Sarah Anderegg

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This week's article discusses a recent survey of faculty and students regarding online learning. As with most topics, there is much to consider as we gauge the want for, utility of, and effectiveness of learning with online and hybrid modalities. I hope you enjoy it and have a smooth path into final exams next week.

Best,

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Classroom Walls Are Shifting

Professors are open to online instruction — but what form is best?

By Beth McMurtrie

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For years David Hinson taught the professional practice of architecture the way he was taught, by standing at the front of his class and lecturing. The course, designed for fourth-year students in the College of Architecture, Design, and Construction at Auburn University, was content heavy. So, with the help of a suite of PowerPoint slides, he would cover critical topics like business and legal considerations, career negotiation and professional ethics.

Yet it always felt like something was missing, he says. Classroom discussions, for one, were not possible to fit into his tight schedule. Nor were visits from professional architects. Then the pandemic hit. And things started to get interesting.

Hinson, the college's associate dean for research and graduate studies, got a crash course in video conferencing, learned about online teaching tools, and began recording his lectures so that he could spend time in conversation with students during remote class.

By the time Auburn resumed in-person teaching, Hinson was convinced he needed to revamp his course for good. Working with instructional designers from the campus teaching center, he created a series of online course modules complete with taped lectures and online assignments. That allowed him to devote his time with students in person to group work and discussion. He's happier, he says his students are more engaged, and he sees the potential for other architecture courses to flip their classrooms, like he did.

 "I think Covid has poked enough holes in the dike of resistance to technology," he says. "Now the challenge is the upfront investment of time to build this platform out."

Hinson is part of a sweeping change shaped by a pandemic that showed professors and students the possibilities of online education, as well as its limitations. Surveys reveal that a growing number of college students now want to take some of their courses fully or partially online. Faculty members aren't far behind. Even as many express misgivings about their ability to engage students through screens, they are more open to creating classes that blend in-person and remote work.

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But is higher education ready? Online teaching, after all, requires a different mix of skills and setups. Classrooms might need to be outfitted with new equipment. Instructors and students must be able to use the necessary tools.

Terms also need to be clarified so people understand what's involved. Does Hinson's course count as a hybrid course, for example, if students still have to show up in person to every class? If in-person attendance is optional or variable, who decides — the instructor or the student?

And when the average course has so much material already online — homework assignments, required readings, quizzes, recorded lectures, and even office hours — are most classes now, in practice, already hybrid?

The challenge is pedagogical as well. During the pandemic, faculty members stripped down, reordered, and rethought their teaching because they had to. Sometimes it worked. But often students struggled with taped lectures and limited interaction with classmates. What does online teaching look like when it is thoughtfully and carefully designed? And which students benefit most from which mode?

All of these questions are swirling around higher education as colleges have entered the second academic year of a post-pandemic world. While course modes remain in flux, some trends are coming into focus.

Professors are willing to incorporate online elements into their teaching. A survey of nearly 1,000 faculty members by Educause in the spring of 2023 found that only 53 percent preferred to teach a typical course completely on site. Of the rest, 20 percent preferred a course with a mix of online and on-site instruction, and 18 percent opted for completely online. The reason cited most frequently for preferring modes like hybrid or fully online was flexibility.

Traditional-age students are increasingly interested in online options. Older students have long shown a strong interest in online learning for the convenience it offers working adults and parents. Now that demand for flexibility has grown among younger students, as well. A spring 2022 Educause survey of more than 800 undergraduates found that 41 percent preferred completely or mostly in-person classes, down from 65 percent before the pandemic. A survey of chief online officers, by Quality Matters and Eduventures Research, reported that 59 percent saw rising interest in online learning among traditional-age undergraduates.

Professors' and students' interests diverge over online coursework. Asked which course modality they preferred, 55 percent of faculty members but only 31 percent of students chose face-to-face courses, according to a spring 2023 survey by Tyton Partners and others. And in every other category student interest was higher than faculty interest.

What might explain that? For one thing, even many faculty members who are willing to teach online feel that they do their best work in an in-person class.

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inherently worse than on-site. It's just different. Just in the way that a 200-

person lecture class is different from a 15-person seminar.

According to the Educause survey, instructors said that they feel most connected to and able to engage their students, that the quality of their teaching is at its best, and that their students learn the most when they are teaching on site.

In a recent *Chronicle* [virtual forum](#) on hybrid and online learning, teaching experts weighed in on those seemingly mixed feelings. They noted that many instructors have come to appreciate the flexibility that online teaching offers. Students get sick. Athletes need to travel. And everyone is trying to balance personal and academic obligations.

 "We appreciate that flexibility in our personal, professional lives, too," noted Flower Darby, associate director of the Teaching for Learning Center at the University of Missouri. At the same time, many instructors feel that loss of connection when classes move online. "So the real question is, how can we cultivate those connections, despite the distance, despite the screens?"

Administrators need to be sensitive to the fact that most faculty didn't start their careers expecting to teach in multiple modes, Darby noted. Creating a hybrid class might require, for example, working with an instructional designer to rethink assignments or group work. That takes resources to do well.

"If we know students are looking for this," she said, "then we need to be taking a hard look at the line items in the budget."

Professors who have experimented with different modes echo this point. "This was no small investment of time and energy," notes Hinson, the Auburn professor. "It took us a good six months to get a beta version of this together. And we did almost as much work between the first and second cycle."

Bill Collins, an associate professor in the department of neurobiology and behavior at Stony Brook University of the State University of New York, began his foray into online teaching a few years before the pandemic hit. He team teaches an introductory physiology course that enrolls upward of 1,400 students per year. In 2015, tired of running a large, lecture-based class, he began working with colleagues to create a flipped version. Students would watch an online lecture, take an online quiz, and do a few other activities before meeting in a classroom designed for active learning. Shortly before the pandemic hit, Collins also helped create a fully online version of the course.

Now he teaches all three types of sections. "The flipped hybrid course is really labor intensive," he notes. The classroom portion includes 250 students working in groups, being guided by him, three

graduate teaching assistants, and six undergraduate TAs. "Just managing the TAs," he says, "is like having a separate course."

For Collins, the work is worth it. The flipped classroom is more engaging, he says, and providing options allows students to choose the mode that works best for them. Yet he has found it difficult to interest colleagues in the College of Arts and Sciences in more strategic thinking about multi-modal course delivery, such as offering more online courses for residential students. "That's not resonating with people right now," he says. "They're just trying to work out returning back to normal."

Teaching experts say that if colleges want to capitalize on student interest in online learning, they need to help faculty members see the possibilities in a well-designed online course.

"I'll probably end up repeating this for the rest of my career, but pandemic-induced remote teaching is not an example of soundly developed online or asynchronous teaching," said another panelist from *The Chronicle*'s virtual forum, Asim Ali, who leads the Biggio Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, at Auburn University. "Having to go remote is different than intentionally making time to develop learning objectives, learning outcomes, and designing assessments and learning experiences around those.

"So if there are people out there who are thinking, 'No, I'll never do that because of the experience that I had in the pandemic,' I want to put your concern at ease because it is possible to design asynchronous learning in a way that really is just attractive."

At Auburn, for example, Hinson says there's no way he could have redesigned his course without detailed technical and pedagogical guidance from consultants at the teaching center. "I cannot overstate how important it was for me to have that level of support."

Similarly, Collins had a number of people at Stony Brook to lean on. Its Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching employs four instructional designers, up from one before the pandemic, along with a host of other specialists. Rose Tirotta-Esposito, the center's director, has seen a lot of interest among faculty members in retaining elements of online teaching that they picked up during the pandemic. "They learned from Covid the benefits of the flipped classes, and some faculty have kept those best practices and moved them into the course."

Many colleges, however, don't have a deep bench of expertise. In those cases, teaching centers can try to collaborate with faculty members experienced in online teaching.

"If you're a smaller, less resourced institution, that's not an excuse to leave your faculty unsupported in this," said Kevin Gannon, director of the Center for the Advancement of Faculty Excellence, at Queens University of Charlotte, during the *Chronicle's* virtual forum. Instead, think, "Where is your campus capacity? Where is your campus experience? How do those folks become leaders in these conversations where they can bring other colleagues with them?"

The confusion over how various modalities are defined is another barrier: It can cause headaches for students, advisers and registrars. One instructor, for example, may create a course in which Tuesdays are online and Thursdays in person. Another may design a course that is offered simultaneously in person and online.

It's perhaps no surprise then that, when asked about digital-learning terms such as hybrid, HyFlex, and online, about half of institutions — and often fewer — lacked a consistent definition according to a [survey](#) released this month by WCET — the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies. Many said they didn't have definitions, were developing them, or had left it up to departments and colleges. One major obstacle to consistency? Faculty members, respondents said. Some instructors will list a course as being in one mode and deliver it in another.

Student preferences aren't consistent either, complicating matters for professors and departments trying to put together useful offerings. A working adult, for example, may not find it helpful to take a synchronous online class — one with a set meeting time — or one that requires them to come to campus regularly. But such courses could appeal to a residential undergraduate who wants both flexibility and the chance to connect with the professor and classmates.

Coming to campus regularly could support students' mental health and help them connect with their peers, so taking courses in a variety of modes might be a better option.

Alyona Selhay, assistant registrar at the University of Alaska at Anchorage, notes, too, that what students think they want might not always be what they need. She has seen this play out on her own campus, where many students work and have families.

An asynchronous course might seem to make sense for those students, she says, and looking at which course filters they use when registering shows they seek those out. "But we noted that once they started attending they expressed to their advisers that they need more support." Coming to campus regularly could support students' mental health and help them connect with their peers, Selhay says, so taking courses in a variety of modes might be a better option.

That's why colleges need to think strategically about guiding students to the setup that best supports them. "It's important to continue to have the dialogue between advising and faculty and the registrar's office," Selhay says. Yes, colleges can offer more online classes. "But what does it mean for students? We need to approach it from the student experience."

Collins, the SUNY professor, has been having similar conversations on his campus. His department has been in discussion with the advising center about the introductory physiology course to make sure that students select the mode that works for them academically.

He's done some work on this front, comparing what kinds of students did well in his lecture-based course and what kind did well in the flipped course in the fall of 2019. He found that average students — those in the C range — performed better in the flipped course. Academically strong students did well in either mode. Post-pandemic, though, a new difference emerged: In the spring of 2023, he and his co-instructors were surprised to see a bimodal distribution in the flipped section of the course, with quite a few students earning grades in the C or lower range. They did not see that pattern in the asynchronous section. He's not sure what was going on but plans to continue tracking outcomes.

Kathe Pelletier, director of the teaching and learning program at Educause, advises all institutions to study their own campuses. They could begin by administering surveys to determine which types of students prefer which mode, and why. Colleges could also allow faculty members to teach in the mode they prefer, as long as the course structure and attendance expectations are clear to students. But the next important step is to track faculty and student satisfaction and success.

"You start to see patterns and you start to see what's realistic, too," says Pelletier. "So you're making that decision based on what your strengths are and what your mission is as an institution."

MiraCosta College, a two-year institution in California, has done just that. Jim Julius, faculty director of online education, says faculty members have seen how different modes work for different types of students.

Julius wouldn't want to narrow these options. "My concern is that if we oversimplify, we'd miss an opportunity to serve some students."

MiraCosta instead encourages departments to look at how students perform in different modalities, and then base course design or course selection around that. Instructors and others have been given data dashboards that allow them to study these patterns. If a student wants to take primarily online courses, for example, but the data show that students with a similar academic history have struggled when fully online, their advisers might encourage them to take a mix of in-person and online classes.

Teaching experts say it's imperative that colleges also provide training and support for students to help them succeed in online courses. Are tutors available for online students? Do the students know how to use the classroom technology? Do they know how to manage their time in an asynchronous course? Julius, for example, teaches an hourlong workshop for students that covers strategies for online success, which he runs several times every year.

If there's one common piece of advice teaching experts provide, it's this: Stop ranking one mode as superior to another. Pandemic pedagogy made that tempting, but it's also not a fair point of

comparison. "We cannot be in a place where we say hybrid or online is inherently better or inherently worse than on-site," said Gannon. "It's just different. Just in the way that a 200-person lecture class is different from a 15-person seminar."

Teaching in various modes helped him dismantle assumptions he had about what engagement looks like and how students can best demonstrate their learning. "It's definitely made me a better instructor," he said, "because I'm able to really, genuinely connect with students and their learning in ways that are most helpful to them."

That's the potential, and the challenge, of post-pandemic teaching.

Beth McMurtrie is a senior writer for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, where she writes about the future of learning and technology's influence on teaching. In addition to her reported stories, she helps write the weekly Teaching newsletter about what works in and around the classroom.