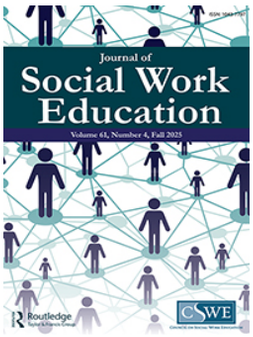

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ABSTRACT

The HyFlex (hybrid + flexible) course design promises increased learning choice, accessibility, and improved student performance. Yet it also raises concerns about diminished informal learning and the reinforcement of extrinsic, goal-oriented behaviors. When COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, we tested HyFlex teaching in a large undergraduate public administration course (N = 96) at Umeå University, Sweden. Using a consistent final exam, we compared student outcomes across three modes: pre-pandemic (face-to-face), during the pandemic (remote), and postpandemic (HyFlex). Results show the highest student performance and satisfaction in the HyFlex format. However, concerns remain about how HyFlex may contribute to a performative culture in higher education and normalize expectations of combining full-time studies with extensive work commitments.

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Critical perspectives on Hyflex teaching

Teaching a large undergraduate course in public administration for social work students at the tail end of the pandemic, we unexpectedly found ourselves amid a natural experiment as restrictions were lifted just prior to the final exam but with all the preceding teaching having taken place online. After 2 years with seemingly good results from take-home exams, we were shocked to discover that more than half of the students failed the on-campus written exam. This prompted us to rethink the course to accommodate better the diverging learning preferences among the students as classes were returning to campus the following semester. More specifically, we applied for and were granted special funding to develop a Hybrid + Flexible (HyFlex) course design (Howell, 2022) that would allow the students to seamlessly mix educational modalities and freely choose between participating on campus or online via Zoom (with key content available as prerecorded lectures).

Evaluating the results of the HyFlex design, we found that both students outcomes and reported student satisfaction improved significantly. Being able to compare the results (a) prior to the pandemic when teaching was exclusively on campus, (b) during the pandemic when teaching was exclusively online, and (c) after the pandemic when the HyFlex design was used, we can conclude that student results were the highest when using the HyFlex design. Nevertheless, despite these impressive results, the new course design seemed to reinforce the instrumentalization and deintellectualization of higher education (Clarke & Phelan, 2017), further eroding its existential and transformative qualities, as the HyFlex design called for extensive planning and predictability.

In response to these concerns, the aim of this article is to offer a nuanced account of our experience of using HyFlex teaching in social work education, one that we think could be of interest to other university teachers who, returning to campus teaching after the pandemic, may be looking for ways to increase learning choice and accessibility while at the same time ensuring that the core values of higher education are not lost in the process.

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The HyFlex model

While hybrid teaching has been discussed for more than two decades (Kurthen & Smith, 2005; Rogers et al., 2003), the pandemic and its sudden shift to remote learning in March 2020 brought about a sea change in the delivery of social work education worldwide. Using video conference platforms such as Zoom, courses in all disciplines quickly moved online, marking a radical break with existing practices and instructional methods (Sutton-Brady, 2021, p. 259). For social work education and other professional degree programs, field placements proved particularly challenging (Perone, 2021), but, in many cases, initial anxieties about the transition to online instruction faded over time as students and teachers alike came to appreciate the flexibility afforded by the new educational modalities. Nevertheless, the loss of informal learning opportunities (Scourfield et al., 2021), the prolonged social isolation (Kindler et al., 2022), and sheer screen fatigue (Peper et al., 2021) meant that, as restrictions eventually eased, there was a renewed appreciation for on-campus teaching. At the same time, having witnessed the possibilities of using information technology in higher education, both teachers and institutions began looking for ways to make use of the experiences and know-how gained during the pandemic to further strengthen their didactic spatial competence (Leijon et al., 2021) and create new blended learning environments.

In terms of research, a recent systematic literature review found that existing studies, although often explorative and qualitative in nature, indicate that hybrid learning environments may have advantages over fully online or fully on-site instruction (Raes et al., 2020). Enabled by the new technology-enhanced learning spaces in which many universities have invested (Pates & Sumner, 2016), it is becoming increasingly feasible to integrate on- and offline students in the same class, offering greater accessibility for students who may not be able to attend classes on campus due to physical distance, personal health concerns or family obligations. However, HyFlex as a model goes one step further in that it includes both synchronous and asynchronous delivery methods that make it possible for students to move between face-to-face, online synchronous, and online asynchronous teaching. Unfortunately, we were not able to make all elements of the course fully available in asynchronous format but, when developing the course, we strived to ensure that there were as many alternative routes as possible through the course, allowing students to learn at their own pace and in their preferred learning environment. With this brief theoretical introduction in mind, we will now turn to the specific course and our experiences of implementing HyFlex teaching in social work education.

Course objectives and outcomes

Each semester, between 100 and 120 students start their undergraduate studies in social work at Umeå University in Northern Sweden. During their first semester, the students are mandated to take a 5-week course called Social Work and Public Administration, a course that is taught by teachers from the Department of Political Science. The course begins with an introduction to the Swedish political system and then covers classic theoretical territory, such as street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010), the policy process (Cairney, 2020), and the professional ethics of civil servants (Heath, 2022). In Sweden, social work degrees are currently offered at 19 universities throughout the country, with approximately 2,000 students graduating every year (Blome & Espvall, 2023). Given this high enrollment, it is not surprising that traditional lectures in auditoriums have historically been the predominant form of instruction.

Prior to the pandemic, all instruction in Umeå was face to face on campus with Canvas being used as our learning management system. At the time, the course consisted of about 10 large auditorium lectures, three smaller-group seminars, and one final invigilated written exam. As can be seen in Table 1, student outcomes when using these traditional learning activities were relatively satisfactory, with around 70% of the students receiving a passing grade on their first attempt.

Contrary to what some reports in international media suggested at the time, the Swedish response to the pandemic entailed far-reaching behavioral restrictions, including the mandatory

Table 1. Student results with different forms of instruction.

Semester	Students	Pass	Percentage	Form of Instruction	Form of Exam
Spring 2019	120	82	68	Face to face	Written campus exam
Autumn 2019	120	87	73	Face to face	Written campus exam
Autumn 2021	107	87	81	Online	Take-home exam
Spring 2022	94	44	47	Online	Written campus exam
Autumn 2022	96	85	89	HyFlex	Written campus exam

implementation of distance education in all upper secondary schools and universities from March 2020 (Tegnell, 2021). After some initial panic on our side over this "emergency remote delivery" (Baker et al., 2024, p. 432), we developed a mix of asynchronous prerecorded lectures on Canvas and synchronous Zoom seminars for the course. As it became clear that campus teaching would remain prohibited for the foreseeable future, we used green screen technology and professional audio recording equipment to gradually increase the quality of the prerecorded lectures. Using Kaltura software to mix the video recordings and PowerPoint slides, we made it possible for the students to seek out a specific slide or term in a lecture. Meanwhile, the Zoom tutorials and seminars enabled more active forms of learning. In retrospect, digitizing the course learning activities proved much easier than we initially thought. The same, however, cannot be said considering the assessment of the course. Unable to use an on-campus written exam, we had to resort to using take-home exams, even as the learning objectives of the course were all oriented toward fundamental cognitive domains such as the ability to recall and apply facts rather than the kind of analysis and evaluation domains suitable for take-home exams (Bengtsson, 2019). Not only was this frustrating in the sense that the questions we asked were not well-aligned with the learning objectives but that we also, early on, began to suspect plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct, as many exam answers were similar in both form and substance. Although only a few cases of academic misconduct were possible to prove, this highlighted the limitations of using take-home exams for a course of this kind. These limitations have only become more apparent following the release of ChatGPT and other artificial intelligence platforms (Ryznar, 2023). As such, the 81% pass rate shown in Table 1 for the autumn of 2021 should be interpreted with some caution.

In the spring of 2022, the pandemic restrictions in Sweden were gradually relaxed. Given the large number of students taking this course, our teaching had to remain online all the way up to the final exam (after which all teaching at Umeå University returned to campus). As indicated in the introduction, this inadvertently created a natural experiment of sorts as we were allowed to assess the students using a similar written exam that had been used prepandemic, even as the instruction had now been online. The results confirmed our fears about the limited validity of the take-home exam and pointed to deeper pedagogical problems. Although some students were able to pass the course at their second attempt a few months later, it was obvious that something more radical had to be done to improve the students' learning in the following semester.

In terms of context, it is worth nothing that, being located in rural northern Sweden, Umeå University has many students who live off campus, in some cases fairly far away from the university. In addition, social work students make up a particularly heterogeneous group, with some having previous working experience and parental obligations while others arrive directly from upper secondary school. Finally, a substantial portion (30% to 35%) of the students do not have Swedish as their first language. As such, the students responded quite differently to the return to campus teaching. This, in combination with the investments that Umeå University had made in new classrooms suitable for hybrid teaching during the pandemic, made us apply for funding from the university to offer the course as a HyFlex course for the autumn semester of 2022. More specifically, we needed extra funding so we could be two teachers in the classroom at the same time, alternating between being responsible for the online and offline groups, respectively, which we hoped would reduce some of the increased cognitive load often associated with HyFlex delivery (Detyna et al., 2023).

Implementing HyFlex

Once our funding application was approved by the central university administration, we began redesigning the course according to the HyFlex model. While keeping some of the prerecorded lectures from the pandemic as an extra resource on Canvas, we decided against fully flipping the classroom (Holmes et al., 2015), instead maintaining much of the lecture-heavy layout of the prepandemic course but now scheduling all the lectures in newly built hybrid auditoriums suitable for video conferencing. In these auditoriums, each seat had its own microphone, while wall-mounted cameras zoomed in on the person speaking when a microphone was turned on. This meant that online participants could seamlessly hear and see those on campus with high audio quality. Similarly, when someone spoke online, everyone in the auditoriums could hear and see them on one of the projector screens. For the seminar activities in the course, which had smaller sections of about 20 students participating at the time, we were able to use the university's "Learning Lab" testbed for hybrid teaching, which, incredibly, came with its own technical support staff. This made it possible to facilitate true cross-group participation between online and offline students (Leijon & Lundgren, 2019), thus eliminating some of the communication challenges reported in other studies on HyFlex teaching environments (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2021), such as uncertainties relating to handover and turn-taking.

During each of the lectures, one of us was available on Zoom, answering questions that would come up in the chat and, occasionally, raising them to the entire group (see Figure 1). Meanwhile, the other one of us was teaching, meaning that we would in total be teaching/managing almost 100 students at the time. While the campus students also had the possibility of participating online using their laptops, only a handful of students chose to do so, with the rest focusing exclusively on taking part in the

Figure 1. HyFlex teaching. *Note.* Photo credit Linda Jervik Steen.

classroom discussion. During the seminar activities, only one of us was teaching and the other one was observing and taking notes for the purpose of writing this article.

Using Canvas to structure the course with specific readings for each lecture and making the PowerPoint slides available from the first day of the course, we also put a lot of effort into providing a comprehensive syllabus and study guide, as well as recording an introductory video that explained the HyFlex format, communicating that the students were free to decide for each learning activity whether they wanted to participate online or on campus. While we were unable to keep exact records of student modality preferences, of the 96 students taking the course in the fall of 2022, between 10 and 15 usually participated online, with the rest remaining on campus for the lectures. It is noteworthy that unusually few students were absent throughout the course, probably in part because even students who were feeling unwell could choose to participate online. The ethics of such sickness presenteeism is, however, a topic in its own right (Ruhle & Schmoll, 2021). Turning again to the results in Table 1, the fall semester of 2022 stands out for its high results, with an impressive 89% of the students succeeding with the written invigilated exam at their first attempt. Furthermore, when reviewing the course evaluation, overall student satisfaction was much higher than in previous semesters, with the students repeatedly praising the pedagogical approach and its "predictability," "clarity of instruction," as well as the high level of alignment between the learning activities and the final exam. Many of the students explicitly mentioned how valuable it was for them to be able to choose their mode of participation and reported that the HyFlex format had helped them not fall behind when their kids had been ill, or their work schedule had prevented them from traveling to campus, echoing views expressed by other students who have taken part in HyFlex experiments (Malczyk, 2019). In addition, nonnative-speaking students stated that they benefited from quickly being able to identify key course concepts. Despite these positive words and the strong student results, we, as teachers, were slightly less enthusiastic about the HyFlex model for reasons to which we will now turn.

Long debates and immediate concerns

Already in the 1930s, C.S. Lewis famously decried the rise of vocational training at the expense of humanistic learning (Lewis, 1939). Although one may argue that the university should ideally have room for both, it seems fair to say that the last decades have accelerated the instrumentalization of higher education with ever greater emphasis being put on quantifiable outcomes, evaluation, and benchmarking. Consequently, as both teachers and students have become increasingly risk averse, the room for doubt has dwindled, in turn reflecting more general social trends such as the projectification of welfare (Brunila, 2011).

Applying this broader lens, the success of the HyFlex project as reported above becomes more ambiguous. Although the evidence clearly suggests that the HyFlex format made us better at "teaching to the test" (Johnson, 2020, pp. 280–282) while continuously reassuring the students through live chat and e-mail feedback, it also had the unfortunate effect of removing some of the existential disorientation (if not alienation) that historically has been an intrinsic element of higher education and transformative learning. With the students now quickly becoming frustrated by any distraction from the preformulated PowerPoint slides while insisting that everything remains "profession-relevant," something important appears to get lost in communication. In addition, at least when teaching large groups, we also believe that there is something with the HyFlex technology itself that raises the social cost of participation, particularly when it is used in a lecture setting. After all, knowing that any question that you ask will not only be broadcast online but that your face will be shown on a big projector screen will in many cases have a silencing effect on classroom discussions.

Although none of the students complained about any of these things in the course evaluation, we cannot help but feel that the HyFlex format has deprofessionalized our role as teachers, at least if executed as above. Instead of throwing out big questions to open discussion in the classroom, focus is directed toward the delivery of predefined bullet points, creating a risk-aversive performative culture that requires less and less in terms of personal engagement (Nørgård et al., 2017). This also influences

the decisions that students make as they negotiate the balance between their studies and outside remunerative work (Hall, 2010).

Despite the extremely generous forms of study financing available in Sweden, the percentage of students working part time has steadily increased, and we believe that the HyFlex format may end up facilitating a further increase. As students become less focused on their studies and, in many cases, also geographically distant, they also lose out on important forms of informal learning and socialization into their future professional roles (Zuurmond et al., 2023). While we believe that each of these problems may be possible to mitigate in HyFlex settings, it will only be so to the extent that resources are made available to allow for smaller groups and more active forms of learning that can build a sense of community among students and better respond to the psychological needs of the students (Mentzer et al., 2023). It is possible that the participation threshold would become lower over time as the students would become more used to the HyFlex teaching format, but the opposite is equally possible, as many of us have witnessed declining engagement in breakout room discussions over the course of the pandemic.

Conclusions

Summarizing our HyFlex project, we were simultaneously impressed and alarmed by the outcome. Undoubtedly, the students strongly appreciated the opportunity to freely mix campus and online teaching while performing better than their peers from previous semesters at the final written exam. In the course evaluation, almost all students explicitly praised the HyFlex format for its high level of structure and predictability, as it helped them better prepare for the final assessment.

As teachers, however, we are concerned that these very features reflect a deintellectualization of higher education, as too much focus is directed toward instruction and the delivery of prepackaged knowledge. In retrospect, our lecture-heavy schedule may be partially to blame for this but considering that lectures were a large part of the course prior to the pandemic, we still found that the students were more reluctant to speak and unwilling to engage with topics outside the "script" (as provided by our PowerPoint slides) in the HyFlex setting. Going forward, it seems important to develop further our didactic spatial competence and carefully balance learning activities to ensure a cohesive learning environment and strengthening student engagement (Bozan et al., 2024), for instance, by more fully flipping the classroom. Considering its many benefits, our ambition is thus to continue evaluating and experimenting with HyFlex teaching.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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