



Creating authentic remote work integrated learning: A new approach using HyFlex classrooms

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This article reflects on the experience of a multi-disciplinary teaching team delivering an applied project course in a business master's program. This capstone course was developed to address industry and government expectations for work-ready graduates. In the course students act as consultants for business clients, completing a project over two semesters to recommend solutions for real business issues. The focus of this article is on the innovative delivery of the course utilizing newly built HyFlex technology-enabled classrooms and how this multimedia technology presented opportunities and learnings for future work-integrated learning (WIL) courses.

The shift to online or hybrid modalities of teaching and learning remains a post-COVID reality, driving change and creating both opportunities and threats to the traditional tertiary education landscape. As Penrod (March 25, 2022) argues, the future success of higher education is at stake and that

higher education institutions must use this post-pandemic reality as the impetus for recreating and redefining their value by investing in tools to improve student success. The collective learning space—physical and virtual—must be incorporated into pedagogical practices and teaching and learning strategies at colleges and universities worldwide. (p. 1)

This reflection describes how these threats and opportunities were addressed by using HyFlex technology-enabled classrooms to bring business and industry more effectively and authentically into the collective learning space. HyFlex is a term coined by Brian Beatty in 2006. It is a combination of the terms hybrid and flexible with the emphasis on flexibility. Beatty defines HyFlex as learning that integrates face-to-face, online synchronous and asynchronous modes of learning, using communication technologies. The important learning benefits of this mode and measures of success identified by Beatty (2019) are a sense of presence for the online or remote students as well as in class students through the use rich media technologies (Daft & Lengel, 1986), equivalence of learning for all groups, flexibility of study and access to learning through good learning design and appropriate technologies, and reusability of learning artefacts.

The COVID-19 lockdowns eliminated the possibility of on-site industry placements for students at this university. Students were also unable to attend class and international students who were overseas could not even travel to New Zealand. However, the Covid crisis also prompted the university to create new HyFlex classrooms equipped with multiple technologies and modes of digital communication. The subsequent development of the project course in the HyFlex classroom reported on here, not only enhanced the delivery of teaching and learning but also added a new dimension to student work-based projects by bringing New Zealand workplaces more authentically into the classroom. The media-rich environment (Daft & Lengel, 1986) of the room enabled all students, whether in-class, at home, or overseas, to interact more directly with industry clients and their staff, to discuss their business issues, and 'see' their workplaces, all with simultaneous input and support from the lecturer. Additionally, it allowed collaboration between all students, regardless of location. As such, the course went beyond simply hybrid or online teaching to become an innovative work-integrated learning (WIL) experience for different student groups that could be usefully employed in other WIL courses.

WIL generally refers to courses that integrate theory with the practice of work to expose learners to authentic learning experiences, providing the opportunity to apply theoretical concepts to practice-based tasks (Knight & Yorke, 2004; Peach & Matthews, 2011). The WIL experience has long been recognized as positively impacting the employability and preparedness of students to enter employment (Jackson & Dean, 2023; Winchester-Seeto & Piggott, 2020; Ferns & Lilly, 2015). WIL is seen, particularly by international students, as an important way to engage with New Zealand industry, leading to enhanced employment opportunities upon graduation (Drewery et al., 2022; Jackson et al., 2016; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2018). The opportunity for authentic WIL is one of the drawcards for international students choosing a particular tertiary institution or study option (Gribble, Blackmore, & Rahimi, 2015). Therefore, it is very valuable to recreate and redefine ways in which WIL can be successfully and authentically managed.

WIL activities have been classified as having two dimensions: task authenticity and proximity to the workplace, on a continuum from high to low (Kaider et al., 2017). The 'gold-standard' for a WIL experience is traditionally seen as high in both proximity and authenticity, such as an on-site placement in a company with a real project experience that integrates theory with the practice of work. However, there have always been practical and pedagogical difficulties in this approach, particularly for international students. These students are often on short time frame programmes such as the one-year master's programme discussed here. International students usually need paid work to support themselves, and their time and work commitments do not allow for on-site placements. Also, there is the issue of the preparedness of international students to undertake WIL in an off-campus situation (Cameron et al., 2018; Venville et al., 2021). They usually need close supervision and support from the lecturer to understand a client brief and requirements in an unfamiliar context in a new country, and this is more difficult to provide if students are on a placement off-campus. Also, as on-site placements are usually individual WIL experiences that do not usually allow for a group project, developing the teamwork aspect of employability is less likely.

Additionally, with the growing emphasis on authentic assessment, there is an increasing demand from tertiary institutions on companies for WIL placements that are not just work experience opportunities. However, the limited time and availability of industry and academic staff needed to supervise these students, and the lack of capacity to physically accommodate them, make on-site WIL placements increasingly difficult to secure. The default alternative WIL experience for students is classroom-based (in-class or online), with teachers providing real or simulated case studies and materials, augmented perhaps with industry guest speakers. This mode tends to exclude remote students from active participation and is inherently low in authenticity and proximity. The new HyFlex classroom presented an opportunity to bridge this gap between the classroom and the workplace.

The HyFlex classroom used in this course was equipped with several overhead cameras and microphones to capture the industry client, the lecturer, and sound and video of students in the classroom and online. The direction and selection of these were controlled at the front console. Microsoft TEAMS meeting technology was used to bring business clients and distance students into the class. Several screens in the classroom were used, one for the display of the lecture slides, and the other for the display of distance students in the meeting and one for the industry client presenter. The lecturer controlled the cameras and microphones from the front to capture a view and audio of the students or the client. The distant students saw the camera feed and the lecture slides on their screens and could interact with other students in the classroom, with the client and with the lecturer, similar to an online meeting situation, through audio.

Although they were not physically at the company, students were able to talk to different company staff and see, through video camera feeds, some of the physical context and operations of the company. Company videos, documents, and processes were made accessible through student files management systems—in this case: Canvas. After the initial presentation, there was continued contact with the clients throughout the six months of the project through discussion boards and video appearances as well as email and direct messaging. Several students could work on the same projects, some in groups of two or three, while other groups were working on different projects for the same company. All students, however, had the benefit of hearing all the discussions with the industry clients and getting a wider perspective of the organization they and other students were working with. All the presentations and question-and-answer sessions with industry clients, and all in-class activities and discussions being captured on video and made available for all students.

After the first delivery in the HyFlex classroom, student feedback suggested that offshore students valued the opportunity to be ‘present’ in the classroom and with the clients, and the flexibility and reusability of learning materials they had access to throughout the two trimesters as a result of the posting of videos of the sessions with clients and the documents provided by the client companies. However, the level of equivalence of engagement for offshore students compared to the in-class students was not as high as desirable. In response, the team decided to create a preparatory course where students were prepared for HyFlex delivery. They were encouraged to interact more through discussion groups and group work on TEAMS, in which distant and in-class students were mixed. Students were also better prepared for the actual applied project by practicing consultancy and communication skills in situations such as

simulated on-line client briefings and interviews and presenting in different mediums. Also, HyFlex learning was not without technical difficulties and the presence of an IT technician in the classroom, at least at the beginning of the session, became a necessity. Later, enlisting the help of a volunteer teaching assistant or student to manage the technology was also very useful.

These classroom features aligned with Beatty's (2019) definition of the attributes of HyFlex as integrating face-to-face, online synchronous, and asynchronous modes of learning, using multiple communication technologies, with benefits of creating a feeling of presence and equivalence of learning, for both online, and in-class students, and providing flexibility of study, and reusability of learning artifacts. However, the meaning of the term HyFlex extends beyond a learning space. As Penrod (March 25, 2022) asserts, "[i]t is an ideology, a way of doing business, and a strategy for providing expanded educational opportunities to students" (p. 1). The intended benefits of using the new HyFlex classroom in this course, were more than those listed by Beatty (2019). They were to improve the authenticity of the industry-based assessment and decrease the proximity gap with industry in several ways.

The HyFlex classroom delivery experience transformed what was an urgent response to a crisis situation to an innovative forward-looking approach for WIL experiences. Firstly, through continuous interaction with industry clients, students received real-time feedback on their work, allowing them to iterate and improve their projects. This ongoing dialogue helped students refine their skills, understand industry expectations, and learn to respond to feedback constructively, mirroring the iterative nature of professional work. The experience of students adapting to the HyFlex delivery classroom from their previous classroom experiences also developed one of the attributes of employability: having a "dynamic adaptive nature," an ability that aligns with the labour markets into which students transition (Bennett, Knight & Rowley, 2022). Another benefit of the HyFlex mode, which is not typically possible with traditional individual on-site placements, is that students were able to develop their teamwork skills by collaborating on projects in remote teams.

Additionally, the HyFlex classroom provided flexibility for the business clients. An increasing number of these are working globally, and the presentation of client briefs and continued communication with the client was, out of necessity, online. By leveraging HyFlex technology, students could interact with industry clients regardless of their location and the clients could present briefs and provide feedback through live sessions or recorded videos, enhancing of the projects.

Most importantly, it has been noted that universities often lag in using digital platforms to manage WIL, potentially not preparing their students for future work (Penrod, 2022). This course could be seen as simply a response to an increasing demand for flexible delivery of courses generally (Diaz-Infante, et al., 2022) but it also reflects the quickly evolving working environment of business today in ways that a traditional placement-based WIL does not. There is a growing remote working culture globally (Felstead, 2022) and as businesses are increasingly transitioning into distributed and/or hybrid modes (Iqbal et al., 2021) the physical environment loses its importance, and the authenticity of digitally presented WIL will increase. Gulikers et al. (2004) identified one of the requirements of authentic assessment is an authentic environment that closely resembles work conditions. This environment is both social, as in the interaction

with people in the workplace, and physical. In some areas such as management, engagement with the social aspect is more important than the physical context. As social interaction in both personal and work life, increasingly occurs on-line, then as Mirzaei, Hebblethwaite, & Yates (2024) argue, a social environment high in media richness will supersede the physical environment in students' perception of authenticity.

The HyFlex delivery model has become embedded in our course. Though initiated as an urgent response to the situation of international students trapped overseas, HyFlex delivery has become a way forward for successful hybrid online and in-class delivery, and for making authentic work-integrated assessments that align with the evolving working environment in business.

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