

THE INSIGHTS OF THE STUDENTS ON HYBRID LEARNING

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Abstract	<p><i>Hybrid learning has been a common choice of teaching and learning method since the world was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. Most schools and higher education institutions all over the world opted for Hybrid learning. Now that the pandemic has subsided, many still decide to continue using Hybrid learning. Hybrid learning combines both online and face-to-face learning. Among the objectives of this study are to identify the challenges that students faced in Hybrid learning as well as to discover some alternatives to improve Hybrid learning in USIM. A questionnaire was distributed to 74 USIM undergraduates. Various positive and interesting responses received from the survey conducted in order to learn the students' insights of Hybrid learning in USIM. It is hoped that some of the weaknesses highlighted will be given attention and improvement for the betterment of Hybrid learning in USIM in the future.</i></p> <p><i>Keywords: Hybrid Learning, Synchronous, Asynchronous, Online, Face-To-Face.</i></p>
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INTRODUCTION

The name of Hybrid Learning is made known during the Covid-19 pandemic where all education institutions around the world chose to conduct teaching and learning online. During the lockdown, everyone was not allowed to leave their homes, hence all teaching of learning was conducted online. As time goes by, when the pandemic turned endemic, many education institutions such as higher education institutions started to call their students back to campus, however, teaching and learning was not done fully online but hybrid.

Similarly, this practice was done in Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) in which starting 2022, most classes were conducted in Hybrid. Hybrid learning, or blended learning, "combines online with face-to-face learning. The goal of Hybrid learning is to provide the most efficient and effective instruction experience by combining delivery modalities" (Kumar, 2013). Hybrid learning is a combination of face-to-face classroom instruction and online activities. It reduces the amount of seat time in a traditional face-to-face course and moves more of the course delivery online. During classroom instruction time, students will be engaged in authentic, collaborative learning experiences. The online components may include multimedia-enhanced content and channels for ongoing discussion.

To date, many higher education institutions are practicing Hybrid learning and various feedbacks have been received from students who have experienced the Hybrid learning for a few semesters.

This study aims to investigate the students' insights of Hybrid learning. The research questions are :

1. What kind of learning that take place in Hybrid Learning?
2. What kind of teaching method used in Hybrid Learning?
3. What is the main challenge of Hybrid Learning?
4. How to improve Hybrid Learning in USIM?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, information technology and distance education have provided interesting developments in higher education (Matthews, 1999). The integration of web-based education and learning through a learning management system (LMS) has enabled educational institutions to carry out the learning process off-campus (Samarawickrema & Stacey, 2007). The Covid-19 pandemic that hit the world in late 2019 had precipitated the practice of online education globally, resulting into a high scale of online teaching and learning worldwide, as means to facilitate education from pre-school to tertiary levels. Three years post-Covid, online learning still ensue alongside the traditional face-to-face classroom. A study by Holzapfel (2021) reported that the pandemic has accelerated the evolution of digital education by ten years. A study by Gnaur, Hindhede & Andersen (2020) confirms the importance of rethinking teaching and learning in the current digital turn. In this new era, the study shows that "there is a need to accommodate a greater student diversity and to further the development of higher learning skills through active learning strategies in an online learning environment".

Blended learning emerged as one of the most popular pedagogical concepts in higher education and in EFL contexts at the beginning of 2000 (Halverson et al, 2014). Scholars predict that blended learning will become the "new traditional model" or the "new normal" in course delivery (Graham et al., 2012). Hybrid or blended learning is defined as a pedagogical approach that includes a combination of face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction. The terms blended learning, hybrid learning, and mixed-mode learning are used interchangeably in current research; however, in the United States, hybrid learning is used most often (Byrne & Pytash, 2015). Since then, the concept of hybrid learning has gained popularity and became more widely adopted in various educational institutions.

Ranganathan et al. (2007) highlighted the interesting features of hybrid teaching format with 50% each for online and face-to-face. Hybrid learning combines traditional face-to-face classroom instruction with online learning components, offering a flexible and dynamic educational experience. It allows a flexible approach to the learning process in which the students, the teacher, participating experts, and the institution could engage collaboratively (Al Najdi, 2014; Ranganathan et al., 2007). Al Najdi (2014) surmised that the key feature of hybrid learning permits adjustments made to the needs of the learner, the course, pace, time and space, particularly, beneficial for time and space constrained individuals. In cross-disciplines, institutional bridging and non-formal settings, hybrid learning has been seen as conceptually effective and applicable in the different forms of collaborative learning. Sukiman, Haningsih and Rohmi (2021) state that the combined formulation of face-to-face and hybrid learning needs to be adjusted to the characteristics, educational purpose and orientation, level of ability, readiness, and learning autonomy of the students at each educational level. In their study, online learning at the doctoral level was the most effective among all.

Challenges to Hybrid Learning

In Germany, Hanft (2009) reported that even though hybrid learning has been incorporated in various universities since the 1970s, the majority of short courses and other forms of higher education are predominantly based on face-to-face teaching. Matthews (1999) documented on issues relating to costs of educational materials, staff training, instructors' service and equipment investments as main concerns of hybrid learning.

Jeschke (2010) mentioned the drawbacks of e-learning systems to universities, particularly at the faculty level are (1) the lack of support to choose all appropriate software applications and hardware products, (2) the missing didactical concepts, and (3) the time-consuming integration into curriculum. 70 percent of faculty members in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Germany, surveyed were concerned about their ability to deliver engaging, high-value learning experiences in online settings (Holzapfel, 2021). According to Al Najdi (2014), hybrid learning has not been practised widely because of issues relating to applicability, integration, cost restrictions and social effects to the learners.

Students' perceptions of hybrid learning can vary widely based on their individual preferences, learning styles, and experiences. Among the numerous factors affecting f2f and online learning, some have been well scrutinized in previous research, such as learner autonomy and interaction, whereas other issues remained somewhat unexplored, especially in relation to instructors' roles, learning resources and activities, and learning styles (Drysdale et. al, 2013). A study on non-English major students taking a blended English course has found that most learners preferred blended learning to either face-to-face (f2f) or online learning alone, with f2f learning as more preferable than online learning. As to the respective roles of f2f and online learning, students considered f2f learning to be more advantageous to learning world knowledge (Huang, 2016).

Recent research has elicited more important findings with regards the impacts of hybrid learning upon students at higher education institutions. One study highlighted that online learning cannot produce desired results in underdeveloped countries like Pakistan, where a vast majority of students are unable to access the internet due to technical as well as financial issues. The lack of face-to-face interaction with the instructor, response time and absence of traditional classroom socialization were among some other issues highlighted by higher education students (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Gautam and Gautam (2021) posits that technological support, infrastructure availability, faculty and students' perception have a significant relationship for the effectiveness of the online mode in the teaching-learning process. Their research shows that although students faced anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic, but their stronger willingness to learn has reduced their level of anxiety.

In another study, Holzapfel (2021) reported that digital education has led to challenges such as the need to adapt pedagogy for remote or hybrid learning and create opportunities for student engagement. In their study, Gnaur et al. (2020) summarized that the design of hybrid learning environments is uniquely dependent upon the context of each academic programme and its elements. This takes into account the differences of students' learning needs and their pre-conditions for learning. Inviting students as co-designers and creating more hybrid learning environments would facilitate a smoother transition to online teaching.

METHODOLOGY

This present study aims to investigate students' insights of Hybrid learning. The participants were 19 male and 55 female students of first and second year degree in Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia. A questionnaire was distributed online to the students in order to get their feedback. The data was then analysed and presented in tables.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Hybrid Learning Experience

To begin the questionnaire, we need to know if the students have been involved in Hybrid learning in the last 1 or 2 years, or not. Majority of them, 93.2% (69) have already experienced Hybrid learning while a small number which is 6.8% (5) have never involved in Hybrid learning. Most of these students are affected by the lockdown during Covid-19 pandemic and did most of their leaning online.

Types of Learning Take Place in Hybrid Learning

For this question, 6 types of learning were listed and the students were to determine which types of learning and the frequency they happened in Hybrid learning.

The first one is synchronous online learning in which lecturer and students are present online at the same time. 9.5% responded that this happened all the time, 25.7% responded it happened most of the time, 60.8% responded it happened sometimes while 4.1% responded it hardly happened.

The second one is asynchronous online learning (students learn on their own using materials uploaded by the lecturer for example recorded lessons.) 9.5% responded it happened all the time, 21.6% responded it happened most of the time, 60.8% responded it happened sometimes, 6.8% responded it hardly happened and 1.4% responded it never happened.

The third one is lecturer sends homework or notes through handphone to students. 18.9% responded this happened all the time, 36.5% responded it happened most of the time, 37.8% responded it happened sometimes, 5.4% responded it hardly happened and 1.4% responded it never happened.

The fourth one is students take turn to attend class physically. 9.5% responded it happened all the time, 36.5% responded it happened most of the time, 35.1% responded it happened sometimes, 12.2% responded it hardly happened and 6.8% responded it never happened.

The fifth one is students learn online sometimes and attend physical classes sometimes. 23% responded it happened all the time, 31.1% responded it happened most of the time, 37.8% responded it happened sometimes, 4.1% responded it hardly happened and 4.1% responded it never happened.

The last one is students learn through television programme at home and attend physical classes sometimes. 6.8% responded it happened all the time, 13.5% responded it happened most of the time, 45.9% responded it happened sometimes, 24.3% responded it hardly happened and 9.5% responded it never happened.

From the responses it can be concluded that there are many types of learning in Hybrid learning. It can be face-to-face or online. Some students may not realise that although the learning is conducted remotely, it is still considered as learning. However, some students do realise that learning has taken place and it is Hybrid learning.

Table 1. Types of learning take place in Hybrid Learning

No	Statement	All The Time	Most Of The Time	Sometimes	Hardly	Never
1	Synchronous online learning (lecturer and students are present online at the same time).	9.5%	25.7%	60.8%	4.1%	0%
2	Asynchronous online learning (students learn on their own using materials uploaded by the lecturer for example recorded lesson).	9.5%	21.6%	60.8%	6.8%	1.4%

3	Lecturer sends homework or notes through handphone to students.	18.9%	36.5%	37.8%	5.4%	1.4%
4	Students take turn to attend class physically.	9.5%	36.5%	35.1%	12.2%	6.8%
5	Students learn online sometimes and attend physical classes sometimes.	23%	31.1%	37.8%	4.1%	4.1%
6	Students learn through television programme at home and attend physical classes sometimes.	6.8%	13.5%	45.9%	24.3%	9.5%

Teaching and Learning Methods

Three teaching and learning methods was listed in the questionnaire to get feedback on which one was used in Hybrid learning.

The first one is lecture. 27% responded it was used all the time, 48.6% responded it was used most of the time, 18.9% responded it was used sometimes and 5.4% responded it was hardly used.

The second one is hands-on activity. 14.9% responded it was used all the time, 32.4% responded it was used most of the time, 44.6% responded it was used sometimes and 8.1% responded it was hardly used.

The third one is project-based learning. 13.5% responded it was used all the time, 35.1% responded it was used most of the time, 43.2% responded it was sometimes, 6.8% responded it was hardly used and 1.4% responded it was never used.

In Hybrid learning, just like conventional learning, these teaching and learning methods can be used. Lecture is one of the common one be it synchronously or asynchronously. Similarly, hands-on activities and project-based learning can also be used in Hybrid learning.

Table 2. Teaching and Learning Methods in Hybrid Learning.

No	Statement	All The Time	Most Of The Time	Sometimes	Hardly	Never
1	Lecture	27%	48.6%	18.9%	5.4%	0%
2	Hand-on activities	14.9%	32.4%	44.6%	8.1%	0%
3	Project based learning	13.5%	35.1%	43.2%	6.8%	1.4%

Challenges of Hybrid Learning

All kinds of teaching and learning have its own challenges. Different setting of classroom gives different impacts. Some students shared their responses on the challenges they faced in Hybrid learning.

Majority of the students (55%) responded that the main challenge for them in Hybrid learning is related to Internet such as poor Internet connection at their place and little data amount available. When they have poor internet connection, they will have problems to connect and to stay put during the class, reconnection is required all the time. Besides that, poor internet connection also contributes to lagging and buffering especially when downloading materials given by lecturers. When these happen, they seem to lose focus and become demotivated to attend classes.

Other responses on the challenges of Hybrid learning are difficult to focus on the class (16%), difficult to understand what is being taught (16%), the students themselves (11%) and students do not know each other physically (2%).

Students have difficulties to focus as a result of poor Internet connection, other distractions such as noises from other housemates who are also having online class

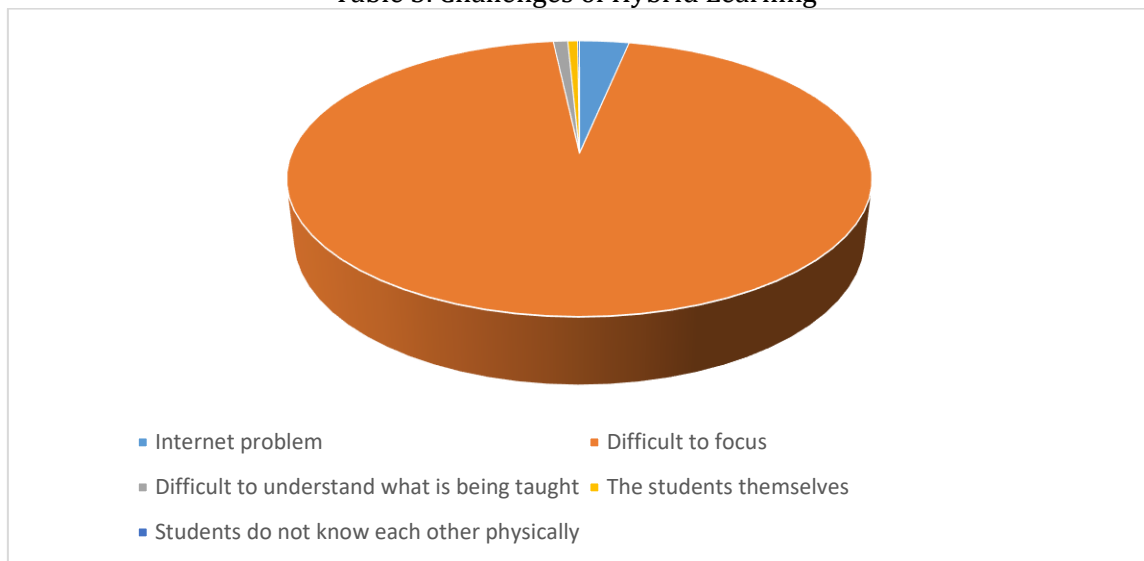
simultaneously and no physical interaction with classmates which results in difficulty to focus on the class.

Having difficulties to understand what is being taught is another challenge of Hybrid learning. These students said that it was difficult for them to pose questions due to shyness to speak up, due to lagging and buffering which affects their understanding of the subject being taught and the explanation of the lecturers are sometimes unclear.

Another challenge of Hybrid learning according to the students is the students themselves. For example, in Hybrid learning they can easily skip classes as lecturers do not notice this, lack of desire and motivation, lack of self-discipline, lack of interaction with their classmates and easily distracted to their surroundings.

Lastly, another challenge of Hybrid learning is students do not know each other physically. Some of them do not even know the lecturers. They find it difficult to do group work and discussion as they do not know each other. This is because they seldom meet as Hybrid learning is not 100% face-to-face.

Table 3. Challenges of Hybrid Learning



Ways to Improve Hybrid Learning in USIM

The last question in the questionnaire is asking for the students' opinion on ways to improve Hybrid Learning in USIM. Since many of them had experienced it for one or two semesters, they might have some suggestions.

Among the suggestions are :-

1. online classes should not be conducted during public holidays,
2. more face-to-face classes needed and less online classes,
3. lecturers should use slides in PowerPoint to ease the students' understanding of the lesson compared to using textbook,
4. lecturers should share their notes after class so that the students and understand better,
5. schedule should be given earlier of whether the class is going to be online or face-to-face so the students can easily plan their time and transportation,
6. all classes during festive seasons such Hari Raya should be conducted online so that the students can go back home,
7. classes with difficult topics should be done face-to-face while topics which are easy can be done online,
8. online classes should be interesting and fun such as quizzes and online games,
9. have gap in between classes because the students need to rest before the next class,

10. the university should provide strong wi-fi or allocate some money for the students to purchase data for online classes and
11. make the lectures fun and safe for the students to express their concerns and ask questions.

DISCUSSION

Based on the responses from the students on Hybrid Learning, majority of them are satisfied with the Hybrid Learning that they have undergone. Hybrid Learning or also known as Blended Learning is a combination of both synchronous and asynchronous learning in which is considered a bit flexible in terms of learning. Some classes are conducted face-to-face while some classes are conducted online. However, the assessment part is still the same as before (conventional learning).

From the responses, it is learned the major challenge that the students face in Blended Learning is internet. Some have very poor internet connection while others have limited data hence contribute to buffering and lagging in watching recorded lessons and downloading materials provided. The students suggested that the university provides strong internet connection in the hostels (for those staying in hostels) in which they can use the hotspot provided to connect the wi-fi. Some students who stay out of campus, require the university to provide free data for them to use for learning purpose. As many classes are conducted online, they need to have sufficient data to access the internet.

Hybrid Learning also requires self-discipline especially during the online session. Some students take for granted by not attending the class, not paying attention and lack of focus. It is important to remind the students that the online class is similar to face-to-face class as contents of the lessons and materials are provided. Perhaps some students are not used to online session but it is hoped in the coming semesters, they will be better.

Some students also suggested that online class to be fun and friendly as it is a bit dull compared to face-to-face class. They also suggested that lecturers to use animations, add quizzes and interesting software to make the online class lively. Some students have a barrier to pose questions as they feel that online class is a bit rigid and strict. Hence they suggested the lecturer to be friendly as they will feel safe to ask questions during online class.

CONCLUSION

Positive feedbacks have been received from the students about Hybrid Learning. Some suggestions were also given by the students. These suggestions can be taken into consideration by the university to improve Hybrid Learning in the future. It has been implemented just a few semesters and it started in a rush when no one was fully prepared at that time. As time goes by, with the suggestions given by the students, perhaps the university can look into it and improve Hybrid Learning.

As for now, Hybrid Learning is well received by many due to its advantages and it can be practiced in a long run. With some improvement, it is hoped that Hybrid Learning will create a new conducive learning environment that can boost students' confidence and helps them to excel academically.

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