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Reemerging Spaces: Examining Classroom Climates in the HyFlex Realm



Carolyn Gascoigne
University of Houston-Downtown
gascoignec@uhd.edu

Abstract

HyFlex courses offer multi-layered learning spaces that can create complex interpersonal connections among participants. This study examines the classroom climate in these layered spaces as perceived by students through the lens of small group dynamics. To do so, we administered the Connected Classroom Climate Inventory (CCCI) survey to students in four HyFlex courses at the post-secondary level. Results shed light on student perceptions of the HyFlex classroom climate and found that students considered their level of connectedness with their peers to be a strong one.

Introduction

More and more courses are moving to online, blended, and HyFlex modalities, both as part of an unstoppable social and pedagogical trend, as well as a new post-pandemic landscape. Indeed, this trajectory involves both the greater use of established online practices along with novel and experimental designs (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2021; Romero-Hill & Ripine, 2021). As we increasingly embrace these dynamic learning spaces, the following pages highlight the need to consider the evolving classroom climate in which students are increasingly participating. With HyFlex designs combining both physical and virtual spaces, the classroom climate is becoming increasingly complex and worthy of study.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), in fall of 2019, the most recent semester for which statistics are available, 37.2% of all undergraduate students at all degree-granting post-secondary institutions in the United States took at least one course online. While not yet available at the time of this writing, we can all imagine what this percentage looked like during the fall of 2020, at the height of the pandemic. Similarly, one might expect the percentage of online, hybrid, and HyFlex offerings to continue to trend upward as students and faculty grow more skilled in different technologies and more accustomed to certain flexibilities.

As students call for increased flexibility in learning (Owston, 2013; Szeto & Cheng, 2016), HyFlex modalities have grown to meet this demand. HyFlex course designs represent a blend of learning spaces, modalities, and formats. HyFlex courses offer a multi-layered learning space that combines the physical, the virtual, and the liminal, and as such, its climate has yet to be fully explored. The following pages, therefore, seek to examine the classroom climate in these layered spaces as perceived by students engaged in a HyFlex learning experience.

Small Group Dynamics

Over the years, a great deal of attention has been paid to the traditional classroom environment, to include teacher-student interactions (Hall & Sandler, 1982; Hays, 1970; Rosenfeld, 1983), the physical space (Cleveland & Fisher, 2014; Felix & Brown, 2011; Mcarthur, 2015), and student-to-student interaction (Carlson et al., 2006; Dwyer et al., 2004; McBrien, Cheng & Jones, 2009). Certainly, the role and impact of the instructor has been debated for centuries (Dewey, 1916; Rousseau, 1762). However, the importance of the student group, and the influence that a

classroom's group dynamic has on the individual learner, is worthy of further reflection. This is especially important given our evolving classroom spaces, which now include online, blended, hybrid, and Hyflex in both synchronous and asynchronous modes.

The student group and the dynamics within a group of learners is a powerful contributor to the environment within any learning space. The collective characteristics of the learner group, and the evolution of these characteristics over time, helps to determine the classroom climate. Indeed, it is the peer group in any given leaning environment that is considered by some to be among the most influential forces in learning and academic performance (Dornyei & Murphy, 2003; Schmuck & Schmuck, 2001).

Studies examining the role of one's peers and the collaboratively-constructed classroom climate where all group members play a role have received increased attention over the past two decades. This is thanks to a growing number of instruments that have been created and validated to measure students' perceptions (Carlson et al., 2006; Dwyer et al., 2004; Fraser, 2018; Henderson & Loh, 2018; Zandvliet, 2018). While not discounting the role of the instructor which, given an imbalanced power dynamic, is significant, attention has rightfully expanded. More recent inquiries include consideration of peer-to-peer interactions, with dimensions such as student cohesiveness, student involvement, and student integration gaining prominence (Fraser, 2018; Stanton, Zandvliet & Dhaliwal, 2018). Learning is no longer an individualized phenomenon for many researchers. Instead, it is the students' perspectives about their learning experiences, including their connections to one another, that are essential for understanding the learning environment.

With the proliferation of technologically-mediated learning environments, our understanding of the role of the classroom climate must expand and evolve as well. Fortunately, Zandvliet (2018) offers a model to represent what he describes as the "technologizing" (p.63) of the curriculum. He presents three interrelated spheres of influence on the modern learning environment: the ecosphere, which represents one's physical surroundings; the sociosphere, or our "interrelationships with other people over time that occur in these learning spaces" (p.64); and, the technosphere, which comprises the tools and technologies used by the members of the group (p.63). HyFlex course designs embody Zandvliet's technologizing of the curriculum and possess all three interrelated spheres: an ecosphere, a sociosphere, and a technosphere. But unlike the typical online or hybrid course, most HyFlex designs can't be categorized as seamlessly given the added signature element of student choice.

HyFlex Literature Review

Defining a HyFlex learning environment is not as simple as one might expect. In fact, there are about as many definitions as there are subtle variations upon the theme itself. Still, Beatty's 2019 description of a HyFlex course design as one that delivers a multi-modal, student-directed learning experience and allows for students to choose between participating in person or online, where participation may be synchronous, asynchronous, or both (p.29), is commonly accepted by many. While hybrid and blended designs have been available for decades, HyFlex is novel in the degree of choice and control that it gives the learner. No longer must the distant student remain distant and the face-to-face student remain face to face, but there can be (personal logistics permitting) a bi-directional flow between the two. This fluidity allows students to move back and forth between modalities, physical spaces, and synchronicity at their will.

While a HyFlex course design represents a monumental departure from the monolithic mode of the traditional classroom, and could appear daunting to some, there are noted benefits for student and instructor alike. For students, a HyFlex design offers not only increased access given the dynamic and flexible nature of the course, but it also provides students an opportunity for agency and self-efficacy by surrendering control of the schedule and learning mode to the student. Benefits to faculty members, on the other hand, include reaching larger numbers of students due to increased flexibility and creating opportunities that provide more equal access to all. For example, if a student suddenly loses access to technology, the face-to-face option is ever-present. When reliable transportation evaporates, virtual participation remains. And, when life overwhelms, catching up asynchronously is yet another option.

To those looking to engage in HyFlex courses, Beatty (2019) offers four pillars with and upon which one can design courses:

1. Learner Choice: Provide meaningful alternative participation models and enable students to choose between participation modes daily, weekly, or topically,
2. Equivalency: Provide learning activities in all participation modes which lead to equivalent learning outcomes,
3. Reusability: Utilize artifacts from learning activities in each participation mode as learning objects for all students, and
4. Accessibility: Equip students with technology skills and equitable access to all participation modes. (p.30).

In reviewing studies of HyFlex course designs that reflect the pillars of learner choice, equivalency, reusability, and accessibility, a call to better examine the sense of community between online and campus students is emerging in the literature (Leijon & Lundgren, 2019; Miller, Sellnow, & Strawser, 2021; Szeto & Cheng, 2016). For example, Leijon & Lundgren (2019) posit that HyFlex designs could increase the feeling of connectedness between online and campus learners. To examine this sense of community, Leijon and Lundgren (2019) investigated the connection between groups of students across different HyFlex spaces from the perspective of the instructor. Employing an ethnographic design, Leijon and Lundgren followed three HyFlex instructors over the course of a semester. A series of live-streamed lectures involving each instructor were recorded and then examined, followed by a series of detailed interviews with each instructor. During the interviews, excerpts from the recorded classes were reviewed together and then discussed, paying particular attention to the types of interactions involved. The authors found that each of the three instructors employed different strategies for interacting with, and promoting interaction among, students. Despite employing different techniques, a common fear of neglecting students in certain spaces over others was shared by all the instructors and was among the most prominent theses emerging. Leijon and Lundgren ultimately conclude that in a HyFlex design, the teachers share agency and ownership with students and call for additional studies to cull the student perspective more directly.

Koskinen (2018) examined the perspectives of graduate students participating in HyFlex courses through a series of case studies. Recruiting students enrolled in three graduate courses across three separate disciplines, Koskinen recruited eight students ranging in age from 22-53. Methods of inquiry included interviews, web surveys, and polling instruments. While intending to examine self-direction and ability to engage in learning within the HyFlex environment, Koskinen unearths an emerging theme of a lack of engagement from distance students that ultimately prevented the group from building a sense of community. The lack of connection with other students was also repeatedly voiced by face-to-face students concerning their distance peers. However, the interaction taking place within the physical classroom, both with the professor and the other students, was lauded and cited as the reason for electing to attend in person. Koskinen noted a different dynamic between students who were attending class in person and those attending online and describes distance students as less integrated within the classroom community. This observation was not lost on the face-to-face students, with one student sharing that “there’s not enough student interaction” with our distance student peers (p. 69).

While not specifically examining HyFlex, Vesely, Bloom, and Sherlock (2007) investigated student and faculty perceptions of the sense of community in online courses as compared to face-to-face courses. The authors surveyed 48 graduate students along with 14 faculty members all involved in online courses across a variety of disciplines. Data analysis from the twelve-question survey revealed that 85% of students and 100% of the instructors felt that being a part of a learning community helps students to both learn material and perform well in class. Yet, 89% of students and 79% of instructors felt that building community in online courses is more challenging than doing so in face-to-face courses. Following a content analysis of open-ended survey questions, it was revealed that students and instructors were in agreement that the following elements are essential to establishing a sense of community among online learners:

1. A sense of a shared purpose
2. Purposeful communication involving communication and support
3. Collaboration to learn material
4. Working on a common goal
5. A comfortable exchange of information.

Vesley et al. conclude by recommending that the development of a sense of community must be an intentional goal built into the design of the course, not something left to chance.

Current Study

The present study sought to examine the sense of community and connectedness among first-time-in-college students participating in a modified HyFlex course from the students' perspectives.

Specifically, it sought to gain insights into the viability of a modified HyFlex design in terms of its ability to facilitate a sense of community among incoming first-year students, while also allowing for some degree of flexibility and student choice. The specific research questions are as follows:

1. How do incoming first-time-in-college students participating in a modified HyFlex course design perceive their classroom climate as measured by the Connected Classroom Climate Inventory?
2. Does student feedback on the Connected Classroom Inventory match the instructor's assessment of classroom climate as revealed by completion of the same instrument.

The Participants

The target pool of participants included any student enrolled in the four sections of a first-year seminar course taught by a single instructor. These sections represent a sample of convenience. Each section began the semester with 25 students. Total student enrollment across the four course sections at the time of the survey distribution during the fourteenth week of the semester was 88. Of the 88 students enrolled, 28 agreed to participate in the study and completed the survey. No demographic information concerning student participants can be shared given that the survey was administered via Qualtrics and submitted anonymously. Institutionally, however, 71% of students identify as first-generation college students, and no students live on campus as it is a metropolitan, non-residential university.

The instructor of all four sections had 25 years of teaching experience, including ten years of experience teaching in hybrid and online environments, but had no prior experience in HyFlex. She had, however, participated in several hours of training for both the requisite technology and general HyFlex pedagogy. The instructor of the four sections is also the current author.

The Courses

The courses selected for this inquiry were four sections of a three-credit first-year seminar course that had an ambitious agenda. Designed for incoming first-time-in-college students at an urban, metropolitan university with both a Hispanic-Serving, and a Minority-Serving designation, this course sought to accomplish the following:

1. provide incoming first-year students with the strategies and skills needed to be successful in college,
2. create an opportunity for students to analyze community issues with respect to different perspectives, theories, or solutions, and
3. introduce students to how ideas, values, beliefs, and other aspects of culture express and affect the human experience. (Institutional catalog).

The first-year seminar is a required course for all incoming first-year students and is part of the 42-hour general education core.

While a HyFlex design is typically described as one in which students chose between face-to-face, online synchronous, or online asynchronous participation on any given day, the design of the courses targeted in the present study can more accurately be described as a subset of HyFlex, referred to by Miller, Sellnow, & Strawser (2021) as BlendFlex, or blended plus flexible. BlendFlex differs from HyFlex in that the instructor preassigns face-to-face attendance on certain days, but allows students to choose how they would like to participate on other days, whereas in HyFlex, the student generally has a choice in how they participate across all days.

In the case of this study, the classes were scheduled with a synchronous meeting time on Mondays and Wednesdays. Mondays were predetermined by the instructor to be face-to-face days for all students throughout the course of the sixteen-week semester. Wednesdays, however, allowed for varying degrees of student choice concerning participation. According to the syllabus, and therefore preselected by the instructor, some Wednesdays could be attended synchronously either in person or over Zoom. This restricted decision was left up

to individual students. On the remaining predetermined Wednesdays, students could choose between attending in person, attending synchronously over Zoom, or participating asynchronously by watching recordings and engaging in online activities. As such, this particular design allowed for some student choice but also provided structure. There was predictability in knowing that Mondays were always conducted face-to-face, and there was tiered student choice concerning type of participation on Wednesdays. On all Wednesdays throughout the semester there was a blend of both in-person and Zoom participation with the percentages of participation in each modality changing from week to week. To participate asynchronously, students had to request the recording from the instructor, this added step may have discouraged asynchronous participation as only a handful of students ever availed themselves of this option.

The Materials

The instrument used to measure students' perceptions of the classroom climate within a HyFlex –inspired course design was Dwyer et al.'s (2004) Connected Classroom Climate Inventory (CCCI) (see Appendix A). The CCCI is an eighteen-item Likert instrument that measures "students' perceptions of student-to-student behaviors and feelings that create a supportive, cooperative classroom environment" (Carlson et al., 2006, p.11). Response options range from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree. The closer responses are to the strongly agree rating of (1), the more connected and supported students reportedly feel in the learning environment. Prior research has found the CCCI to have an overall reliability of $\alpha=.94$ as well as evidence of validity (Dwyer et al., 2004). While the CCCI has been used to gauge student perceptions of the classroom climate in disciplines often associated with performance anxiety, such as public speaking courses (Dwyer et al., 2004, Carlson et al., 2006) and foreign language courses (Gascoigne, 2012a, 2012b), it is applied here to a first-year seminar course.

To capture instructor impressions of the modified HyFlex design along with recommendations for future applications, she kept a weekly teaching journal noting her impressions of the levels of attendance and participation, along with real-time reactions to activities and notes for improvements. She also independently completed the CCCI instrument to represent her impression of the classroom climate prior to viewing student feedback of any type.

Results

The instructor/author's feedback on the CCCI was completed globally as a reflection of the class sections as a single experience. The instructor gave an overall average rating of classroom climate from her perspective across all 18 items as 2.61 with (1) indicating a connected classroom climate and (5) indicating a lack of connectedness. She gave the lowest scores (4) to item 3 (I feel a strong bond with my classmates), item 9 (The students in my class praise one another), item 11 (The students in my class smile at one another), and item 12 (The students in my class engage in small talk with one another). She provided a neutral or undecided rating of (3) to item 6 (The students in my class respect one another), item 10 (The students in my class are concerned about one another), and item 14 (The students in my class laugh with one another). All other items received a higher rating of (2) on the five-point scale.

The 28 students who completed the survey produced an overall average rating of classroom climate across all 18 items of 1.58, with (1) indicating a connected classroom climate and (5) indicating a lack of connectedness. The students, therefore, rated the classroom climate as noticeably more connected as compared to the rating given by the instructor (1.58 versus 2.61 on the five-point scale). While students and instructor differed considerably in their ratings of the overall climate, they gave their lowest ratings to the many of the very same items. Similar to the instructor, the students gave their lowest scores to item 3 (I feel a strong bond with my classmates) 2.79, item 9 (The students in my class praise one another) 2.22, and item 11 (The students in my class smile at one another) 1.96. However, unlike the instructor, students also gave some of their lowest scores to item 10 (The students in my class are concerned about one another) 2.46.

The students gave their highest ratings to item 6 (The students in my class respect one another) 1.25, item 8 (The students in my class are courteous with one another) 1.25, item 7 (I feel included in class discussions in my class) 1.32, item 5 (The students in my class are friendly with each other) 1.36, and item 1 (I feel a sense of security in my class), 1.39.

All remaining items received an average student score ranging from 1.43 to 1.75:

The students in my class are non-judgmental with one another 1.43,

The students in my class show interest in what one another are saying 1.46,

The students in my class share stories and experiences with each other 1.5,

The students in my class cooperate with one another 1.54,

The students in my class are supportive with one another 1.68,

The students in my class are comfortable with one another 1.68,

I have common ground with my classmates 1.7,

The students in my class engage in small talk with one another 1.71,

The students in my class laugh with one another 1.75.

Discussion

Despite limitations such as the small sample size, which in turn led to examining all four sections collectively as opposed to individually, the present investigation found that students participating in a modified HyFlex course (or BlendFlex) perceived their classroom climate to be positive and supportive as measured by the Connected Classroom Climate Inventory. Specifically, students reported feeling a sense of security in their class, that students were friendly, that they felt included in class discussions, and that students were courteous and respected one another. Even with these positive impressions, students did not report having formed a strong bond with one another.

On essentially all items, the students gave much more positive CCCI ratings to the course(s) than the instructor. While students gave higher connectedness ratings to this modified HyFlex experience than anticipated or perceived by the instructor, this investigation did not attempt to compare classroom climate scores with any measures of student success, such as final course grades, or completion rates, so no causal relationships between a supportive HyFlex or BlendFlex classroom climate and student success can be claimed. While much of the research to date suggests to us that a supportive classroom climate will correlate positively with student engagement and success, the current study cannot explicitly add to this conversation.

Conclusion

The peer relationships within a learning environment, coupled with how any given learner sees herself within and in relation to others, are powerful normative forces (Schmuck & Schmuck, 2001). As our learning spaces evolve, we must consider the impact of our new learning spaces on the relationships within the learner group and on the learning process. This investigation, while primarily exploratory in nature, endeavored to address the first question only: What is the impact of our new learning spaces on the relationships within the learner group? It did so by applying the Connected Classroom Climate Inventory to a modified HyFlex course and found that students in these courses considered their modified HyFlex learning environment to be a connected and supportive one. It also found that the level of connectedness reported by students was greater than that which was anticipated by the instructor. While not causal, this does bode well for those of us who believe that a positive and supportive environment facilitates learning.

The courses investigated here were not fully HyFlex, as there were limitations on the degree of student choice in terms of participation mode. Therefore, it is hoped that readers will consider applying the CCCI to other HyFlex or BlendFlex courses, both in terms of discipline and modality, in order for a fuller picture to emerge. Still, this study hopes to call attention to our continuing need to examine the classroom climate from the student's perspective within our ever-evolving learning spaces.

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Appendix A

Classroom Climate Inventory

Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by marking: (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) are undecided, (4) disagree, or (5) strongly disagree.

1. I feel a sense of security with my class.
2. I have common ground with my classmates.
3. I have a strong bond with my classmates.
4. The students in my class share stories and experiences with each other.
5. The students in my class are friendly with each other.
6. The students in my class respect one another.
7. I feel included in class discussions in my class.
8. The students in my class are courteous with one another.
9. The students in my class praise one another.
10. The students in my class are concerned about one another.
11. The students in my class smile at one another.
12. The students in my class engage in small talk with one another.
13. The students in my class are non-judgmental with one another.
14. The students in my class laugh with one another.
15. The student in my class are supportive of one another.
16. The students in my class show interest in what one another are saying.
17. The students in my class cooperate with one another.
18. The students in my class feel comfortable with one another.

(Dwyer et al., 2004).

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