Assessing Student Interest in Hybrid Course Delivery at the MBA Level

Mark Schmidt  
*St. Cloud University*

James Weber  
*St. Cloud University*

Nancy Van Erp  
*St. Cloud University*

Michele Mumm  
*St. Cloud University*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2009](http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2009)

Recommended Citation


[http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2009/617](http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2009/617)
Assessing Student Interest in Hybrid Course Delivery at the MBA Level

First author’s name
Affiliation
e-mail address

Second author’s name
Affiliation
e-mail address

Third author’s name
Affiliation
e-mail address

Fourth author’s name
Affiliation
e-mail address

ABSTRACT
The development of online learning has boomed in recent years. The most recent trend has been in the area of hybrid courses, those which replace some face-to-face time with online time. This exploratory study assessed learners’ perceptions about and preferences regarding their experience with collaborative technology in hybrid MBA courses. Students enrolled in hybrid courses, who previously had completed program courses face-to-face, were asked whether or not they wanted more hybrid courses, how and where they accessed the online portion of their classes, and how they felt about the discussion board. Students indicated they strongly supported the use of online discussion boards and both groups desired more hybrid courses in the future. The study also found students most commonly accessed the online portion of their courses from home, supporting the idea that hybrid classes enhance students’ flexibility in taking classes.

Keywords
Online education, MBA program, hybrid course delivery, discussion board,

INTRODUCTION
Online graduate education has grown exponentially in recent years with no signs of slowing down in the near term. This exploratory study was designed to assess MBA students’ satisfaction with graduate courses delivered via a hybrid online model, students’ experiences with online discussion boards, and challenges faced by students with technology used to support this mode of education delivery.

Online Learning
With the advent of new technologies, previous ways of doing things are being reconsidered and, quite often, are being adapted, adjusted, or outright changed. Methods of delivering education are no exception. Higher education, and more specifically, graduate education, is amidst these technological changes. Enrollments in traditional full time MBA programs are declining while enrollments in online MBA programs have seen dramatic increases (Lorenzo, 2004). Rising online MBA program enrollments are suspected to exist, in part, from the convenience and flexibility offered by such a delivery method (Lorenzo). It appears there are a number of factors perceived by students as important when considering satisfaction with online learning: student, instructor, and colleague interaction and interactivity; availability of technical training specific to the online technology used; students’ previous experience with online learning; and opportunities for use of asynchronous learning tools such as discussion boards (Kim, Liu, & Bonk, 2005). Flexibility and scheduling are commonly cited as reasons for the increase in online learning (United States Department of Education, 2002, 2008; Vaughan, 2007). Garnham and Kaleta (2002) identified the cost of
commuting and the difficulty with finding parking at many institutions of higher education as additional reasons for the favorability of online learning. Certainly studies about online learning have documented both favorable and unfavorable student perceptions (Kim, Liu, & Bonk, 2005). Regardless of the popularity of online MBA education, concern exists about such programs.

The current trend does not show any signs of slowing. Some of the push has now even become political. Minnesota Governor, Tim Pawlenty, (Minnesota North Star, 2009) recently cited efficiency, meeting a diverse population of learners’ needs, and a need for general education reform when he boldly stated he felt it was “time our colleges and universities move more aggressively to deliver more of their courses online” (p. 10). In his January, 2009, state of the state address, Pawlenty challenged the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system to move 25% of its courses online by the year 2015 (Minnesota North Star, 2009).

Hybrid Delivery

An alternative to completely online MBA education is the hybrid education delivery model which combines the significant components of the online delivery mode with key characteristics of face-to-face traditional delivery (Terry, 2007). While the move toward online education was initially done on a more wholesale level, with complete online delivery, the shift of late has been to the hybrid approach (Marcketti & Yurchisin, 2005; Ziegler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2006). The movement toward more hybrid opportunities for higher education learners is obvious when comparing the online delivery statistics in the 2000-2001 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) study with those of the 2006-2007 NCES study. The 2006-2007 NCES study (NCES, 2008) on distance learning found that 66 percent of both two and four year Title IV degree-granting institutions offered online, hybrid or blended, or some other type of distance courses. That number was up considerably from 56 percent in 2000-2001 (NCES, 2002). The 2006-2007 report indicated 35 percent of institutions reported offering hybrid or blended courses. Interestingly, the 2000-2001 report did not include any statistics on hybrid or blended learning. (United States Department of Education, 2002, 2008). Marcketti and Yurchisin (2005) explained that in higher education there was an initial focus on online learning to reach out to those who could not get to campus, but now increasingly more colleges and universities are shifting some of their energy toward hybrid options. Because the internet is now so accessible, colleges and universities are encouraging increasing numbers of their students who live on campus or near campus to consider hybrid options (Marcketti & Yurchisin, 2005). John R. Bourne, a professor of electrical and computer engineering at Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering, is even predicting that in the near future between 80 to 90 percent of classes may become hybrid (Young, 2002). Hybrid courses are growing in popularity as they provide another viable option for students who want to replace some face-to-face meeting time with online meeting time for convenience and flexibility (Olapiriayakul & Scher, 2006).

What is the definition of “hybrid” courses? What distinguishes hybrid courses from online or face-to-face delivery? Experts are not in agreement about distinguishing characteristics of face-to-face, online, and hybrid modes of education delivery. Terry (2007) suggested generic descriptions of the three modes: Face-to-face delivery is “characterized by student or faculty interaction via lectures, discussion, and exams on campus at scheduled times and days” (p. 220); completely online education delivery may be described as instruction that “replaces the walls of the classroom with a network of computer communication” (p. 221); and hybrid delivery is suggested to use 40-55% of its time in a face-to-face mode while the balance of class meeting time is spent in “computer-based communication, which includes lecture notes, assignments, and e-mail correspondence” (p. 221).

Terry (2007) in his study comparing student learning in campus, online, and hybrid MBA classes, found “using online tools and communication, in the form of a hybrid class, can substitute some classroom contact time normally associated with campus courses without compromising the overall quality of student learning” (pp. 224-225). In addition, he suggested “the hybrid mode is a viable alternative that offers some flexibility but maintains the high quality and student satisfaction associated with traditional campus instruction” (p. 225). The popularity of hybrid learning options in higher education may likely be due to the hybrid model’s ability to combine the best of both online learning and face-to-face delivery models.

Hybrid Delivery Benefits

The literature suggests an array of benefits exist in the hybrid method of education delivery. Young (2002) as well as Garnham and Kaleta (2002) explained that the goal of hybrid learning is to mesh the best features of face-to-face
models and online models. They further described how a careful mix of traditional delivery and online delivery allows learners to reduce seat time and increase flexibility while simultaneously engaging in learning experiences that are more active, self-directed, and independent. Students appreciate the opportunity to control the pace of their learning. They cited flexibility, specifically the ability to complete course work when it worked with their schedules, as a key benefit of hybrid learning (Garnham & Kaleta, 2002). Vaughan (2007) concurred that scheduling is becoming a considerable factor for learners of all ages and backgrounds because there are increasingly more students who have responsibilities beyond school, including work and family, around which they must arrange their studies.

Garnham and Kaleta’s (2002) study on hybrid learning at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee reported students had an 80% satisfaction rate. Dziuban, Hartman, Juge, Moskal, and Sorg (2005) found blended or hybrid courses to have lower drop-out rates than online courses. A case study of hybrid learning courses conducted by Olapiriyakul and Scher (2006) did not find any significant difference between the performances of those who took a course in a fully online mode versus a hybrid mode. What they did find, however, was positive feedback from students about the perceived benefit of taking the course in the hybrid form. The study also considered learning styles and found that most students preferred visual presentations of course materials over verbal explanations.

Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) cited social interaction as a distinct benefit of hybrid learning along with access to knowledge, personal agency, and cost effectiveness. Social presence was identified by Ziegler, et al. (2006), Mortera-Gutierrez (2006), Hutchens, et al., (2006), and Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) as a critical factor for success in the hybrid and online environments. Defining the premise of social presence theory as “the communication done through different technology medium…and its delivery information resources…allow[ing] the creation of a sense of intimacy and immediacy among students and instructors” (p. 321) Mortera-Gutierrez (2006) concurred. Additionally, Mortera-Gutierrez (2006) favorably described the hybrid approach as one that “breaks down the lack of social contact of online courses” (p. 317) and essentially scaffolds social interaction. Furthermore, Robins (2000) stressed social interaction as a necessity in the hybrid environment for the purpose of increasing satisfaction and reducing the feelings of isolation for learners. A one-year exploratory study by Lin (2008) identified “content connectivity and student interactivity” (p. 62) as critical and found that students felt hybrid learning provided them with more opportunities for interaction, even though not all students in the study were found to have benefited equally.

Mortera-Gutierrez (2006) described the hybrid model as more critical and reflective than traditional delivery models and explained it is a positive environment for both student-to-student and instructor-to-student feedback. Stein and Wanstree (2006) described hybrid learning experiences as opportunities for students to “connect with text, expose them to diverse viewpoints, help them take responsibility for their learning, increase their comfort level with ambiguity, prompt them to question their assumptions and give them more insight into themselves as learners” (p. 235). Sands (2002) believed hybrid and blended courses to be “de facto writing intensive courses when the teachers work carefully to integrate the online and classroom components” (para. 3). Spilka (2002) credited increased opportunities for self-direction in hybrid learning as a boost for students’ project and time management skills.

Hybrid learning is attractive to a diverse population of learners as well as faculty and administrators. In a 2002 study at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, 100% of the faculty study participants reported they would recommend the hybrid approach to others. Faculty members cited enhanced interaction with their students, an increase in student engagement in the learning process, flexibility of the environment for both teaching and learning, as well as the opportunity for continuous improvement as reasons for the recommendation (Garnham & Kaleta, 2002). Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) identified ease of revision for an instructor revamping a course as an advantage of hybrid models. Administrator responses, in the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee study (2002) were also quite favorable. Administrators cited an enhanced reputation for the university, an ability to expand course offerings, and the ability to reduce operating costs as tangible benefits of hybrid learning models.

**Online Discussion Boards**

The discussion board is one tool in a hybrid course that can increase collaboration, foster critical thinking, and promote student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction, all of which, in turn, works together to improve one’s sense of belonging in a course (Hutchens, et al., 2006). Discussion has long been considered a useful technique to help learners critically reflect on issues (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005), but when the discussion happens
in an online discussion board, both the accountability and potential for critical reflection gets ratcheted up a few notches. Sapp and Simon (2005) explained that the higher order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation are promoted by the process of writing and reflecting, thereby promoting communication that is clearer and more precise. Critical reflection and a myriad of other skills are all supported by hybrid learning courses which meaningfully incorporate discussion board activity. The asynchronous nature of such discussions allows for pensive consideration of responses as well as time to do research to support one’s thoughts and opinions. The fact there is a permanent record of the discussion is also worth noting. The permanent record allows not only for accountability of who contributed what and when, it also enables learners to revisit the discussion (and the thinking inherent in the discussion) whenever and however often they desire. If the discussion board in a hybrid course is used properly, it can foster critical thinking, enable meaningful feedback from both instructors and learners, and spur the development of writing (Hutchens, Jones, Crone-Todd, & Eyre, 2006).

Further research to support the collaborative nature of hybrid learning is found in a recent study by Tutty and Klein (2008) that compared online collaboration and face-to-face collaboration. Tutty and Klein’s findings indicated “virtual dyads exhibited significantly more questioning behaviors and significantly better project performance than those who collaborated face-to-face” (p. 101). Furthermore, they found “virtual collaboration may be better suited than face-to-face collaboration when solving ill structured problems” (p. 121). Tutty and Klein’s findings were balanced with evidence that indicated some types of learning seem to occur better in the face-to-face environment as well as with their final conclusion that both environments can be effective places to achieve learning goals.

Enhancement of collaborative processes is a common theme in the literature on online and hybrid learning with the common conclusion being that it is both good for learning and essential for success (Greene, 2008; Hutchens, et al., 2006; Ziegler, Paulus, & Woodside, 2006; Palloff & Pratt, 2003; Burdett, 2003; Stahl, 2002; Tutty & Klein, 2008). Palloff and Pratt (2003) identified several powerful reasons for collaborative activity to be integrated into online or hybrid learning. Those reasons included: deepening learning, decreasing the sense of isolation, and an increased sense of connectedness to the instructor, group, and the course in general. In addition, Palloff and Pratt pointed to collaborative work as a means to promote critical thinking skills, foster reflection, enhance transformative learning, and shape knowledge and meaning in a constructivist manner.

Ziegler, et al., (2006, p. 315) provided further support for integrating collaborative activities in hybrid classes. They stated that the “dialogical process of creating knowledge together” should be a goal of both the online and face-to-face portions of the hybrid experience. Burdett (2003) described the hybrid environment as one in which learning groups allow students to “negotiate meaning, manipulate ideas, and create their own knowledge” which he explained are all skills that correlate with the skills students need in the larger world. Ziegler, et al. also stressed the importance of interaction in the online portion of hybrid courses stating that if the online portion of hybrid classes are only used to access knowledge that the experience is going to be shortchanged. They go on to explain that instead of access to knowledge online, the focus needs to be on the creation of knowledge online. Stahl (2002) agreed, stating similarly that instead of knowledge transmission, the focus needs to be on knowledge creation, explaining that knowledge is created via conversation with others.

**Instructor Role in Discussion Board Use**

In order for the appropriate principles of learning to be realized in the instruction of hybrid courses, it is essential for the role of the instructor to switch to that of guide or mentor. In short, Hutchens, et al. (2006) stated the courses must be taught differently. Course design must be done so that students can be “active participants, more responsible for their own learning, and have or develop good communication skills” (Hutchens, et al., 2006). In his research, Lin (2008) found that simply putting content on the internet did not ensure student participation or engagement. He cited examples of discussions that were merely threads of individual student contributions. He contrasted that experience, which completely lacked interaction, with tasks that asked students to complete authentic and meaningful work which naturally fostered direct benefits from connecting with others.

Additional support for the meaningful integration of collaboration into hybrid learning can be found in a study by Gokhale (1995). Gokhale’s study focused specifically on the effect of collaborative learning on critical thinking skills. What he found was collaborative learning does foster critical thinking skills through discussion, idea clarification, and the review and evaluation of others’ ideas. However, in order for critical thinking skills to blossom in collaborative learning environments, the instructor must serve as a facilitator rather than as disseminator of
information. The instructor role is to create, monitor, and support meaningful learning experiences and real world applications.

**Hybrid Delivery Challenges**

Although the benefits to the hybrid approach seem bountiful and ever-increasing, it is not without its challenges. Dziuban and Moskal (2001) and Garnham and Kaleta (2002) pointed out online and hybrid students sometimes struggle to realize that having fewer face-to-face classes does not mean there will be less work. Additionally, they explained some learners struggle with the acceptance of personal responsibility for learning and others have a hard time successfully managing their less structured time. As can be expected, the sophistication of the technology provides challenges to some as well.

“When two environments are thoughtfully integrated, the educational possibilities are logically multiplied” (Picciano as cited in Lin, 2008). So it is with the integration of face-to-face education and online education. The hybrid model of education delivery offers graduate education, generally, and MBA education, specifically, wide and varied opportunities for students, instructors, and administrators. As Hutchens et al. (2006) suggested, however, online delivery is just a tool and must be used appropriately.

**PURPOSE OF STUDY**

Kim, Liu, and Bonk (2005) suggested student satisfaction is an important element of online education; thus, student satisfaction must be considered when evaluating either an online or hybrid mode of delivery. This need is especially dire in the growing area of hybrid learning as the existing research is sparse. At the same time, the number of hybrid courses continues to grow. The purpose of this study is to add to the body of research surrounding the growing phenomenon of hybrid learning. In particular, this exploratory study assesses learner perceptions about and preferences regarding their experience with collaborative technology in hybrid MBA courses.

**METHOD**

This study involved three sections of two different MBA classes offered in differing hybrid formats at a mid-sized Midwestern comprehensive university. All three sections used a discussion board as a collaborative out-of-class tool, substituting for 15% of one class and 33% of the other two classes. Two of the three sections enrolled part-time MBA students, while the third section consisted of a cohort of mid-level managers who take all of their MBA classes together while working full-time.

Subjects surveyed consisted of 69 students (47 male, 22 female) having an average age of 27.1 yrs (S.D. = 5.0 yrs). The cohort section was slightly older, at 28.3 years (S.D. = 3.8 yrs.) and students in the cohort group worked more hours per week, (46 hours per week vs. 27 and 23 hours for the other two classes).

**SURVEY**

The survey, consisting of 28 items, was developed to help assess subjects’ experiences with the hybrid delivery system and preferences regarding this mode of delivery in the future. The first 18 items, resembling student evaluations and scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree), asked about student learning using the discussion board system, problems with the technology supporting this system, and preferences for this mode in the future. The next section (8 items) dealt with standard demographics, prior use of a discussion board, and access to the internet. The final two items asked the amount of time spent on the discussion board and whether students preferred the hybrid mode to a face-to-face mode.

The survey was piloted with 5 students who suggested minor changes that were incorporated into the final version of the survey. The survey was then administered in the three sections of MBA classes described above during the last session of the semester for those classes by the faculty teaching those classes.

**RESULTS**

A number of responses regarding student practices and experience are of interest from the results of this survey. In terms of student experience with the particular hybrid technology used in the three classes included in this study, 76.8% had already used discussion boards prior to these classes. The great majority (82.6%) accessed the discussion
boards from home and 91.3% used a broadband or similar high-speed connection when participating on the discussion board.

Subjects responded very positively to student preference items. Since responses were scored on a 1-5 point scale with Strongly Agree = 5, average responses above 3 are above the midpoint of the scale. As shown in Table 1, students had no problem using the discussion board software and were comfortable and enjoyed using it. Furthermore they believed that they learned a lot using the discussion board and that the discussion board was a valuable addition to the class. One of the reasons the discussion board was valuable is it allowed students to get feedback from peers, and subjects also responded that the online component of the class (the discussion board) provided an additional method for them to collaborate.

Students were also very positive about hybrid courses in general. They liked the hybrid course delivery method, and, not surprisingly, liked the shorter classes that resulted from using the discussion boards. Time spent on the discussion boards was viewed as a reasonable trade-off for getting out of class early and they liked the amount of time spent in class and out-of-class in the format used in classes studied. Overall, students wanted more hybrid classes in the MBA program.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I learned a lot while using the discussion board in this course.</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting feedback from peers was on reason using the discussion board was valuable.</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoyed using the discussion board in this class.</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am comfortable using the discussion board software.</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using the discussion board was a valuable addition to the class.</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time spent on the discussion board was a reasonable trade-off for getting out of class early.</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I liked the hybrid course delivery method used in this class.</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I liked the shorter classes that resulted from using the discussion board in class.</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had no problems using the discussion board software.</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We should have more hybrid classes in our MBA program.</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The online component of this class provided an additional method for collaboration.</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would prefer to get out of class 90 minutes early and have an online component each week.</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Student Responses to Selected Learning and Preference Items (n = 69).

Of central interest to researchers was the question of whether students wanted to have more hybrid courses in the MBA program. As shown above in Table 1, students indicated that they did want more hybrid classes. The differential design and composition of the MBA classes surveyed allowed researchers to further examine this question with regard to the amount of time substituted for and the composition of the class itself. Two of the three classes substituted for a larger amount of face-to-face classtime (33% versus 15%) and one of the classes was composed of a cohort versus the other two which were filled by random enrollment.
SPSSs GLM, simulating a ANalysis of COVariance (ANCOVA) was used to examine this question, with student preference for more hybrid classes entered as the dependent variable and two grouping variables representing the difference in classtime and how the classes were composed entered as categorical variables. Since it was known that the cohort group differed from the other sections in terms of age and hours worked, these variables were entered as covariates to parse their effect from the analysis. Significant differences ($F_{1,64} = 5.716, p = .023$) were found only for the grouping variable representing more time spent on the discussion board, although observed power (.629) was lower than desirable. Subjects in classes with more time spent on the discussion board were more likely to believe that there should be more hybrid classes in the MBA program (mean = 4.47 versus mean = 4.22).

CONCLUSION / DIRECTION FOR THE FUTURE

The small sample size and single-school nature of the sample make it inappropriate to draw strong conclusions from this study. While the ability to generalize from this study is lacking, the study does suggest topics for future research and areas where scholars and practitioners may want to either make or check assumptions.

Based on this study, students reacted very positively to discussion boards and their use in hybrid classes. As shown in Table 1, most student responses were above 4 on a 5-point scale. Some means (for items regarding comfort with discussion board software and lack of problems using discussion board software, examined in concert with the percentage who had used a discussion board before) might be high enough to lead researchers with similar samples to assume these skills in designing hybrid courses in the future. Additionally, the high percentage of students who accessed the discussion boards primarily from home lends credence to the argument that hybrid classes provide students with more flexibility in taking their classes at a time and location convenient for them. Another important student practice datum is the high percentage (over 90%) of students who accessed the online segment of classes using a broadband connection. As professors examine alternative means for providing online experiences for students, the assumption that students have adequate bandwidth for a particular technology/pedagogy becomes critical.

The finding that students enrolled in classes that dedicated a higher percentage of class time to discussion board discussion were more likely to say that more hybrid classes should be offered in the MBA program is a fascinating one. If replicated, the questions that arise are many. Why does the increased use of discussion boards lead to a desire for more hybrid courses? Is there an optimal point beyond which additional out-of-class time lead to a desire for less? Do other pedagogies used to create hybrid courses also lead to a desire for more hybrid classes? All of these questions represent important areas for future research. In summary, this exploratory research showed strong support from students for both the use of discussion boards and hybrid classes. Information gained from students shows an increasing familiarity with online tools and a capability that could lead to the introduction of additional tools. Lastly, increased use of a particular online tool was associated with student desire for classes that used more of the tool. This finding, among others, is one that future researchers can usefully explore.

REFERENCES


