

Modes of learning: a practice guide

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**Sue Beckingham, Richard Beggs, Danielle Hinton,
Tünde Varga-Atkins and David Watson**

Edited by Dr Kay Hack (PFHEA), Lead Consultant (Education)

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Introduction

The recent Office for Students' report (OfS, 2022) defined blended learning as

“teaching and learning that combines in-person delivery and delivery in a digital environment.”

Using this definition, blended learning has been common practice in the UK higher education (HE) sector since the start of the century, facilitated by the almost universal adoption of virtual learning environments (VLEs). However, the past decade has seen rapid changes in online practices, accelerated over the last two years. These changes have evolved the language we used to describe practice, resulting in a range of terminology used to describe the different ways students interact with their lecturers, their subject and each other. As we develop more flexible learning, providing student choice in place, pace and mode of learning, it is critical that we are using the same terms to describe the same learning modes so that expectations can be clear and consistent for staff and students.

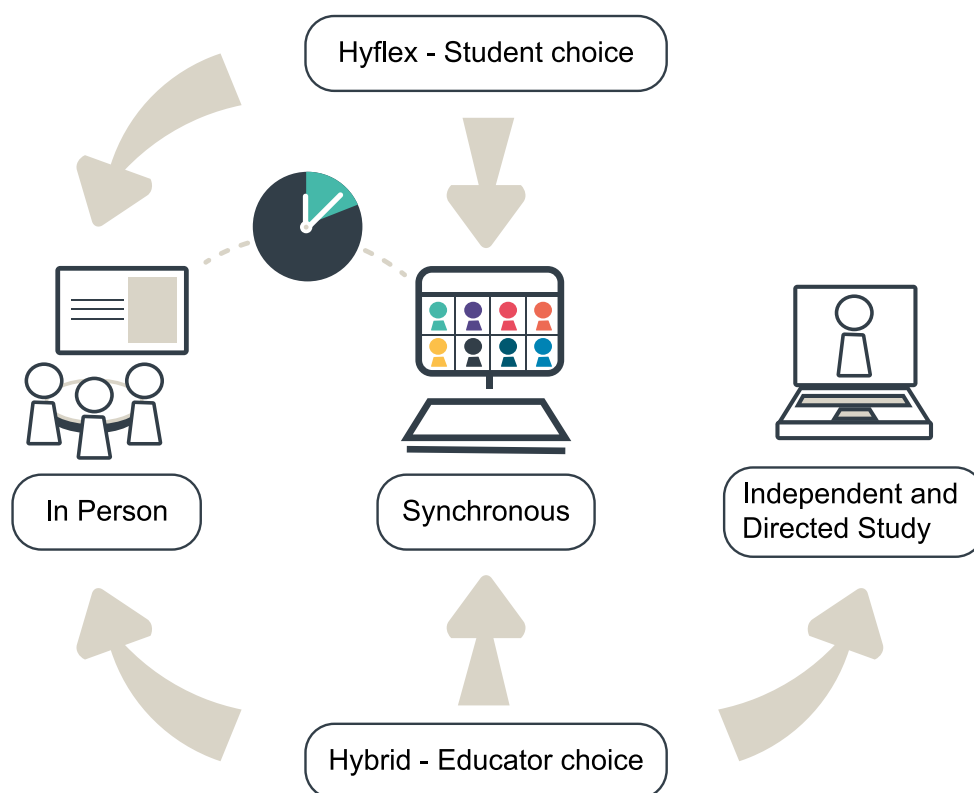
This practice guide, for course teams designing and delivering learning, describes the three key teaching modalities that may contribute to blended learning.

- + In-person learning: any form of formal or informal learning that requires physical co-presence of educators and students.
- + Synchronous online learning: formal online learning undertaken in groups in real-time facilitated by an educator.
- + Directed learning: flexible, self-paced learning activities that students carry out independently or as part of a team at a time and a location – online or in-person – that suits them.

Combining modalities provides choice of time and place of learning for educators and students.

- + Hybrid: a deliberate integration of synchronous (online and in-person) and directed learning, used sequentially such that any one modality will be used at a given time.
- + Hyflex: learning is offered in-person, synchronously online and asynchronously online, with students deciding how to participate.

Figure 1. Modes of flexible learning



How to use this guide

This guide is designed to provide programme or course teams with a snapshot of different learning modalities (what? Why? Where?) alongside information for designing, planning and facilitating. The aim is to develop engaged and effective student learning with an intentional blend of in-person and online teaching.

Strategic implications for institutions

Combining in-person, synchronous online learning and directed learning via hybrid or hyflex approaches has benefits for educators and students. It also has implications for workload models and the learning environment – both online and physical learning spaces. The following sections provide some points for consideration at an institutional level to provide accessible and equitable quality learning experiences.

Student expectations

- + Set policy or guidance detailing the relative amounts of in-person, synchronous online and directed learning. Inform staff and students of expectations.
- + Provide a clear rationale for the learning design and communicate and promote to students.
- + Provide timetables, attendance and participation guidance for all elements of the programme, where possible using more than one format (text, diagram and/or video).
- + Provide a definition of what constitutes contact time in clear and concise language that is easily accessible for all students.
- + Ensure that timetabled sessions make good use of students' time and presence on campus.
- + Communicate to staff and students the rationale and policy for recording synchronous online and in-person sessions.
- + Inform students of the expectation for self-directed learning. This can include activities such as revisiting learning resources, independent research, reading or viewing and assessment preparation.

Ensuring inclusive practice

- + Recognise and support the different experience or confidence in online learning of your staff and students.
- + Ensure all students have access to a stable digital learning environment supported through equipment loans and/or access to open learning spaces that allow engagement with online learning.
- + Define how online learning will be made accessible with text alternatives and closed captioning as well as guidance on lecture capture.
- + Invest in technology and people for accurate live transcription (audio to text) to produce transcripts that need minimal or no amending before distribution.
- + Use a clear and consistent learning and teaching structure across all online learning content.
- + Circulate materials prior to synchronous online and in-person sessions to enable students who use specialist software, such as screen readers or similar, to prepare appropriately.
- + Design teaching to meet the needs of a diverse cohort of students through adopting Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to ensure there are no barriers that would impede students fully participating in their learning and reaching their potential.

Learning spaces

- + Provide collaborative teaching spaces for small and large group in-person activities.
- + Provide discipline-specific learning spaces to develop professional practices and consider to what extent these spaces can be complemented by, or supplemented with, immersive learning spaces.
- + Create a 'sticky' campus that encourages and supports students to stay on campus by providing sufficient informal learning spaces, with access to power and/or devices to facilitate both group and individual self-directed learning.
- + Invest in smart classrooms providing learning technology, such as computers, specialised software, audience response technology, assistive listening devices, networking, and distributed audio and visual devices to enhance teaching and learning and facilitate interaction between in-person and online students for hyflex delivery.
- + Provide industry standard software and hardware, technology and equipment in bespoke disciplinary learning spaces to provide students with the valued, authentic hands-on experience they want and need to learn.
- + Use a consistent design for the online learning environment to ensure it is easily navigable, accessible and appropriate to all your learners.
- + Provide access to immersive learning spaces that use virtual and/or augmented reality to develop professional practices, explore inaccessible environments or understand abstract concepts.

Workload model

Providing flexible learning requires significant time investment. This needs to be considered in workload models.

- + Allow sufficient time for the design and development of accessible online learning content.
- + Recognise that directed online learning requires ongoing monitoring, interaction and moderation which contributes to contact time (QAA, 2011).
- + Consider using a team-based teaching approach, comprising educators, digital education developers, administration, library and other professional staff including careers and student support services. This is particularly important for online synchronous teaching to large cohorts and hyflex sessions.

Pedagogic approaches

- + Design for your subject material, your students (skills, motivation, confidence) and your context, including staffing, location, time zones, technologies and class size. For example:
 - create or identify quality core materials, including videos, that are suitable for reuse and repurpose
 - use short screencasts (maximum 10 minutes) to convey semantic knowledge including developing students' understanding of concepts, methods and data
 - use synchronous methods (in-person or online) to develop episodic knowledge.
- + In-person activities should deploy active, social and collaborative learning approaches to leverage the benefits of physical co-presence or develop professional practices and competences requiring specialist equipment or learning environments.
- + Ensure the online learning environment provides high-quality collaborative learning.

Technology

- + The number of innovative tools and technologies available to enhance learning has expanded rapidly. This guide recommends that the institutional VLE is adopted or maintained as the principle learning environment used to supporting flexible learning:
 - it provides content management; assessment and feedback; learner engagement; student administration; communication tools; collaboration tools; and synchronous teaching elements. Additional functionality can be provided by using plugins to third party sites, including blogs, wikis and immersive learning sites
 - it is designed for use on various devices and operating systems and can incorporate principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
 - all of your students will already have VLE accounts and, ideally, any additional plug-in tools are available via a single sign-on, and student activity can be readily tracked for support purposes.
- + Web-conferencing platforms provide a range of options to enhance synchronous online learning. These include video/audio, screen sharing, whiteboards, breakout rooms, chat, polling and virtual body language and reactions. Effective use of these tools may require professional development of teaching teams, or team teaching with technical support.
- + Consider access to discipline-specific, high-tech appliances. This access can be physical, via Internet of Things, or augmented reality.
- + Immersive technology, such as virtual, augmented or mixed reality and 360-degree video, supports simulations, role playing and other activities.
- + Smart classrooms can provide a range of technology to enhance and extend in-person teaching, including interactive whiteboards or multi-touch tables, lecture capture technology, built-in electronic voting systems, pop-up laptops or collaborative platforms.

- + Identify software that enables educators and students to create multimodal artefacts to develop multimedia literacy, enhance inclusivity and support understanding. For example, digital story (moving image plus text), infographics (visuals plus text), animations, digital posters, blogs, wikis, websites, social media, podcasts/audio recordings, video/screen recordings, oral/digital presentations, immersive, game-based and virtual environments (visual plus movement/touch). Where possible, select tools that can be plugged in to the VLE.
- + Use content authoring tools to create resources with formative feedback to students.
- + Consider what technologies and capabilities you need for the modes of communication. Prioritise those that provide institutional support, such as the VLE, but also consider other technologies if they effectively enhance learner engagement or provide opportunities to develop digital and professional skills.

In-person learning

What?

In-person learning is any form of formal or informal learning that requires physical co- presence. This could be with educators and/or with other students. It generally adopts one of the following typologies (Imms et al, 2017).

- + Teacher facilitated presentation, direct instruction or large group discussion.
- + Teacher facilitated small group discussion or instruction.
- + Team teacher facilitated presentation, direct instruction or large group discussion.
- + Collaborative/shared learning, supported by teachers as needed
- + One-on-one instruction.

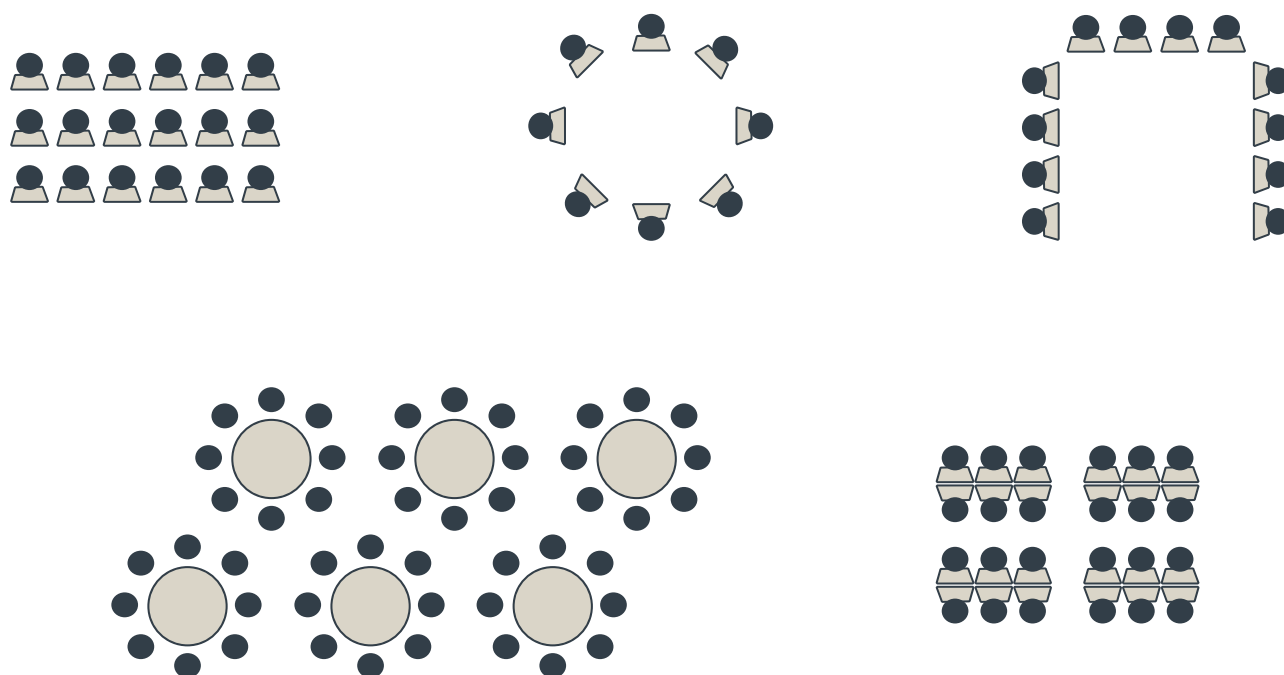
Why?

The physicality of in-person learning provides a wide variety of opportunities to take part in hands-on practical activities as well as engage in active learning. Students can meet other students and educators teaching them, both in class and pre- and post-session, enabling informal networking. Access to resources in class can remove barriers for those that do not have access to technology required for online classes.

Where?

In-person formal learning will take place in timetabled classes in designated spaces, but also informally prior to and after a class in spaces chosen by the student(s). The formal learning spaces will typically be within the site of the university. Exceptions could include field trips, within the workplace, or visits to external sites for other co-curricular or extracurricular activities. For many programmes, the traditional learning spaces students will experience include the lecture theatre for large group in-person teaching and a classroom for seminars or tutorials for smaller group teaching. These learning spaces may contain fixed furniture or provide a flexible space where tables and chairs can be positioned to suit the pedagogy.

Figure 2. Learning spaces for in-person teaching



In addition, bespoke authentic spaces relevant to the discipline (Elkington and Blyth, 2019) may be provided for specific aspects of the programme. Table 1 shows some examples.

Table 1. Discipline-specific in-person learning spaces

Discipline	Learning space
Architecture, art and design	Studio and workshops
Computing	PC lab
Engineering	Workshop
Broadcast journalism	TV and radio studios
Law	Court room
Medicine and health	Ward or operating theatre
Performing arts	Studio or theatre
Sciences	Science lab
Sport	Indoor or outdoor exercise space

The design of in-person teaching will be further shaped by cohort size, classroom layout, the subject and the intended learning outcomes, as well as the need to encourage contact between students and educators (Chickering and Gamson, 1987) and peer to peer interaction.

Design and planning of in-person teaching

- + Design learning to maximise the benefits of being present in-person. For example, group work activities; time for discussion, debate or problem solving; or applied learning working with clients or local community groups.
- + Ensure that formal learning spaces meet the needs of the planned learning activities including:
 - the specialist equipment to meet the needs of the learning discipline
 - the number of students expected to attend the class
 - the layout of tables and chairs
 - the duration of the class.
- + Consider how the actual physical setting, spatial layout and flexibility will empower an active learning space that enables interaction, collaboration and hands-on activity.
- + Consider whether you need to provide students with choice in where to sit and with whom they wish to work. Developing friendship groups can increase motivation and a sense of belonging; at the start of a semester or year it can be beneficial to create working groups to ensure inclusivity and sense of belonging.
- + Inform students if they are required or will benefit from bringing a notebook, digital device or specialist equipment and what may be available on loan.

Facilitating and supporting in-person teaching

- + Create a welcoming environment and demonstrate that you value social presence by allowing and encouraging social interactions as students settle in for the session.
- + Understand and acknowledge the value of presence and impact on students' interpersonal skills and social capital.
- + Recognise the time and resource required to travel to and from campus to attend in-person classes.

Synchronous online learning

What?

Synchronous online learning is designed to be undertaken in groups in real-time, connecting educators and learners that cannot physically be co-located. Synchronous online learning should maximise opportunities for active collaborative learning, including discussions and questions and answers, and opportunities to surface misunderstandings.

Why?

Synchronous learning activities allow for real-time social interaction that face-to-face learning and teaching affords online. Geographical location becomes less challenging and opens learning opportunities for those not located near a university campus or who have other commitments such as work.

Where?

Students can access learning from geographical distances as well as over multiple time zones. Learning can take place in a variety of locations including home, work or community, allowing for integration of differently abled and overseas learners in a more inclusive manner. Synchronous technologies are an important tool to allow for continuity of an in-person (real-time) type teaching when situations such as pandemics, weather events or other emergencies occur. While this allows the benefits of in-person teaching and learning, the technological, cognitive load and emotional challenges associated with a rapid switch shouldn't be underestimated and must be supported institutionally.

Design and planning of synchronous online teaching

- + Familiarise yourself with the functionalities of the webinar platform you will be using.
- + Use a constructive alignment approach to identify which learning outcomes of your course or module, could be met or progressed through synchronous activities and which can be developed through directed learning, either before or after the synchronous session.
- + Design for your students and the relationships and interactions dictated by your programme context. This includes the complex interplay between subject needs, staffing, location (geographical enrolment including any time zones), technologies and students (skills, motivation, confidence) and numbers.
- + Provide signposts and supports around the required technologies used as well as digital and independent learning skills required at pre-enrolment and throughout studies.
- + Define what online engagement looks like, and discuss with and promote to your students.
- + Cognitive load for the teacher (pedagogical techniques, subject materials, interactions, and technology) can be such that teaching with a peer, teaching assistant or technical support is advisable.

- + Share with your students the rationale for the design of your learning environment including the layout, opportunities for interaction and any additional requirements.
- + Ensure that all students are prepared to participate in online education: device, network and skills.
- + Point students to on-campus facilities, rooms and technology to enable them to join a synchronous session on site if required.
- + Delivery to large groups (300+) via synchronous tools is functionally possible although careful consideration needs to be given to how to ensure active learning in this environment: eg pauses for Q&A or breakout groups; large-scale delivery will be enhanced through a team-based approach.

Facilitating and supporting synchronous online learning

- + Use the functions of your platform to promote collaborative learning and student engagement: video/audio, screen sharing (presenting), whiteboards, breakout rooms, chat, polling and virtual body language and reactions (eg raise hand, emojis 🙋👍❤️ and fast/slow).
- + Allowing text-based chat can promote engagement. However, it can also be a distraction to the educator and the students. Decide when you will turn on and off the chat functionality and inform students of the rationale.
- + Value and model social presence and agree a camera policy. Consider ways of ensuring and monitoring presence that does not require cameras.
- + Explain to students how they can ask questions and give you feedback. You could include this information in a 'housekeeping' slide you show at the start of a session.
- + Build in purposeful active learning opportunities and 'reflection points' at intervals during your session.
- + Know and become comfortable with the functionality of your technological platform and use the functions that help enhance your teaching and student learning.
- + Consider the pros and cons of each tool you use – does it promote inclusivity and enhance engagement and learning, or is it overwhelming or distracting?
- + Immersive virtual worlds are starting to be used to support synchronous online learning. However, the cost of the equipment means that current use is predominantly to enhance in-person teaching on campus.

Directed learning

What?

Directed learning is flexible, self-paced learning activities that students carry out independently or as part of a team at a time and a location, either online or in-person, that suits them. Directed online learning can also be referred to as asynchronous online learning. These activities are designed and directed by educators and may count towards student contact time (QAA, 2011).

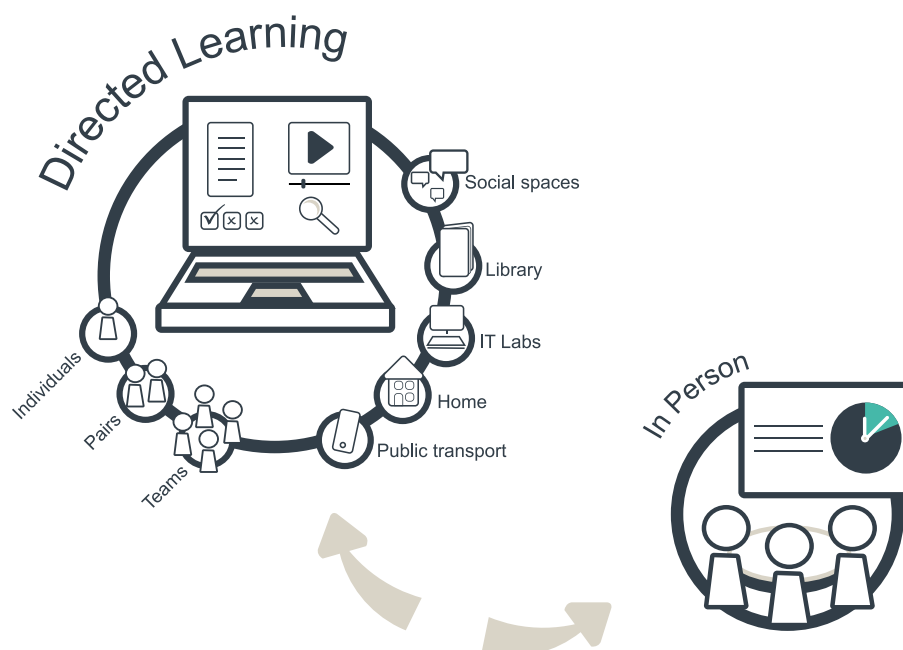
Why?

Directed learning is critical for developing independent learners. You can encourage and support learning by requiring students to prepare for in-person class activities and to conduct follow-up activities, either individually or in groups. This also prepares students to engage deeper with concepts and theories that are of interest to them.

Where?

The digital learning environment of the HE institution is the normal host for online directed learning. This may be the virtual learning environment (VLE) where students engage with planned learning activities, such as reading papers or watching video lectures, before using discussion boards or online quizzes to demonstrate understanding. Although directed online learning is designed to work with digital tools and platforms, students may wish to access the content on campus in the social learning spaces or the library via personal laptops, phones, tablets or in IT labs. Other students may access from home, a coffee shop or on public transport via personal devices. Group activities may take place online or in-person depending on student groups' choice of the physical location.

Figure 3. Directed learning



Design and planning of directed learning

- + Use a constructive alignment approach to identify which learning outcomes of your course or module could be met or progressed through preparatory work or a follow-up learning activity.
- + Allow enough time prior to teaching sessions to plan the design of directed learning materials and how they link to learning outcomes.
- + Ensure the programme team have a shared understanding of what directed learning entails so they can provide a consistent experience for students and ensure that the student workload is evenly distributed. Preparation work for an in-person class can include pre-reading, watching a video or taking a quiz. Follow-up activities can include group or individual work designed to deepen understanding, application and extension of taught content. It can also include a formative assessment or quiz.
- + Consider whether the programme team requires support or professional development to ensure that a consistent approach to directed learning is used.
- + Apply principles of learning design to ensure online activities are valuable, inclusive and aligned to learning outcomes to encourage engagement.
- + Provide clear instructions for students with particular focus on time and effort requirements.
- + Break activities into smaller, more manageable chunks.

Facilitating and supporting directed learning

- + Communicate expectations clearly to students.
- + Actively monitor student engagement by providing responses to their comments and interactions.
- + Ensure active engagement with directed learning by providing trigger questions or statements and expectations for online activities, eg write, reflect, answer, respond, predict.
- + Scaffold support around the technologies students are expected to use as well as signpost students to digital and independent learning skills resources.
- + Schedule time to encourage engagement and respond to student interactions in a timely manner to foster and maintain an effective online student experience.
- + Provide timely support and guidance to prepare for engaging fully in directed online learning.

Hybrid learning

What?

Hybrid learning is a deliberate integration of synchronous (in-person or online) and directed learning. Programme teams decide which elements are delivered remotely and which require in-person presence. The Open University, UK was an early proponent of hybrid or ‘supported open learning’.

Why?

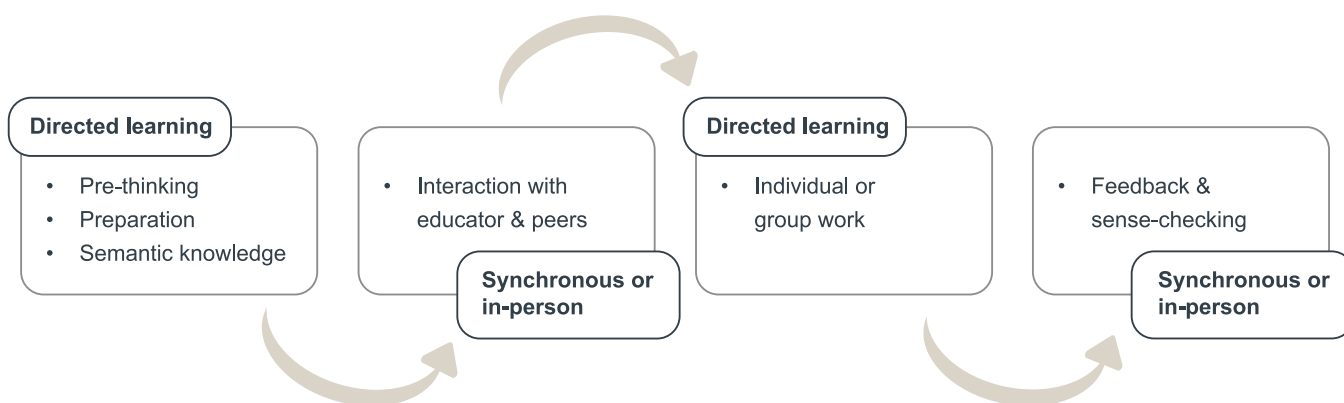
A hybrid model recognises the benefits of the combination of directed online activities that provide learning flexibility and in-person activities that provide time and space for social and collaborative learning, creating cohort identity and developing discipline-specific skills.

Where?

The hybrid model requires access to appropriate physical space (campus or a designated local or regional centre) that supports social learning activities. Where necessary, discipline-specific learning spaces may be required to develop professional practice.

Online activities may take place flexibly, over a designated time period in any appropriate space including at home, on the move, at the workplace, in open spaces (eg libraries) or on campus.

Figure 4. Hybrid learning



Design and planning of hybrid learning

- + Map out and review each programme element or topic and consider what parts can be delivered online and what parts require or benefit from in-person presence.
- + Consider whether the synchronous element is offered in-person or online. Online can be effective to support students (eg mature, work-based, highly mobile or remote or international students) with restricted access to the campus. It can also be used to support large cohorts where there is insufficient physical space in the lecture theatre. If there is a benefit in providing students with a choice of mode of attendance then the hyflex model can be considered.
- + Inform students of expectations for in-person, directed and synchronous learning.
- + Design the online learning environment at a programme level to provide a consistent learning experience, ease navigation and reduce cognitive load on learners.
- + Provide timing and type of interaction required for each activity mapped against the overall “contact” or group learning time. Provide estimated timings for directed activities (mins to read/watch/reflect/post) and actual timings for video or audio elements to support students planning their learning time. Provide timely information on which learning activities require group work as well as the overall volume and timing of activities.
- + Consider how to maximise the benefit of students’ presence on campus, either by clustering in-person classes or building in time and space for group activities following in-person classes.
- + Consider adopting a set of emojis or icons such as 🕒 (time), ⌨️ (keyboard) and 💬 (discussion) as well as text, and use consistently across the programme.

Facilitating and supporting hybrid learning

- + Provide timely information around expectations of workload and time sensitive tasks.
- + Ensure that teaching presence is signposted throughout the programme.
- + Provide digital touch points and tracking to allow you to identify students who might be struggling or disengaging.

Hyflex learning

What?

The hybrid flexible, or hyflex format is an instructional approach that combines in-person and online learning. Each class session and learning activity is offered in-person, synchronously online and asynchronously online. Students can decide – for each class or activity – how to participate (Milman, 2020).

Why?

Hyflex provides flexible accommodation for student needs, meaning that those with other commitments and responsibilities may choose to attend either in-person or online with no reduction in their learning experience. Use a hyflex approach for learning that requires or benefits from synchronous interaction and where there are benefits for providing student choice. This combination of face-to-face and online modes of learning also provides opportunity for educators to design for different methods of interaction and engagement in a hyflex environment.

Where?

Hyflex occurs synchronously in two domains: via on-campus, in-person learning spaces and webinar platforms (eg via Zoom, Microsoft Teams or through a VLE tool such as Blackboard Collaborate), with both in-person and online audiences interacting and collaborating. It is important to note that a hyflex approach may not be the most appropriate for disciplines that require physical components such as lab work, use of machinery and/or specialist equipment or patient care.

Design and planning of hyflex learning

- + Plan for engagement to be the core of the session.
- + Consider how you will provide an equitable learning experience for both online and in-person cohorts. This can include the room set-up, the position of the cameras and the audio, and whether you have the technology to allow peer-to-peer interaction between the in-person and the online cohorts. Quality and equitable hyflex learning environments will benefit from team teaching in classrooms with 360o cameras, microphones and speakers or similar technology to facilitate peer interaction.
- + Help students feel prepared for the live session; include help resources from your chosen platform, remind students of the need for a stable internet connection, webcam, headset/microphone, and provide a direct link to the session.
- + Where appropriate, consider recording all synchronous sessions and activities, allowing asynchronous viewing for students to review and reflect on the session.

- + Limit the duration of hyflex sessions to one hour and/or plan regular short breaks as it can be difficult to maintain attention in synchronous online environments.
- + Design socio-collaborative learning activities that give students a reason to interact and collaborate.
- + Identify how you will set up groups. Do you want separate online and in-person groups, or a mixture? Will you need breakout rooms for large online cohorts?
- + Be receptive to student feedback and use this to enhance the hyflex learning experience.

Facilitating and supporting hyflex learning

- + Endeavour to help students feel connected to each other and to you, the educator. Be sure to maintain ongoing communication in online channels and chat forums.
- + Recognise that hyflex teaching can often be a challenging experience for educators and students. Managing several tools and platforms to achieve active learning in a synchronous online environment can be a daunting prospect for some, while it can also be difficult to facilitate student interaction and motivate discussion between in-person and online students.
- + Be transparent that active participation is a requirement for synchronous sessions.
- + Consider a code of participation to share with your students.
- + Value and model social presence by sharing audio and video. Ensure that you provide clear instructions of how and where students should interact and confirm if they have permission to share their audio and webcam and how this will work throughout the session.
- + Use a mix of active learning tools and approaches to encourage student participation.
- + Ensure each activity is supplemented with clear instructions, guidance and aims so that students know what they need to do and why they are doing it. Consider using time-limits to keep students focused and on task.
- + Actively monitor student interaction and provide regular feedback and comments in response to these interactions – this will provide students with ongoing constructive guidance they can apply to the tasks in real time.

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Contact us

General enquiries

+44 (0) 3300 416201

enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk

www.advance-he.ac.uk

Media enquiries

+44 (0) 1904 717500

communications@advance-he.ac.uk

www.advance-he.ac.uk/contact-us

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