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Balancing Preference and Practicality: Student Choice of Study Mode in a Hybrid-Flexible Academic Writing Course

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Abstract

How – and why – do students engage with an increasingly diverse range of learning opportunities in the digitised university? This paper investigates students' motivations for choosing in-person, online or asynchronous study modes and explores the implications for academic writing provision. I reflect on student and teacher experiences on a non-credit, Masters-level academic writing course at a UK university which was delivered through a 'hybrid-flexible' approach (Beatty, 2019). Students could opt to learn through synchronous in-person (on-campus) classes, synchronous online classes or asynchronous activities delivered through a virtual learning environment; all study modes supported the same learning outcomes and students could switch between them as they choose. Course evaluations reveal students have different motivations for choosing in-person, online or asynchronous learning, and suggest that learning preference and practical motivations are not always aligned. I reflect on the opportunities and challenges I encountered as a teacher designing and delivering hybrid-flexible academic writing content. I conclude by exploring how tensions between learning preference and practical motivations might be addressed in the design and delivery of in-person, online and asynchronous learning activities.

Introduction

As blended learning approaches become the 'new normal' (Buhl-Wiggers et al., p. 151), students increasingly experience a range of in-person and online learning activities. Studies frequently note student preferences for in-person or 'face-to-face' learning (e.g. Alhamami, 2018; Asghar et al., 2022; Lomer & Palmer, 2023; Tratnik et al., 2019). However, students continue to choose online study options, often due to their perceived flexibility (Ferrer et al., 2022; O'Brien & Verma, 2019). A key question, then, is how to harness the benefits and overcome the challenges of these different study modes.

This paper explores the 'hyflex' (or hybrid-flexible) approach implemented in an academic writing course for Masters students in social sciences subjects at a UK university. Key characteristics of hyflex learning are outlined by Beatty (2019). Students can learn through a range of study modes, including in-person and online classes and asynchronous resources. Students can choose between these study modes on an ongoing basis and can 'mix and match' depending on their needs and preferences. Each study mode leads to the same learning outcomes (Beatty, 2019).

Research has highlighted positive student experiences, as hyflex learning supports both students' preferences and their practical circumstances. Students gain increased control of their learning as they select study modes to suit their preferred learning styles (Abdelmalak & Parra, 2016; Bockorny, 2023). Practical benefits include improved access for students balancing commitments outside of study (Abdelmalak & Parra, 2016) and reduced travel time and costs (Athens, 2023; Buatois et al., 2022). Asynchronous options allow students to study at their preferred pace or to catch up on material from classes they were unable to attend (Malczyk, 2018).

Despite these positive findings, these preferences and practical concerns are not always balanced. As Malczyk (2018) argues: "students may choose modalities that are in fact not their best options in relation to their overall learning and educational experience" (p. 25). This suggests that more scaffolding might be required to support students with participating in different study modes, particularly where these are less familiar. Studies have also noted that effective engagement in online and asynchronous modes can require additional motivation and effort from students (Kohnke and Moorehouse, 2021; Malczyk, 2018). Careful course design can address these demands on students and ensure that students are able to interact and contribute to learning activities regardless of study mode (Buckley et al., 2024). However, hyflex design and delivery has also been associated with increased workload and cognitive load for teaching staff (Boehm & Boerboom, 2023; Detyna et al., 2023), who must meet the challenge of providing equivalent learning opportunities across multiple study modes (Heilporn & Lakhal, 2021). Hyflex delivery offers opportunities to enhance students' learning experiences but also requires careful navigation on the part of both students and teachers to ensure these benefits are achieved.

The hyflex literature thus highlights considerable practical benefits and opportunities to support students' learning preferences – but also practical challenges that hyflex course design must address. This paper explores how these preferences and practicalities are experienced in a non-credit, hyflex academic writing course. There is little evidence to date of prior research into hyflex academic writing provision, or in the non-credit contexts in which academic writing is often situated (Macnaught et al, 2024; Wingate, 2018). Nonetheless, I felt the flexibility offered by hyflex would be particularly useful for non-credit academic writing where students must find additional time to attend outside of their core classes. The remainder of this paper will discuss both students' choices and my own experience as a teacher and course designer. The teaching context, course design and delivery methods are briefly outlined before students' motivations are explored. I then reflect on the implications for academic writing pedagogy, exploring how course design and delivery can accommodate both preferences and practicalities.

Teaching Context

Developing Your Academic Writing (DYAW) is a suite of academic writing classes and resources for taught postgraduate students on one-year Masters programmes in business, education and social sciences subjects. DYAW is delivered separately to five discipline areas, to allow tailoring to the specific writing practices of each cohort. Topics include assignment structure, using sources and demonstrating critical analysis. The provision is designed to support students' core curricula but is optional and non-credit-bearing.

DYAW had run for a number of years through in-person classes and was designed to give students on intensive Masters programmes options: to attend classes at different times and to pick topics that best met their needs. This focus on flexibility was a key,

practical motivator for redeveloping DYAW for hyflex delivery, as it offered the potential to maximise opportunities for 'time-poor' students to access provision. I was the sole teacher involved in designing and delivering DYAW so was also conscious that I would need to manage the increased workload the hyflex design entailed and ensure that the project was feasible. However, I was also keen to explore the benefits for learning in academic writing that hyflex delivery could bring.

Course Design

A key starting point for the hyflex course design was extending the inductive approach used in the original, in-person version of DYAW to online synchronous and asynchronous study modes. Inductive approaches are widely used in English for Academic Purposes (Bell, 2022) as they encourage students to identify, explore or challenge features of academic writing in their discipline. DYAW classes were designed around a series of short exercises, typically involving students considering the strengths and weaknesses of short example texts. Tasks built incrementally in order to scaffold student learning throughout each session.

While in-person and online classes are often delivered simultaneously in hyflex provision (Bockorny et al., 2023), I kept these two study modes separate. As DYAW classes were already delivered on multiple occasions each week, it was straightforward to divide these between in-person classes held on campus and online sessions held on Zoom. This also avoided the need to secure suitable spaces and technical facilities for simultaneous in-person/online delivery. The online classes were designed to use the same timing, structure and materials as the in-person classes. Keeping these study modes as similar as possible had a number of benefits: maintaining the inductive approach and the incremental task progression across in-person and online modes; offering continuity for students who might choose to switch between the modes; and speeding up this aspect of the design process, allowing the course to be launched sooner. Class materials included presentation slides highlighting key points and instructions and feeding back on class exercises, and a document collecting the short texts discussed in class. Classes were scheduled for one hour, as this tended to fit best with students' timetables.

A key difference between the two synchronous study modes is that in-person students discussed the short exercises in groups while online students were asked to work on the exercises individually and then share ideas using the chat function or audio. While I had considered using virtual breakout rooms to replicate the in-person group discussions, I was aware that students often experience additional barriers to verbal interaction online (Ho et al., 2023). Providing time for individuals to think through the tasks before discussion was preferable.

The third study mode which students could select was asynchronous activities. These were designed using the University's content management system, which allows the development of independent study resources which combine videos, slideshows, text and quizzes. The approach was selected as a multi-media approach has been found to be effective in asynchronous learning (Davis and Frederick, 2020; Varkey et al., 2023). The asynchronous activities followed the structure of the live classes and a key priority was preserving the inductive approach through which students were encouraged to construct their understanding of academic writing in their disciplines. For example, students might be asked to consider the strengths and weaknesses of an example text, complete multiple choice quiz questions to demonstrate their understanding and then watch a short video in which the teacher highlighted key points. Asynchronous activities

were typically made available around the time of synchronous classes on the same topic and then remained available throughout the remainder of the academic year.

Student motivations for choice of study mode

Students' motivations for choice of study mode were elicited as part of an anonymous, online, end-of-course questionnaire, which received 93 responses. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the relevant University committee.

Respondents were first asked to indicate which mode(s) they had participated in. Results confirmed all study modes were utilised, with online classes most commonly selected (n=74), followed by in-person classes (n=49) and asynchronous study (n=40). The majority of respondents (n=59) participated in more than one study mode, including 11 who participated in all three. This suggests that many students enjoyed having the option to attend in different ways.

Respondents were then asked to select as many options as they wished from a list of potential motivations for choosing study modes they had participated in. These potential motivations were identified through key themes highlighted in the literature, such as preferred approach to learning, access and interaction opportunities. The list of potential motivators was tailored slightly for each study mode, in recognition that not all factors would apply across, for example, synchronous and asynchronous learning. The percentage of respondents from each study mode who cited each motivation as a factor is shown in Table 1. An opportunity to add open comments on each study mode was also included.

Table 1: Motivations selected by study mode

	In-person	Online	Asynchronous
Prefer this type of class (in-person vs online)	71% (n=35)	25% (n=18)	n/a
Prefer in-class vs independent study	41% (n=20)	25% (n=18)	15% (n=6)
More suitable for my schedule	18% (n=9)	71% (n=51)	25% (n=10)
More opportunities to communicate with other students	51% (n=25)	4% (n=3)	n/a
More opportunities to communicate with the teacher	53% (n=26)	9% (n=12)	n/a
Revision after live class	n/a	n/a	73% (n=29)
Too busy to attend live class	n/a	n/a	28% (n=11)

These results highlight four key themes around motivation for choice of study mode.

Preference

71% (n=35) of in-person attendees cited a preference for in-person study as a motivation. In contrast, only 25% (n=18) of online attendees cited a preference for online classes. This is consistent with a general preference for in-person study found in the literature (e.g. Lomer & Palmer, 2023). A preference for synchronous study was also a more common motivator for in-person participants (41%; n=20), compared to online attendees (25%; n=18). These results highlight that while preferences did vary across the cohort, in-person and synchronous academic writing provision were still preferred overall.

Practicality

Despite this general preference for in-person study, students regularly selected other study modes. Online participants were considerably more likely to cite suitability for their schedules as a motivator (71%; n=51), compared to 25% (n=10) of asynchronous participants and 18% (n=9) of in-person participants. Participants' comments suggest

that 'best fit with my schedule' was understood more widely than simply avoiding clashes with other commitments, as one student's comment demonstrates:

> '[online] classes are easier to fit into my day and are far more convenient.'

Practical motivations for choosing online learning have also been identified in previous studies (e.g. Ferrer et al., 2022; O'Brien & Verma, 2019). The results suggest a tension between many students' ideal preference, often for in-person academic writing provision, and their more practical need to save time and best suit their circumstances.

Opportunities for interaction

Opportunities to interact with other students were more commonly a motivator for in-person participants (51%; n=25), compared to only 4% (n=3) of online participants. There was a similar gap for opportunities to interact with the teacher, cited as a motivator by 53% (n=26) of in-person participants compared to only 13% (n=13) of online participants.

However, only 20% (n=19) of overall respondents cited opportunities to meet and work with new people as a motivator for participating in DYAW provision, suggesting that interaction was not a primary concern. A perceived lack of interaction opportunities in online classes could also be viewed positively; one participant described online classes as:

> 'quite a good alternative to students who do not favour working in group settings with people they do not know that well […] the idea of having an alternative has made me more comfortable and less pressured.'

While in-person learning was more commonly associated with interaction, this was not always what students sought.

Revision

The most commonly selected motivator (73%; n=29) for choosing asynchronous study was to revise material students had already encountered in synchronous classes. Open comments referred to the asynchronous resources as a means of reviewing material, catching up on points missed and assessing understanding. Where asynchronous study was selected instead of synchronous learning, this was typically when students were too busy to attend a live class (cited by 28%; n=11) or where class times were not suitable (cited by 25%; n=10). Asynchronous learning was almost never considered a 'first choice'.

Implications

Reflecting on these themes, and on my own experiences as the course teacher, has helped me gain new insights into my design and delivery of academic writing provision. An initial implication is that hyflex is a viable and valuable option for the teaching of academic writing. All three study modes were utilised and student evaluations were very positive, indicating this flexible provision was accessible and met participants' diverse needs.

The reported student experiences of hyflex academic writing provision were similar to those observed in other disciplines (Malczyk, 2018): students often chose a study mode for practical reasons rather than learning preference. A key implication of these findings is the need to address tensions between preference and practicality in the design and delivery of academic writing provision. The appeal of convenience is unlikely to change,

as students on intensive Masters courses continue to contend with competing priorities. The deeper issue highlighted here is the lesser value many students attach to online and asynchronous study. Reviewing my course design and delivery methods in light of student experiences helps to ensure there is no 'less good' option, only different ways of achieving the same learning goals.

As I reviewed my own choices in course and materials design, I realised these were also shaped by both preference and practicality. I selected my 'preferred' hyflex approach as I believed it would enhance students' experiences and the accessibility of the provision. At the same time, I also had to work with the 'unavoidable cost' of hyflex delivery (Beatty, 2019): the increased time required for teachers to develop and deliver courses through multiple study modes. I made conscious design choices based on practicality, to address the 'time challenge' of hyflex course design and make delivery of the course feasible. As DYAW had previously run in a non-hyflex format, I had a bank of materials to draw on and adapt. Using identical materials for both in-person and online classes gave continuity for students and was also sufficiently time-efficient to allow me to run large-scale hyflex provision. However, this approach also meant that the online classes were based on a structure and tasks that were originally designed for in-person study.

The most obvious differences between the delivery of the materials in the in-person and the online classes were the extent to which students could interact with peers and the teacher. These differences arose from decisions situated in the complex network of preferences and practicalities we consider when designing and delivering academic writing provision. I ensured in-person and online students had comparable opportunities in whole-class discussions, with the latter group able to use their microphones or text chat. However, the opportunities in-person students had to discuss tasks in pairs or small groups were not replicated online. I realised that my preference for structuring academic writing classes around multiple, incremental short tasks contributed to this decision. In-person settings make it easy to ask students to have a 'two-minute chat with the person sitting next to you' on multiple occasions but this is impractical with more technically demanding online breakout rooms. The 'drop-in', optional nature of my academic writing classes was also likely to increase the potential for students to experience barriers to verbal interaction online (Ho et al., 2023) as small group discussions would have required students to work with a new group each week, without the opportunity for community-building activities to be introduced over time.

Despite these practical constraints, I wanted to maintain the inductive and incremental approach in online classes. I was motivated by a conviction that key learning occurred in each student's active engagement with the task, which may happen silently and internally rather than verbally and publicly (Gourlay, 2015; Macfarlane, 2016). Consequently, I asked online students to work individually on tasks and to share ideas in text chat if they chose. It is useful to consider this through the lens of students' motivations for and experiences of the different study modes. Students mostly considered interaction opportunities a motivator only for in-person classes; however, it is less clear whether this reflected a response to the lack of group work in online classes or to expectations around the norms for online learning. There is perhaps scope here to redesign the online class activities to enable more peer-to-peer interaction. However, this should be accompanied by the continuing provision of alternatives, where students can choose to engage with tasks either individually or in groups in both in-person and online settings. More explicit discussion outlining ways of learning through online classes could focus on the value of engaging with tasks through interaction but also through individual thinking.

The design of asynchronous materials was also impacted by practical and preferential factors. I again used an inductive approach, providing students with a series of short,

incremental tasks. I felt these materials would be most engaging if I used a range of media, including video; this proved resource-intensive, as video required more time for technical tasks such as recording and editing. I became aware of how much of my synchronous delivery was filled in 'on the day', as I talked around key points on presentation slides. Ensuring a comparable experience for asynchronous learners meant taking care to identify and include these points in asynchronous resources. Points that students might raise spontaneously in classes, however, could not be replicated.

That students mostly selected asynchronous activities for revision also suggests these were largely considered as a means to check understanding of teacher-generated content. I had not been aware that students would seek revision activities beyond the live class materials and their own notes; this knowledge has helped further my understanding of how students might use different modes for ongoing engagement with the academic writing course. However, it may also be possible to develop further spaces in the asynchronous activities for students to reflect on their learning and add their own observations, as a closer alternative to the spontaneous contributions of the live classes.

Reflecting on hyflex has highlighted the complex network of preferences and practicalities in which academic writing provision is situated. Further research could build on this initial study through larger-scale data collection to explore student views. For example, surveying student views at multiple points during an academic writing course could give more granular insight into student experiences. Student learning outcomes could be compared with hyflex choices. Additional research could also compare the impact of hyflex in credit and non-credit academic writing contexts.

My reflections are, of course, specific to my own teaching context. However, they do highlight key themes that could inform other contexts for hyflex academic writing provision. In practical terms, hyflex offers flexibility to accommodate diverse student needs and motivations, which might be particularly useful in increasing access to academic writing development for 'time-poor' students. Nonetheless, the benefits of hyflex need to be balanced with the increased workload for teaching staff. Academic writing departments may need to advocate for staff resources to be dedicated to expanding delivery to additional study modes, emphasising the benefits of this investment for students' learning. Further, these learning benefits also need to be evaluated in terms of both preference and practicality, particularly in working to ensure that the pedagogic benefits of online and asynchronous modes are as apparent as those of in-person learning. This can be addressed during course design but may also require explicit discussion of the benefits and use of online and asynchronous learning to be built into the activities. Finally, designing hyflex provision can also offer a framework through which we can engage critically with our own teaching practices. My experience enabled me to surface and reflect on practices that had become largely normalised within my course design and delivery. Exploring different study modes can, therefore, encourage us to focus on the approaches underpinning the design and delivery of academic writing teaching and to reflect on different ways these might be implemented to achieve learning goals.

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