The hybrid shift: Evidencing a student-driven restructuring of the college classroom

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ABSTRACT

College students progressively come to campus with mobile devices and increasingly use them for academic work. We propose that student appropriation of mobile technology transforms classrooms, regardless of structural format, into online environments where students engage, network, and restructure in-class learning. Such activities may be facilitated by faculty and intentional interventions, but is principally driven and organically defined by students. This study represents a first step in identifying and understanding this trend, we refer to as a hybrid shift, in which student use of mobile technology restructures traditional face-to-face classes by adding a vibrant, and organic, supplemental learning component. Data informing this research were drawn from qualitative responses from 620 students in Korea and the U.S. Findings from textual analysis evidence student appropriation of technology for academic purposes, their desire for more supportive structures and instructional practices, as well as teaching and learning implications stemming from this practice. While further research into this occurrence is needed, this study was intended as a preliminary step at identifying the phenomenon to frame and guide continued work.

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1. Introduction

For over a decade, the term "online" has trended from an occasional classification of a few courses to a common description of the contemporary college classroom (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Fully online courses, from small to massive, or blended/hybridized courses incorporating elements of online teaching and learning have become the norm rather than the exception, particularly in higher education, dating back to 2003 (e.g., Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007). While researchers have delineated between formal and informal learning activities mediated by technology in these contexts (e.g., Wu et al., 2012), the traditional course design model depends on the faculty or institution to define and structure the environment.

Pedagogics hope these structures are thoughtful, engaging, and intentional in promoting learning in areas such as communication skills, critical thinking, and effective collaboration (e.g., Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). In this conventional arrangement, the learner is the passive recipient of information facilitated through content and structure designed by the faculty. An expectation is that students will be empowered to explore and take charge of their own learning beyond class time. The ubiquity of mobile smart devices and immediate online access has redefined this arrangement by "blurring the lines" (Gikas & Grant, 2013) between technology use for formal and informal, social and educational activities. This has enabled a transformation of traditional face-to-face classroom spaces into online-enhanced environments, bypassing faculty design and intention (Dringus & Seagull, 2014). Faculty may not be aware of the extent to which such "here and now" activities (Martin & Ertzberger, 2013) may be taking place in online-enabled anywhere, anytime "ubiquitous learning environments" (Chen, Chang, & Wang, 2008).

Recently, the authors of the 2014 Higher Education Horizon Report (Johnson, Adams Becker, Estrada, & Freeman, 2014) named both the growing pervasiveness of social media and the integration of online, hybrid, and collaborative learning as the two "fast trends" forecasted to drive changes in global higher education over the next two years. Current research endorses these predictions; however, the convergence of the two trends warrants attention. By extending the concept of "blurring the lines," a terminological shift in philosophy about online learning emerges – that students transform traditional classrooms into online environments, regardless of the format, by appropriating their own technology. In this way, the student, rather than the faculty, may be positioned structurally as the learning environment, evocative of Wellman's (2001, 2002) networked individualism. Put simply, the student may be physically present in the class, but spends a percentage of in-class time creating and connecting to an *ad hoc* network to enable personal learning. Mobile devices most often facilitate this connection. We propose this phenomenon constitutes a shift to personalized hybrid learning, bearing implications for the core skills students need to be successful in contemporary educational environments.

The purpose of this large-scale qualitative study was to introduce and provide a preliminary discussion the hybrid shift concept. Our hypothesis students, using personal mobile devices, transform face-to-face classrooms into online environments to engage, network, personalize, and re-structure learning. Such activities may be facilitated by faculty and intentional interventions, but is principally driven and organically defined by the student. This cross-cultural study of student use of mobile technology in the classroom, involving students in the Korea and the U.S., was designed to examine this concept in different contexts. Korea and U.S. were selected as the two target countries for survey, because the nature of their mobile and social relationships and their cultural attitude toward academic study facilitated by Internet technologies may represent collegians in Asian and Western countries (Cho & Park, 2013). This study also contributes to previous literature by extending the research into an inter-cultural sphere theoretically and into broader data contexts methodologically.

2. Review of literature

2.1. The hybrid learning approach

Hybrid learning approaches, intended to bridge fully online and face-to-face courses, primarily were developed after students and faculty experienced problems transitioning to a fully online format. Largely, these issues were related to course structure (i.e., navigation problems) or other individual limitations related to digital literacy (Lee, Fong, & Gordon, 2013). Also, institutions have used hybrid formats to counter problems stemming from a lack of classroom space and budget constraints. Initially, the most common features of a hybrid format were the ability access materials online or to participate in discussion boards (Allen et al., 2007). More recently, Zhao and Breslow (2013) differentiated hybrid courses by identifying four key purposes: (1) replacement (students watch videos or complete assignments before class to reduce in-class time), (2) supplemental (students access additional materials online with no in-class time reduction), (3) emporium (students have no in-class time, but an available in-person resource center), and (4) buffet (students choose a combination of online or in-class activities).

Research on student learning differentiated by course format has shown the most promising outcomes from courses that blended online activities and face-to-face teaching, rather than focusing on fully online or in-class instruction. In a U.S. Department of Education sponsored meta-analysis of studies published from 1996 to 2008, Means, Toyama, Morphy, Bakia, and Jones (2009) found differences related to learning outcomes between face-to-face, online exclusive, and hybridized environments, based on format. Students tended to learn similarly in all online or all face-to-face courses, but performed better academically in blended classrooms. Recently, Zhao and Breslow (2013) reviewed a decade of published studies on hybrid learning environments as part of their work with the Teaching and Learning Laboratory at MIT. While the researchers did not provide a narrative synthesis of findings, a table summary of studies showed nearly all comparisons favored hybrid environments over face-to-face, as evidenced by statistically significant learning improvements. It is important to note that research evidencing both meta-analyses was derived from faculty-defined or institutionally-structured efforts.

One contextual consideration common in the research on hybrid learning related to expectations; students and faculty in hybrid courses perceive each other's roles differently and have opposing experiences (Miyazoe, Saeki, & Paterson, 2010). For example, in contrast to faculty, students enrolling in hybrid courses envisage up-to-date materials, 24 × 7 access to faculty, and incorporation of additional technologies (Jackson & Helms, 2008; Kent, 2013; Osborne, Kriese, Tobey, & Johnson, 2009). Following a five-year study of hybrid learning integration in graduate computer and information sciences courses, Dringus and Seagull (2014) reported similar results, but noted some similarities between students and faculty for issues such as too much work, negotiating different delivery models, and consideration of new policies about class along with guidelines for balancing online with in-class activities.

2.2. Student use and expectation of mobile technology

According to recent international survey data (Dahlstrom, Walker, & Dziuban, 2013), college students do not perceive learning as solely a classroom, place-based experience, but view the learning environment more broadly. Further, college students increasingly want to use the technology they own for academic work (Wu et al., 2012). Results from a number of large-scale surveys consistently showed students held high expectations for ubiquitous, anytime, anyplace access to course materials and use of mobile devices in- and outside the classroom (Dahlstrom & Warraich, 2012; Greene, 2011; Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011).

From their review of studies from 2003 to 2010, Wu et al. (2012) found college students preferred to adopt devices they used, such as smartphones, for learning activities. Dahlstrom et al. (2013) suggested use of mobile technologies for academic purposes has grown to over 50% among college students. In terms of perceived benefits, Dobbin, Dahlstrom, Arroway, and Sheehan (2011) found that for students, engaging with technology means connecting to academic resources and related information, supporting productivity and efficiency, engendering institutional and peer engagement, and making learning more creative and more applicable. These activities remain consistent with the most recent EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) data. Martin and Ertzberger (2013) classified related activities as "here and now mobile learning" and identified three basic tenets: (1) enabling constant involvement with others, (2) permitting students to easily access and produce information; and (3) taking place "naturally and without directed effort." Notably, this is not a U.S.-only phenomenon.