

## **Educational Experiences with Traditional, Online and Hybrid Learning Environments**

**Dr. Binh Tran**

Assistant Professor

School of Science and Technology

Georgia Gwinnett College

Lawrenceville, GA 30043, USA

### **Abstract**

*The Information Age also referred to as the Digital Age or Computer Age is the current period in human history following the Industrial Age to an economy based on information, automation, and computerization. With regards to education, this Information Age marked by Internet technologies is transforming education by taking it out of the traditional classroom and making education more open, flexible, and affordable. Educational institutions even those that have denied the value of online learning before are without a doubt seeing the benefits and necessity to change that viewpoint to adapt to the times. While online programs have significant strengths and offer unprecedented accessibility and convenience to quality, education and training there are many inherent weaknesses and these can create potential treats to the benefits and success of the entire program. This article compares the different learning methods of traditional, online and hybrid learning with implications of all three and a recommendation for one.*

**Keywords:** hybrid learning, online learning, traditional classroom, blended learning, online environment

### **Introduction**

Technology has affected every aspect of our lives and has drastically altered teaching and learning. Higher educational establishments such as colleges and universities are no longer the sole repository of scholarship and knowledge is no longer enclosed within the walls of a traditional classroom. Despite the variety of teaching pedagogies available to educators, the primary goal of higher education remains the same. At one college in Northeast Georgia, the mission statement is to emphasize innovative use of technology and an active-learning environment to provide students enhanced learning experiences, practical opportunities to apply knowledge, increased scheduling flexibility and a variety of course delivery options.

### **Traditional Classroom**

The original and old fashioned type of delivery method is the traditional class where students attend class typically twice or three times a week. The class will have an instructor who typically focuses on traditional lecture, homework assignments, and assessments such as quizzes, exams, and projects. The learning environment is synchronous so students need to be in class at the class time to participate and learn. The teaching style is normally auditory with visual aids such as videos, demonstrations and in some subject also case studies. The greatest advantage is the face-to-face interaction between the student and the instructor allowing students to ask immediate questions and get feedback. In many situations, the instructor can also receive instant feedback on topics by asking questions to see if the students understand the concepts and are indeed following along with the lecture. If given the opportunity to teach in smaller class sizes I find that in my own experience I create direct and personal connections with students knowing who are the more interested and passionate students and those who are there just to pass the course. An instructor can then make minor changes to his or her teaching style in real-time to benefit the majority of the students. Another benefit is that the educator can remind students of certain deadlines for important milestone assignments such as midterm exam, projects, presentations and final exam dates as well as general college and university deadline such as last date to withdraw with a "W".

### ***Online Classroom***

The second and newer type of delivery method is the online classroom. In this environment students use a Learning Management Systems such as Blackboard, Desire to Learn, Moodle, Canvas or a variety of other software packages that allow delivery of the online environment. The learning is typically asynchronous which means students learn independently from anywhere, anytime it is convenient for them. This is a big advantage and allows flexibility for the students as they can set their own learning pace and schedule. Students can complete their coursework depending on their own personal work and life schedules and are not tied to classroom meeting times. Working students are given the ability to complete courses or an entire program of study while balancing a full-time work-load and family responsibilities. For example, if a student knows that he or she has a major commitment on the horizon he or she can start working ahead and complete the assignments in advance so when the busy period comes they do not fall behind. Assessments are done through the Learning Management System and in most cases automated such as quizzes or tests and are automatically graded. The instructor now becomes a facilitator by using email and course announcements as the main communication methods to connect to his or her students. The LMS would include lecture notes, slides, audio, video, discussion boards, important links, grade book, deadline reminders, and everything else the typical student needs to complete the course. The primary interaction between the students and the instructors typically is through the discussion board questions and also the grading feedback and possibly custom videos that instructors can record and post to the LMS to enhance the learning experience.

### ***Hybrid classroom***

This last type of delivery method known the hybrid classroom incorporates both traditional as well as online class environments. Typically, students still would have a scheduled class time to meet but the face-to-face time is much less than the traditional classroom times. This means students still need to arrange their work and personal schedules to accommodate the synchronous meeting time but must also use the Learning Management System to do work that is done in the online portion of the classroom. For example, a class could meet just once a week such as Wednesday nights from 6pm – 9pm for the face-to-face time and then everything else is done asynchronously through the learning management system. The face-to-face time could be used for lecture, hands-on lab time or as a help session where students and instructors can work together in a real-time environment as opposed to using the just the LMS for communication. There are numerous advantages and disadvantages that will be discussed in further detail later on in this article with this delivery method.

### ***Benefits and Disadvantages***

#### **Traditional classroom**

The primary benefit of the traditional classroom environment is as discussed earlier the amount of face-to-face interaction between the students and the instructor as well as interaction between the students and their classmates. In many situations, students can ask questions and receive immediate feedback from the instructor and other students who are not willing to ask also can benefit from the answer provided. A second benefit is that students know what is expected of them so they can stay on track and not fall behind because a good instructor will go over what is due and when in addition to reviewing, what was covered the previous class. A third benefit is that from an instructor's point of view he or she will know which students are actively participating and understanding the material versus those that are disinterested or struggling in the course allowing them to act quickly and effectively. Disadvantages of traditional classroom environments primarily includes scheduling problems because a class that meets on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at 8:00am – 9:15am require students to attend 3 days a week for 16 weeks resulting in 48 meeting times plus the final exam for just a single class. Commuting students and students taking 3 or 4 courses will have a hard time with scheduling especially if they are also trying to balance their work and family schedules. Another disadvantage is that many instructors teaching by using the traditional classroom environment do not fully embrace the technological improvements of the Information Age and thus feedback to students is often delayed and not immediate such as test results and grading feedback. One more disadvantage is the pace of the course must be determined by the instructor so some struggling students may find the pace is too fast and cannot keep up whereas others may find it too slow and thus boring.

### ***Online Classroom***

The primary advantage to the online classroom learning environment is the flexibility and convenience of being asynchronous so students can move at their individual pace on their own schedule. (Vaughan, 2007) The Learning Management Systems today are very sophisticated and have a myriad of features that gives the students immediate feedback and allows them to know where they are at during the entire college or university term assuming the instructor grades in a timely fashion. The grading systems can be very interactive allowing students to know how they are progressing and also how much of each module is completed so they can pace themselves accordingly. The software can give student reminders via automated emails and uses trackers to give students indicators of their performance and percentage of assignments completed. Another advantage is that students can make their own schedules based on their own work and personal lives and can take courses accordingly. (Holenko & Hoic-Bozic, 2008) Personally after finishing my Bachelor degree I started working full-time at a job that had 8am – 6pm hours so as I pursued my MBA I did not have many options other than going online which fit my schedule perfectly allowing me to finish my MBA in under two years without interfering with my full-time work schedule. I also understand that for a full-time working student with both work and family responsibilities the traditional classroom schedule would be close to impossible to maintain throughout the entire program of study.

Disadvantages of the online classroom include the lack of instructor presence and the inherent face-to-face instructor time that the student has from the traditional setting. Online classroom environments require students to have more motivation and discipline and in many cases, some students need direct instruction for learning. I can remember to this day when I was a Program Director for a School of Technology at a college one student came to me to insist I offer a traditional class he needed while there was an online section still open. When I asked him if he would be willing to take the online class, he said: “Sorry, I did not go to college to teach myself.” This resonated with me to this day and even though online learning has come, a long way there is still this inherent self-teaching perception that comes with online classes that is not well suited for all student learners.

Another disadvantage is that a course curriculum is typically designed for the entire semester or term whether it is a 10-week term, 12-week term, or 16-week semester. What can happen with online classes is that students attempt to complete 2, 3 or 4 weeks of semester in one week which is their prerogative; however, this defeats the course curriculum design because there is little chance that the students can retain and carry on that knowledge to subsequent classes. Another disadvantage is no matter good the technology is there will be issues with either the computers, network connections, learning management system and student computer literacy which can make a course much more difficult than the actual content. Lastly there is also the issue of academic dishonesty in a fully online environment where someone other than the student could be the person that is submitting and completing the coursework such as a friend or family member. (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010)

### ***Hybrid classroom***

The hybrid learning environment incorporates both the traditional classroom setting as well as the online classroom environment and if designed correctly can enhance the overall learning and teaching experience. A typical hybrid course will include less face-to-face interaction than the traditional setting but will still have a required session. For example, a class that meets just once a week for 2-3 hours instead of 3-4 hours of face-to-face time. These once a week meetings will allow for more flexibility in scheduling and allows students to take 3-4 classes and balance that with their work and personal schedules; however, it is not as convenient as the online only class environment. The trade-off is that this meeting time allows for the instructor-student interaction where various learning techniques can be employed and if executed properly may provide the optimal combination for student learning as well as instructor teaching.

The key difference is that this in-person contact time which allows for the students to ask questions and get help on complex concepts, it also allows for instructors to give help and monitor student performance as well as allow for use of educational strategies such as presentations, interactive group-work, active-learning assignments. Assessments such as quizzes, tests, midterm, and final exam can be proctored during these scheduled meeting times. Depending on the class individual or group presentations can be given during the face-to-face time also allowing for both student-instructor interaction as well as peer-to-peer student interaction. (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). I have taught in all three educational delivery methods and find the hybrid is the best mix of both traditional and online allowing for both flexibility but keeping that personal instructor-student interaction that is necessary for quality education.

The hybrid nature also allows for some students who are not as vocal to be able to participate at their own comfort level in the online portion of the hybrid course rather than speaking up in the face-to-face session. (Serlin, 2005) If designed correctly courses and curriculums which employ the hybrid delivery method will have a much better chance for success and positive student learning than the other delivery methods which have more disadvantages.

### **Summary**

My personal experience in teaching traditional, online and hybrid environments has moved me in the direction of hybrid as being the most beneficial both for the student as well as for the instructor if designed and instructed correctly. The issues are that for correct execution of the hybrid learning environment educators must be trained and teach it as such and not just like the online classroom environment. When I teach a hybrid course the class meeting time is required and graded and filled with active-learning in-class lab assignments which cannot be made up. This promotes the importance of this face-to-face session and then the learning management system is designed in a way to incorporate other learning techniques such as critical thinking and kinesthetic activities not just auditory and visual learning aids. Another benefit is that if students are struggling to keep up with the pace of the course this once a week meeting time allows instructor to give them further assistance so they do not fall too far behind. Assistance with any of the technological tools and also be addressed during this session which means that faculty teaching these hybrid courses must be more versed and trained for these possible scenarios. If the academic institution does not have ground facilities, then this face-to-face time can be a synchronous session making use of collaborative tools such as Collaborate or Go To Meeting where the instructor and students are all gathered at a convenient predetermined time allowing for immediate questions and feedback. Active-learning assignments should also be implemented in the class so students can understand the value of the face-to-face time and how it enhancing their learning.

There is no doubt that the future of learning is online. The Babson Survey Research Group, supported by The Sloan Consortium, Pearson, and the College Board, and has been studying online education since 2002. Its January 2013 report is the tenth annual report in this series. According to it 71.7% of higher education institutions were offering some form of online learning in 2002. In 2012, it had risen to 86.5% and now the number of complete online programs is up from 34.5% to 62.4%. (Harish, 2013). However, online courses and programs must be designed and taught correctly for it to be effective and meaningful not to mention students who finish a program of study taking many online and hybrid courses must be able to compete for a job and career with their traditional class environment classmates. I feel that as we move further into this Information Age that the administration, curriculum designers and faculty need to take this hybrid environment further to create a more rewarding academic experience for both the student and the instructor.

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