

The Hybrid Experience

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As a student pursuing a degree in English, I was not looking forward to any science classes that I would be required to take. It's not that I don't like science. On the contrary, I have always been interested in the workings of the world and the universe around me. I've just never been very quick to learning and understanding the material presented in science classes. I've always felt like science classes demand that I memorize some words that I cannot attach meaning to, and then they "evaluate" my understanding of said words via a test of some kind. In this manner, if I can relate one word to another on a test, then I have a shot at passing. Unfortunately, there has never been any real learning taking place; simply regurgitation. As aforementioned, I do enjoy learning about all kinds of sciences. The previous winter, tired of literature and unable to produce any writing of my own, I turned to pop-science books for something different. One book was *The Flamingo's Smile* by Stephen Jay Gould (1985). The other book was *In Search of Schrödinger's Cat* by John Gribbin (1984). Although I certainly was not able to understand, or even follow in some cases, everything that these books attempted to teach me, I nevertheless found them extremely fascinating and helpful.

The question begs asking: How was I able to learn from these books what I was unable to learn in the classroom? There's something to be said for the authors' styles and their abilities to effectively communicate complicated ideas to the layman, but more than the writing itself, I believe that I was able to learn from these books because I was able to select which essays or passages interested me the most and skip the diagrams, charts, et cetera that were not helpful to me. Simply put, I chose which material was most conducive to my particular learning style. Harold Washington College's first hybrid biology class offers its students a variety of materials from which to learn, allowing its students to decide for themselves which materials work best for their particular learning styles.

When I first enrolled in the biology hybrid class, I had very few expectations. Since I had never taken a hybrid class before, any expectation was drawn from the stories of other students' hybrid class experiences. However, the majority of those stories pertained to hybrid math classes, so I was aware that my experience would differ greatly. I assumed that I would need to spend more time reviewing the material at home to make up for the reduced face-to-face classroom time. Since biology

is not my strong suit, I also assumed that I would need to meticulously go over every piece of information at my disposal in order to maintain my near perfect GPA. I did not assume that the class would be easier simply because meeting times were reduced by half of the traditional face-to-face biology class. Before the semester began, and into the first few weeks, I reminded myself to work diligently but to remain flexible in case my preconceived assumptions were wrong.

As it turned out, and for my benefit, only one of my assumptions was inaccurate. The class did not demand that I meticulously examine every bit of information presented to me. A wide range of learning materials was given to the students from Professor Movahedzadeh. A short list of these materials included the classic textbook, lecture notes, lecture power point presentations, animations of various processes, and a variety of additional materials obtainable through the course's online component, Mastering Biology. Besides the textbook, all of these materials were readily available online. At first, I studied every source with the belief that I would be tested on every piece of information. It was not long before I realized that each source contained the same information, though presented in varying ways. I began to discard materials that were of no use to me as per my learning style. For instance, the animations were meaningless to me. The exact same information written in the lecture notes or in the textbook was exceedingly more beneficial than the animations. As the class progressed, I found I learned best by reading the lecture note before class, where the professor would review the notes and clarify any confusing aspects of the lesson. Then I would review the lecture notes and the power points again while studying for a quiz or exam. While all other materials were not particularly helpful to me, there were other students in the class who claimed that the materials were helpful to them. It follows that a student's success is entirely dependent on the variety of learning materials that the instructor provides for the class so that each student may experiment with learning methods until a successful formula is reached.

Although I have found the hybrid class intellectually stimulating and yes, educational, it should be noted that a hybrid class is not for every student. Any hybrid class demands that its students be active. A student cannot simply show up to class and expect a passing grade at the end of the semester. If a student does not take the initiative to learn the material outside of the class, then the student has little chance of passing. Students of hybrid classes need to be self-sufficient. They

must know exactly how they learn best, and they must be able to immediately recognize problem areas in order to correct them. Above all else, students of hybrid classes must have an inner drive to learn. Students who enroll in a hybrid class should do so because they have a real interest in expanding their knowledge of the world. Since so much time learning is spent outside of the classroom, a student who is genuinely interested in learning will find a hybrid class much more stimulating than one who is only after a grade. How much motivation can a disinterested student muster? For the disinterested students, the traditional face-to-face class that demands only regurgitation is better suited for their level of commitment. For students with a desire to learn about biology, a hybrid class may be well suited for their needs.

A hybrid biology course offers flexibility for its students. On the first day of class, many students echoed the same reason for enrolling, that is, the class fit their schedules. Many students—particularly at a community college with a wide range of nontraditional students—must work, have children, or face any number of obstacles that prevent them from taking a traditional, face-to-face class. I am currently a full-time student at Harold Washington College. I am also employed by the school as a tutor, and I am the president of the school's Creative Writing Club. In addition to my school-related activities, I am a writer for an internet comedy website, and I must find time every week for my own, more serious writing. Needless to say, I am very busy. Enrolling in a class that only met once a week was the only feasible way that I could take biology this semester. My situation is not unique. Students enrolled in a hybrid class typically do so because they cannot logistically spend the extra time to meet more than once per week.

The only significant problem area concerning hybrid classes is with the technology these classes require. In Jackson and Helms' study (2008), the majority of complaints were in regard to technological issues. When either a teacher or a student does not understand how to interact with the technology, problems will naturally arise. However, one cannot seriously consider this a permanent problem as it will naturally dissolve in time as the technologies required become more familiar to all parties.

I would argue that any student with an active desire to learn can succeed in a biology hybrid course. With all the materials a student could ever need at his or her disposal, success is entirely dependent on the student, as opposed to the

limited class time. As the population continues to grow and each year brings record numbers of students to colleges, hybrid courses of all kinds seem to be the most logical and cost-effective solution to limited classroom space. Most important, the hybrid experience has the potential to teach students material that will be retained after the semester ends, as opposed to the aforementioned regurgitation of material only for a test's sake. Since many students may prosper more in hybrid courses than they would in traditional face-to-face courses, schools should attempt to create as many hybrid classes in as many subjects as possible.

About the Author

Eric Wozniak (ewozniak@ccc.edu) is a non-science major undergrad from Harold Washington College in Chicago, IL. He took Bio114 in the biology department in a hybrid format.



It was his first experience in taking a class in a blended learning. He is pursuing a degree in English/creative writing.

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