Tech-Flex: The Student Experience

A hallmark of any good hybrid course is seamless integration of online and on-campus activities.

This integration necessitates a thoughtful focus on the student experience, so that students are presented with engaging material and prompted to interact with it in innovative ways. That is not meant to imply that activities need always be terrific fun (although fun can be good), but they should be engaging, because this leads to students being more motivated to learn and succeed. The possibilities of how students interact with content and with each other are greatly expanded in a hybrid course; just having them read articles online and then meet to discuss them in-class, for example, takes no real advantage of a class format that can otherwise be a transformative experience.

But engaging students can be challenging in any course – how do we make it happen in hybrid?

In his article, "Blended Learning: Strategies for Engagement," educational consultant and Edutopia online editor Andrew Miller offers the following strategies to maximize student engagement: *

1) Leverage Virtual Class Meetings with Collaborative Work: One of the most prominent features of blended learning is the virtual (or synchronous) class meeting. Sometimes teachers spend the entire class in a virtual meeting room lecturing and presenting content. These meetings are often recorded and available for students to watch later, so they can be a more flexible learning activity than traditional in-class lecturing. With the potential time savings of having students watch recorded lectures, students can instead problem-solve together, collaborate on projects, and use virtual break-out rooms for guided practice. If you want students to be engaged in the class meetings, it must be meaningful. Collaborative work can be meaningful when students problem-solve together, plan, and apply their learning in new contexts.

2) Create the Need to Know: The key here is an engaging model of learning. Teachers can use project learning to create authentic projects where students see the relevance and need to do the whether that work is online or in the physical classroom. The same is true for game based learning. If students are engaged playing a serious game about viruses and bacteria, then teachers can use the game as a hook to learn content online or offline. Through metacognition, and the "need to know" activity, students "buy-in" to the learning -- no matter when and where that learning occurs.

3) Reflect and Set Goals: Related to the comment on metacognition above, students need to be aware of what they are learning as well as their progress towards meeting standards. Teachers need to build in frequent moments, both as a class and individual, to reflect on the learning and set S.M.A.R.T. goals [specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound]. Through these measurable and student-centered goals, students can become agents of learning, rather than passive recipients. Use reflecting and goal-setting both online and offline to create personal connection to the learning and personalized goals.

4) Differentiate Instruction through Online Work: In a blended learning classroom, there is often online work that needs to occur. This might be a module on specific content, formative assessments, and the like. However, students may or may not need to do all the work that is in a specific module. In an effort to individualize instruction, use the online work to meet individual student needs. Whether an extension of learning, or work to clarify a misconception, the work that occurs online can be more valuable to

students when it is targeted. Students are no longer engaged in uninteresting busy work, but focused, individualized learning.

5) Use Tools for Mobile Learning: Edutopia recently published a guide called "Mobile Devices for Learning." This guide provides a variety of apps and tips, proposing that teachers use mobile devices as part of the learning environment. The great thing is that blended learning can partner well with many strategies and apps. If you use the flipped classroom model, for example, apps like Khan Academy, BrainPop, and YouTube are incredibly useful. Leverage the flexibility of where students can learn, and engage them outside the four classroom walls. Use scavenger hunts, Twitter, and back-channel chats to engage students in a variety of mobile-learning activities to support your blended-learning model.

* Note that Miller uses the term "blended" to describe what would more often be called "hybrid."