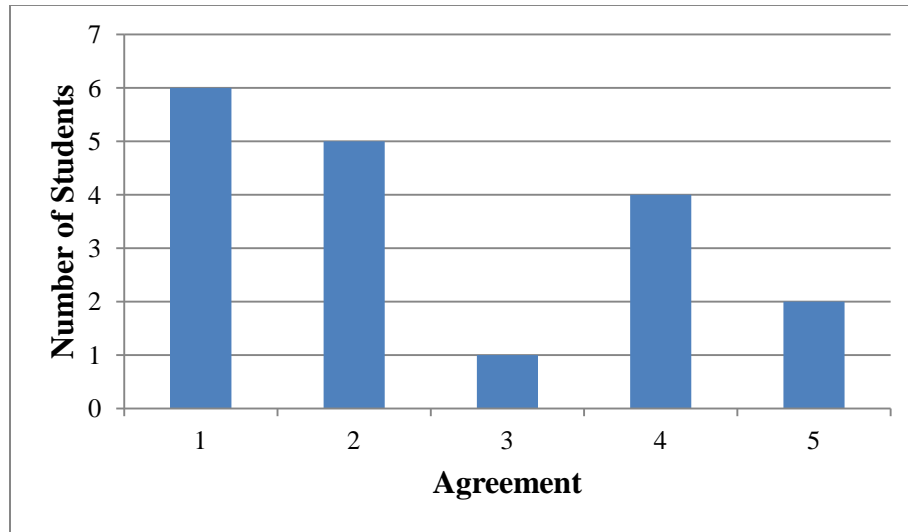


Figure 6. I receive adequate feedback from my professor on assignments. This figure shows that most students felt that they received adequate feedback on assignments.

In addition, most of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that their professors in their most recent hybrid course also gave them feedback in a timely fashion (Figure 7).

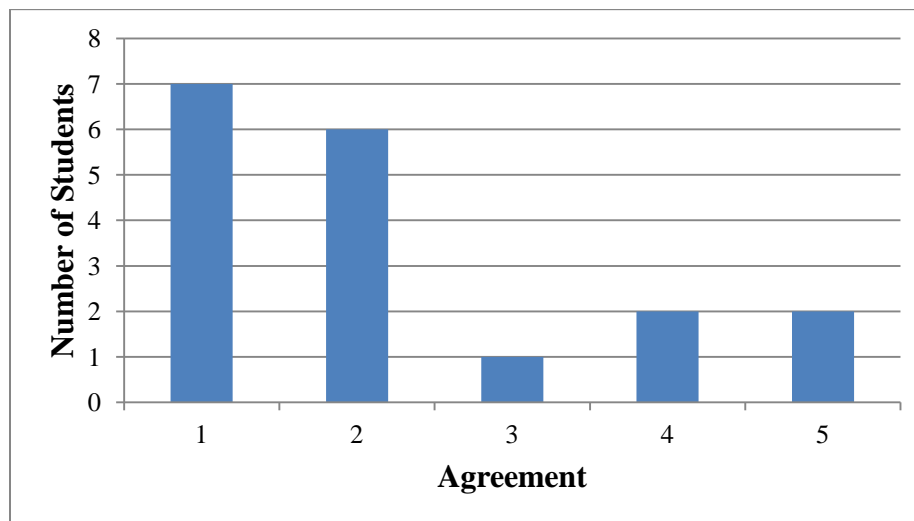


Figure 7. My professor's feedback to my questions is timely. This figure shows that most students found their professors' feedback to be timely.

However, in their short answer responses, multiple students commented that not all professors are the same. Some reported very negative experiences with professors who did not seem to utilize their tools well. Many short answer responses as well as the

two participants in the focus group added that this was still entirely reliant on the professor. Both in short answer in the survey as well as the focus group, students mentioned that some professors did not seem to hold themselves to the same standards as traditional, face-to-face professors in terms of response time. However one of the study group participants said that it truly amazed her how willing many of her professors had been to help her deal with technology and assignments. That being said, both of them agreed that they felt it was important to the program as a whole that the administration examine the professors teaching in the hybrid format to ensure that they were performing their duties to the standards of traditional, face-to-face professors.

In terms of technology most of the students already had everything that they needed for their latest course (Figure 8).

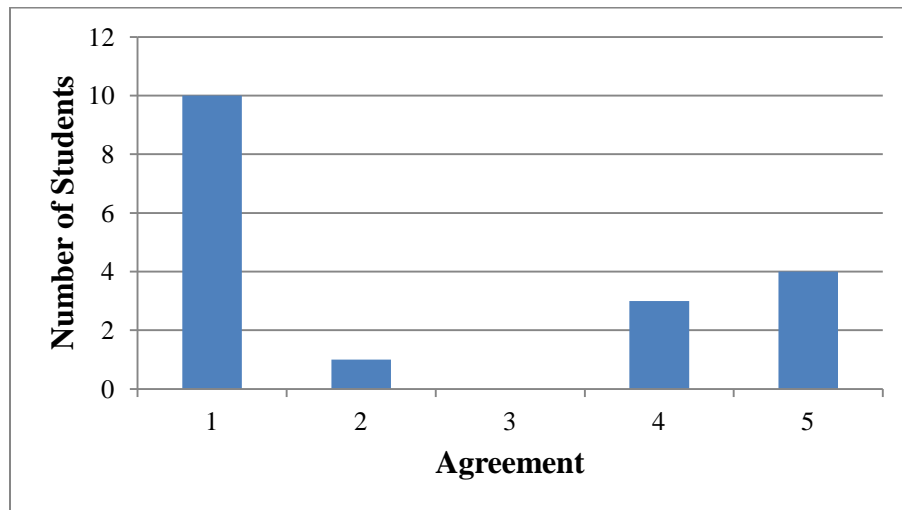


Figure 8. I already had all of the software/hardware that I needed to participate in my latest course. This figure shows that the majority of students already had all of the software/hardware that they needed to complete assignments.

Most students somewhat agreed that they were tech-savvy (Figure 9), and most strongly agreed that their performance was not impacted by technological issues (Figure 10).

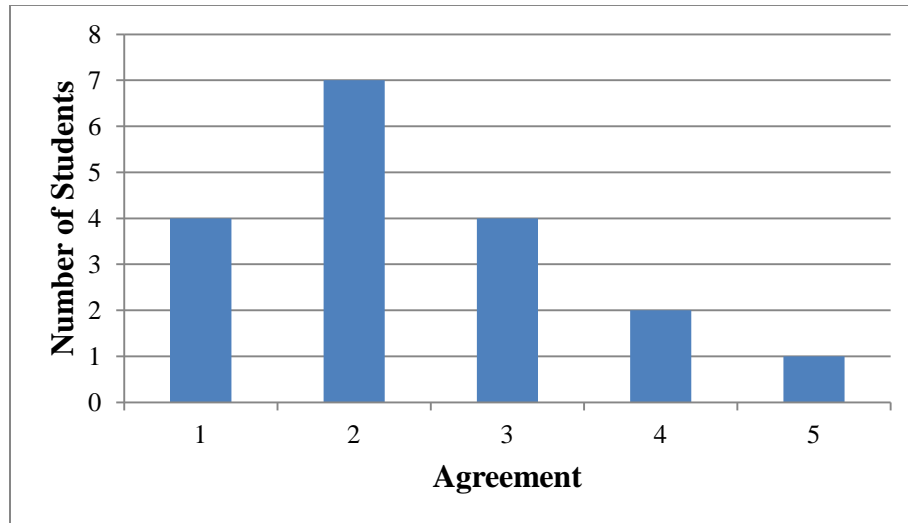


Figure 9. I consider myself to be tech-savvy. This figure shows that most students feel somewhat tech-savvy.

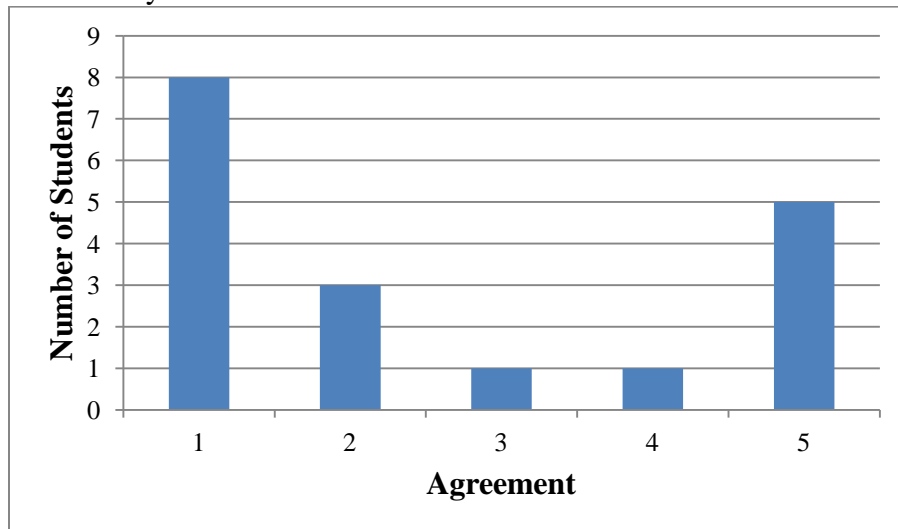


Figure 10. My performance was not impacted by technological issues. This figure shows that most students' performance was not impacted by technological issues, though some did.

However, in short-answer responses, students who reported technological issues cited primarily shortcomings of D2L and poor organization of the D2L resources as their primary issues. In addition, most students had taken more than one hybrid course, and reported that they were more prepared to deal with the technological requirements in successive courses because of it. One of the students in the focus group claimed that, though she was not tech-savvy at all her professors had been amazingly supportive,

always willing to help her through whatever issue she might be having. One of the participants had started her education in the EWO program before they had transitioned to hybrid format. She said that, in the beginning, there had been technological issues, but that there had been a steep learning curve on the part of the institution to prevent them. She said that the transition to D2L from Blackboard as the on-line coordination program had been of immense benefit.

Asked if they felt that they effectively met the course standards in their hybrid course as well as they did in a face-to-face setting, the mode response was “strongly agree”, though “strongly disagree” was the second most common response (Figure 11).

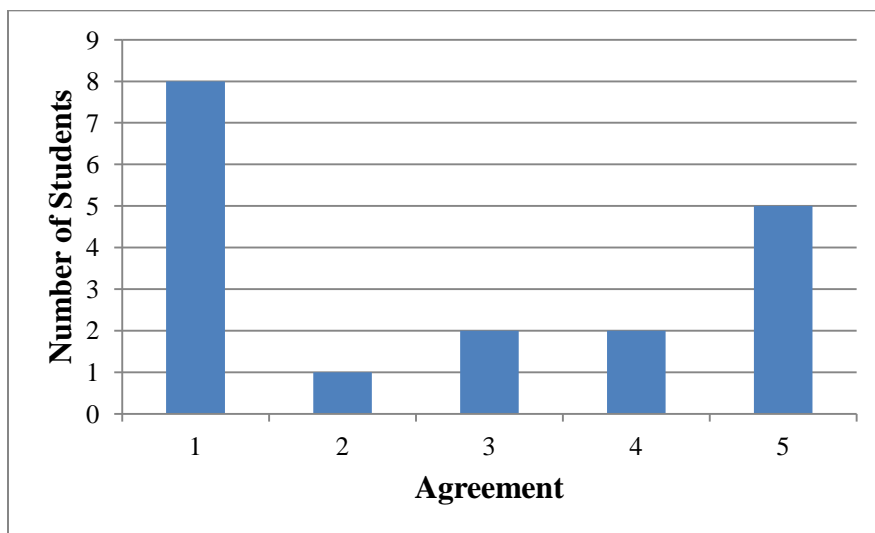


Figure 11. I feel I reached the course learning objectives as effectively in my hybrid course(s) as I did in traditional, face-to-face setting. This figure showed that most of the students felt that they effectively met the course objectives of their hybrid course.

Asked if they felt that they performed better in a hybrid setting than a face-to-face setting, there were two mode responses: “somewhat agree” and “strongly disagree” (Figure 12).

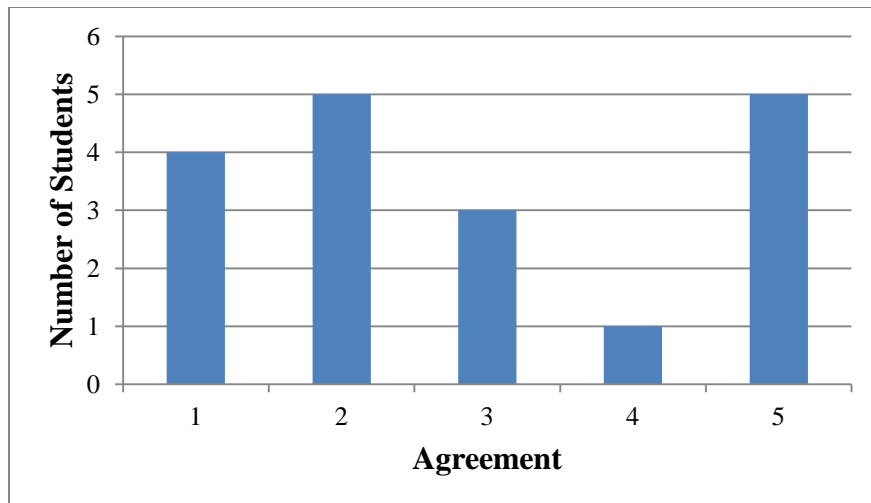


Figure 12. I feel like I perform better in hybrid courses than I do in face-to-face setting. This figure illustrates the divide between agreement and disagreement about whether or not students performed better in their hybrid course than face-to-face courses.

While the two focus group participants said that they refused to let their disappointment stand in the way of reaching their course objectives, both claimed that it was difficult for them to find the motivation to excel in their hybrid course setting. One of them said that, while working in the traditional face-to-face setting, she had a 4.0 GPA. She said that since the EWO department's transition to the hybrid format, she has been watching it fall. While both claimed to be meeting the course objectives, they still felt that their actual performance and learning were suffering under the hybrid format. Asked what they felt was the greatest hindrance to their learning, both responded that they felt the on-line discussion boards were the biggest culprit. One of the participants said that she did not feel compelled to take in the entirety of her reading assignment, since the discussion question was so narrow that she only needed to pick out the parts that answered that question; whereas face-to-face discussions tend to wander, so she felt the need to take in all of it in order to be prepared. Asked what the greatest aid to their learning in a hybrid format was, both initially answered "nothing". One later changed her mind, stating that the ability to take tests on-line as part of the course was helpful, since

she did not have to waste time going to school to do nothing but sit silent in a classroom. One of the short answers from the survey claimed that it was very difficult for her to complete her discussion obligations, because her fellow students routinely wait until the last minute to post their own discussion assignments, leaving her little time to post a response. Asked about this the focus group participants agreed that this was something they had also experienced.

One of the interesting results from the survey is the dual nature of some of the responses. Results of previous research are divided on the effectiveness of the hybrid course, and the mode responses to whether or not students perform better in hybrid courses are divided between agree and disagree, as were the responses on satisfaction with the amount of face-to-face discussion allowed by the course format. Responses to whether or not on-line discussion was as meaningful as face-to-face and whether or not they were more comfortable discussing things on-line had trends towards “strongly disagree”. Despite this, the overall trend on the question of whether or not students perform better in hybrid courses trends towards overall agreement. Since students did not seem to have difficulty with the technological aspects of the course and were overall satisfied with their professors, the only point of concern in student performance in hybrid courses is the discussion boards.

Action Plan

This study set out to examine how student perceptions of and experiences in hybrid courses affected their performance. There are many ways in which this research could be improved. The sample size was too small to be conclusive. The first step in continuing this research would be to expand the sample size. In addition, the sample was only taken from a single university. It would be prudent to do research at more than one

location. The focus group had even fewer participants than the survey, and while both of them were passionate about the subject it was not an enthusiastic passion. Both students had a lot to say about the hybrid format, but their responses expressed overwhelming displeasure with it. The focus group added a bias to the results, since both of the participants were displeased with the hybrid format.

It would be helpful to hear from those who feel that they owe their success in their educational career to the hybrid format. One of the students who responded to the survey stated that she needed to enroll in hybrid courses in order to have any education at all. Had she participated in the focus group, she might have provided a more positive view of the course format. In addition, both participants in the focus group began their education before the Evening, Weekend, and On-line (EWO) department transitioned to the hybrid format. They sought education through the EWO department because of the scheduling combined with the excellent face-to-face education that they had heard the institution provided. With such expectations, it was frustrating for them to discover that they would not be getting that face-to-face experience that led them to enroll. It would be beneficial to speak to students who deliberately seek out the hybrid experience, since they would have more positive expectations than the students who participated in the focus group.

Despite the results of the focus group negatively skewing the overall results of the study, both the survey and the focus group did yield an important revelation. Whether or not the hybrid format is more or less effective than face-to-face education, most of the students agree that face-to-face discussion is more meaningful than those that take place on on-line discussion boards, and there is dissatisfaction with the amount of meaningful discussion provided by the hybrid format. Both participants in the focus group and

multiple short answer survey responses pointed to the on-line discussion boards being the greatest hindrance to their learning in the hybrid format. There are several possible solutions to this issue.

The first possible solution would be to schedule a face-time discussion among the students on a day when they do not meet face-to-face. One of the difficulties with this proposition is that students will likely need to get extra hardware – such as headsets, microphones, or webcams – in order to make this possible, and there are many potential glitches that can accompany such acquisitions. The major issue with this possibility is, of course, that having to schedule a meeting time outside of face-to-face classes negates one of the main purposes of enrolling in a hybrid course in the first place: freedom of schedule. Students would not have to travel to their school location, but they would still have to make time in their schedule for a face-time meeting.

Along a similar vein, another possibility would be the use of an instant messaging program for more instantaneous responses than afforded by a discussion board. This reduces the need to procure extra hardware, since students often have access to some form of instant messaging software through their school e-mail system – such as Google Hangout. Once again, however, students would need to make time in their schedules to have the discussion conversation. One of the other problems with using instant messaging software is the fact that large group conversations can be very chaotic, since multiple people will try to respond to the same comment at the same time. Some form of mediation would be necessary in order to hold a coherent conversation.

Another possibility would be to formulate the discussion post assignments in a way that encourages actual discussion rather than simply post and response. As some of

the short-answer survey responses and the participants in the focus group agreed, it was difficult to post discussion responses when everyone posted their initial discussions at the last minute. The clear way to fix this is to not have discussion posts and responses due on the same day, but to have the responses due perhaps within twenty-four hours of the discussion posts. In this way, students have a chance to respond to each other. This will not, however, alter the discussion posts into actual discussions. There must be more than just one back-and-forth response to constitute a discussion.

It is possible to have extended, worthwhile discussions on a discussion board, but an assignment of one post and a few responses is not it. One solution to this may be to break a class into discussion groups. At the beginning of the course, each discussion group will create a schedule of assignment sequences detailing what order they will post in. Even if each person only has to post twice to the same discussion thread, there is a deeper interaction between the students. If the discussion is deep and meaningful, it may even continue beyond the assigned number of postings. Should an on-line discussion thread go beyond the minimum post requirement, it would be a definite sign that this strategy was working.

Another important thing to think about for discussion boards is how the discussion topics are phrased. A question that is too narrow is difficult to spin into a full discussion post and response set. A student who is crunched for time might find it tempting to skim through the reading to find pertinent information that answers the question and ignore the rest of the information. A broader topic requires students to take in all the information and dig deeper to formulate a response. It also allows them to expound upon their reading and gives confidence that they can actually reach the required

length or their posts, as well as encouraging other students to weigh in with their opinions in the form of responses.

One of the last things to take into consideration is the number of survey short answers and focus group responses which explain that, while many or most of their professors were excellent, there were others who caused extreme frustration and difficulty. One of the major complaints about the professors who caused students frustration was feedback. I think that one of the best ways to help change this would be for professors to weigh in on discussion boards. Especially if the discussion boards are formatted as one discussion and a number of responses to other students' posts, some students' original discussion posts can be overlooked or ignored. Having the professor respond to students would allow everyone at least one response, validating their work even if they aren't graded on content. In addition, it is important for academic institutions to make sure that professors are comfortable with all of the aspects of the hybrid format and ensure that they are prepared to teach hybrid courses.

The results of this study are conflicted, just as results of previous studies have been. In the end, whether or not a hybrid course is highly effective to a student's learning and performance depends on the student's learning preference. However, it did reveal some suggestions on how to ensure that hybrid courses are more effective learning tools for everyone. In the future, it would be helpful to study which aspects of hybrid courses students find to be least effective to their performance and learning. Once this had been ascertained, researchers could look into why those aspects were problematic.

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Appendix A
Active Consent Form

Student Perceptions of Hybrid Courses Focus Group

Active Consent Form

Dear student,

As you may know, I am a St. Catherine University student pursuing a Masters of Education degree. An important part of my program is the Action Research project.

I have chosen to learn about students' perceptions of hybrid courses and experiences in hybrid courses because I feel like these could affect their performance, and schools are consistently moving towards a hybrid format. I am working with a faculty member at St. Kate's and an advisor to complete this particular project.

I will be writing about the results that I get from this research, however none of the writing that I do will include the name of this school, the names of any professors, students, or any references that would make it possible to identify outcomes connected to a particular student.

When I am done, my work will be electronically available online at the St. Kate's library in a system called Sophia, which holds published reports written by faculty and graduate students at St. Kate's. The goal of sharing my final research study report is to help other teachers who are also trying to improve the effectiveness of their teaching.

With increasing numbers of hybrid courses, it is very important to see what kind of impact it plays on students' ability to learn and perform in these courses. It is my hope that, through this study, we may gain further knowledge in this area which can help teachers to better tailor the learning environment to meet student needs.

Procedures:

Participants will be asked to participate in an online survey as well as if they are willing to come in for a focus group (pizza and cookies will be provided) asking questions about your perceptions of and experiences in a hybrid course as well as self-reporting questions about how you feel these things affect your performance. The focus group allows me to ask in-depth questions about student perceptions and experiences, and will take approximately one hour. The survey will not provide any data which can identify the participants. Data from the focus group will be recorded on an audio recorder, the contents of which will be available to myself and my faculty advisor for purposes of analysis. Once the analysis is complete, the recording will be destroyed. This will occur by the end of May, 2015.

If you decide you do want to be a participant in or your data from the survey and focus group to be in my study, you need to sign this form and return it by March 17, 2015. If at any time you decide you do not your data to be included in the study, you can notify me and I will remove included data to the best of my ability.

If you decide you do not want to be a participant in or have your data included in my study, you do not need to do anything. There is no penalty for not having your data involved in the study.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Diane Perry at deperry@stkate.edu. You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, you can ask me or my advisor Irene Bornhorst (ijbornhorst@stkate.edu) who will be happy to answer them. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at [\(651\) 690-7739](tel:651-690-7739).

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

Opt In

I DO want my data to be included in this study. Please respond by March 17, 2015.

Signature of Participant in Research

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix B
Student Survey

Approximately how close are you to completing your degree goals?

1-25% _____ 26-50% _____ 51-75% _____ 76-99% _____

How many hybrid courses have you taken in pursuit of your degree? _____

Given the option, would you actively choose a hybrid course over a traditional face-to-face lecture setting?

Yes

No

As you complete this survey, please think back to your most recent hybrid course unless otherwise specified.

**1: Strongly Agree 2: Somewhat Agree 3: Neutral 4: Somewhat Disagree
5: Strongly Disagree**

1. I like the flexibility that a hybrid course gives to my schedule.

1 2 3 4 5

2. I think that online discussion is as meaningful as face-to-face.

1 2 3 4 5 N/A (no online
discussion)

3. The face-to-face sessions were great for getting to know my classmates and forming a sense of community.

1 2 3 4 5

4. I am satisfied with the amount of face-to-face discussion allowed by a hybrid course.

1 2 3 4 5

5. I am more at ease discussing things online than I am discussing them face-to-face

1 2 3 4 5

6. I receive adequate feedback from my professor on assignments.

1 2 3 4 5

7. My professor's feedback to my questions is timely.

1 2 3 4 5

8. I feel like my professor is capable of using all the technology required for this course competently.

1 2 3 4 5

9. I already had all of the software/hardware that I needed to participate in my latest course.

1 2 3 4 5

10. The schedule of face-to-face vs. online sessions was clear to me.

1 2 3 4 5

11. I consider myself to be tech-savvy.

1 2 3 4 5

12. My performance was not impacted by technological issues.

1 2 3 4 5 N/A

If you encountered technological difficulties which interfered with your performance in any of your hybrid courses, please give a brief description of the issue.

If you did have technological issues, were you able fix them yourself, or did you need to seek help?

Fixed myself Needed help N/A

If you have taken more than one hybrid course, did earlier classes make you feel more prepared to deal with the technological aspects of the course?

Yes No N/A

If you have participated in both hybrid and face-to-face courses, please rank the following statements as above.

13. I feel I reached the course learning objectives as effectively in my hybrid course(s) as I did in traditional, face-to-face setting.

1 2 3 4 5

14. I feel like I perform better in hybrid courses than I do in face-to-face setting.

1 2 3 4 5

If your latest course was your first hybrid, please state some of your expectations entering into it.

If your latest course was NOT your first hybrid, how did your previous courses affect your expectations?

Appendix C
Guided Interview Questions

Guided Interview Questions, will be semi-structured.

1. Tell me a little bit about your major?
2. What kind of classes have you had to take for your major?
3. How did you feel the first time you learned that one of your courses would be a hybrid?
4. Did you already have all of the technological pieces (hardware/software) you needed to successfully complete the course? If not, what was it like trying to procure them?
5. How did you try to organize for the half-and-half scheduling of the hybrid course?
6. What techniques did you find most effective?
7. In your opinion, what makes discussion meaningful? How do you prepare for prepare yourself for classroom discussion? For on-line discussion (if applicable)?
8. How did your professor integrate the technological pieces of the course?
9. Which technological aspects of the course helped you the most?
10. How does your preparation work compare between an on-line and a face-to-face course session?
11. What actions did you take to ensure success in your hybrid course?
12. Which aspects of the hybrid course were most beneficial to your learning? Which were least?