

Collaborative and meaningful engagement in hybrid learning: Post-pandemic narrative ethnography

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Abstract

Given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions have to adapt to a new approach to enable students to engage in remote learning. To ensure a seamless learning experience for students, educational institutions have been adopting a blended or hybrid learning approach. This narrative ethnography explores the dynamics of student engagement within the context of hybrid learning, unveiling a post-pandemic educational landscape. By synthesizing qualitative data in the form of personal stories, this study aims to provide educators, administrators, and policymakers with valuable insights to enhance the quality and inclusivity of hybrid learning experiences in the aftermath of the global pandemic, shedding light on the strategies that foster effective student engagement in a hybrid learning environment. The findings demonstrate that cognitive, social, and emotional engagement in hybrid learning involves collaborative teaching and learning processes necessitating active cooperation between students and teachers to acquire knowledge. In light of the emerging sociocultural dynamics associated with hybrid learning, teachers should be present and embody the desired behavioural patterns for their students. This current study recommends teachers actively collaborate and establish meaningful connections between the subject matter and real-world contexts, issues, and scenarios serving as a model for students' behaviour.

Keywords: classroom challenges; collaborative and meaningful engagement; hybrid learning; narrative ethnography

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Having been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020, many schools have had to transform to a paradigm where students can also do distance learning. To maintain the continuity of students' learning, schools have implemented blended or hybrid learning in which teaching and learning are carried out in both online and offline teaching environments. Virtual rotations were added to students' school days. Learning can now take place at any time and in any place because of the growing adoption of online education made possible by the proliferation of high-speed networks and portable computing devices (Liu, 2020). The utilization of online education as a mode of instruction is becoming more prevalent among educators worldwide due to its cost-saving benefits (Dhawan, 2020). This mode of learning has also fostered adaptability among students, enabling them to overcome geographical and temporal constraints, creating novel opportunities for customizing instruction to cater to the unique needs and interests of individual students.

In the aftermath of the recent pandemic, it is plausible to anticipate a transition towards more hybrid modes of education and an increased focus on virtual instruction. According to Singh et al. (2021), the adoption of blended or hybrid courses is expected to become the norm, and consequently, teachers who skillfully combine an open and collaborative online learning approach with strong interpersonal relationships will have a substantial impact on students' educational experiences. Moreover, educators who prioritize fostering positive relationships with their students understand that such efforts contribute to their students' learning and growth. Hybrid learning has currently become increasingly prevalent in contemporary discourse, nevertheless, the term's precise definition remains elusive due to its multifaceted usage among various individuals (Klimovaa & Kacetl, 2015).

The term "hybrid learning" has grown as researchers and educators sought to identify and understand educational techniques that combine in-person and online learning throughout time. Collective growth in education has led to the idea of merging instructional approaches to improve learning. Within the dynamic realm of education, the concept of hybrid learning has garnered considerable attention as a progressive methodology that effectively amalgamates conventional in-person teaching with digital learning encounters. The research undertaken by Shea, Joaquin, and Gorzyck (2015), utilizing data

from student questionnaires, teacher diaries, and course activities, suggests that a well-designed hybrid course can be achieved by placing significant importance on presence and thorough pre-planning. Hapke et al. (2020) proposes a 3-in-1 hybrid environment approach which allows students to attend classes synchronously or asynchronously, promoting emotional, behavioural, and cognitive engagement. The empirical study found students have a positive attitude towards the new learning environment, with high synchronous attendance and low missed quizzes. Bülow (2022) examined the process of designing for hybrid learning within synchronous learning spaces. The empirical evidence suggests that the hybrid learning model encounters certain difficulties due to the characteristics of the learning environment design. Specifically, the intricate interaction between the social, physical, and epistemic aspects of the learning space poses challenges to the implementation of the design. Using multiple methods with the data stemmed from a national survey followed by individual interviews and focus groups, the research conducted by Forbes et al. (2023) confirms that practical learning may be achieved in hybrid environments and is as valid compared to learning that takes place on campus. Engaging chances for practical learning can be found in activities conducted at home or in the community, as well as through virtual simulations, online practice, and video-based learning.

The hybrid learning milieu has presented notable challenges, particularly in relation to the digital and material components inherent in the instructional context. Flynn-Wilson and Reynolds (2020) posit that the assimilation of technology necessitates habituation, and adept management of its inherent complexity is imperative for optimal educational outcomes. Furthermore, the proficiency of educators in navigating the design of the learning environment emerges as a critical factor influencing the efficacy of hybrid learning endeavors (Flynn-Wilson & Reynolds, 2020). Issues such as challenges in group communication during breakout sessions (Angelone et al., 2020), a dearth of technological and pedagogical support coupled with educators' inexperience (Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2021), and students' reported feelings of neglect or disregard contribute to the multifaceted impediments within hybrid learning environments.

Additional complexities are identified, encompassing the imperative for educators to adeptly synchronize the use of digital platforms in synchronous hybrid learning, the prevalence of ambiguity regarding expectations, temporal constraints, and cognitive overload leading to phenomena such as hyperzoom, hyperfocus, and zoom fatigue (Wiederhold, 2020). Deficiencies in interpersonal communication (Shamir-Inbal & Blau, 2021), a proclivity for students to assume passive roles as mere observers rather than active participants and co-designers of the learning space (Wang & Rasmussen, 2020), and the discernibly heightened technical and communicative demands imposed upon educators in synchronous

hybrid learning spaces (Zydney et al., 2019) collectively contribute to the intricate web of challenges associated with hybrid learning paradigms.

The scholarly contributions made in recent years have yielded valuable insights into the ever-changing landscape of hybrid learning. Additional research is necessary to examine how hybrid instructional approach utilized in the midst of global health crisis was conceptualized, how the approach was carried out to engage the students in learning, and how teachers responded to the classroom challenges and the construction of new sociocultural context of learning in a different methodological approach. Therefore, by analyzing teacher's personal stories, this research seeks to offer educators, administrators, and policy makers valuable insights to improve the quality and inclusivity of hybrid learning experiences following the global pandemic in a different methodological lens. The objective of this study is to investigate how hybrid learning is conceptualized and implemented in the classroom during the pandemic, and to scrutinize the challenges that teacher encounters while endeavoring to engage secondary school students in EFL hybrid learning environments. Narrative ethnography was employed as a means of attaining the stated objectives. The investigation of sociocultural dynamics associated with hybrid learning in the midst of a pandemic constituted a significant and noteworthy discovery within the realm of hybrid learning. The findings of this current study have provided researchers with a deeper understanding of effective strategies for engaging students within this dynamic educational paradigm.

METHOD

Narrative ethnography used in this study emphasizes the use of teacher's personal stories to understand and convey the complexities of human experiences within a particular cultural or social context. Narrative ethnography is used to explore the subjective perspectives of individuals and communities, highlighting the role of stories and narratives in shaping and conveying cultural meanings. The narratives in this study hold great significance in the realm of language teaching and learning research as it provides valuable insights into the intricate thoughts and experiences of language teachers and learners. By delving into the inner mental landscapes of these individuals, the narratives shed light on the complex dynamics of language teaching and learning as both social and educational endeavors (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). By employing multifocal analysis, the objective of narrative ethnography in this study is to discern the contextual dynamics and influences that mold the narrative. Narrative data is utilized to investigate how environmental factors affect individuals' sense of identity, interpersonal dynamics, and interpretation of life events (Arnault & Sinko, 2021). The narratives shape social reality by elevating some and

demeaning others, reinforcing or opposing cultural norms, and creating linkages and divisions (Hohti, 2016).

The participant of this study, identified as "Ayu," is an experienced secondary English teacher with decades of teaching in diverse settings. Ayu obtained her bachelor's and master's degrees from a public university. She began her career as a government official teacher nearly two decades ago and is currently a dedicated educator in a public school located in the capital city of Lampung, Indonesia. She has participated in workshops and training sessions organized by various teaching communities. She has a wealth of experience teaching English in a variety of educational settings, including private schools, public schools, and universities. She is a highly accomplished educator who has been recognized as a transformational teacher or "*guru penggerak*", a teacher who is acknowledged for her ability to inspire and motivate her fellow teachers in government education programs.

A casual invitation was sent out via a chat session on WhatsApp, providing details about the study's terms, procedures, and goals. Ayu was provided with the information one week prior to the interview to give us a better understanding of the context in which we were entering into her experience in hybrid learning. Ayu willingly shared her extensive pedagogical experiences related to hybrid instructional methods during an interview conducted in an informal setting. Despite the casual nature of the interview, it yielded a significant quantity of valuable perspectives. The interviews were conducted through a combination of in-person and virtual methods. Ayu shared her voice notes to provide answers during a WhatsApp interview. The responses gathered from interviews conducted both in person and online were organized and categorized based on the interview topics. Thematic analysis was applied to Ayu's narratives, documenting her experiences with hybrid learning during the pandemic, focusing on four main topics: her perspectives on hybrid learning, challenges in hybrid learning, issues in engaging students in hybrid learning, and her views about pandemic effects and students' new sociocultural experiences.

FINDINGS

Reminiscing learning in the pandemic zone, the interviewer and the participant of this research were trying to recall the participant's reflexive notes about her experience in conducting hybrid learning. The first stage of the investigation was making an agreement on the concept of hybrid learning. Four main questions were addressed to Ayu, the participant. Her perspectives about hybrid learning came as the answer to the first question. The following questions elicited her hybrid learning practices. Ayu was also asked about how classroom engagement was constructed in hybrid learning instructions. The engagement focused on the cognitive, emotional, and social engagement of the students. She was also asked about the challenges that occurred in the hybrid classroom and

the strategies she took to deal with the issues. Regarding the socio-cultural context of learning brought about by the learning modality, Ayu shared her opinions from her point of view. Other related questions were delivered following the main questions. The results of the interview are presented under the four topics of discussion in this article.

Hybrid Learning in Ayu's Perspectives

There is a lack of consensus in the academic literature regarding the precise definition of hybrid teaching, its distinctions from alternative methods of delivering lessons (such as blended learning), and the implementation of this teaching approach within educational settings, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ulla & Perales, 2022). The terms "hybrid teaching" and "blended learning" are used interchangeably (Klimova & Kacetl, 2015; Smith and Hill, 2019). This approach underscored the integration of computer-mediated instruction with traditional in-person classroom instruction. Hybrid teaching is broadly defined as an instructional approach that incorporates technology to offer students an alternative learning environment that accommodates their individual learning preferences and requirements. Ayu's perspectives in the following script (D-1) describe similar discourse surrounding the lexicon and explications of hybrid learning:

From what I have learned, hybrid learning is a kind of blending of classroom face-to-face learning with online or digital learning. Digital platforms like Zoom, Google Classroom, and Google Meet are used to support the face-to-face learning. In my practice during the pandemic, half numbers of the students joined the classroom, while half of them joined the class virtually via Zoom from home. In my case, I also used Google Classroom for all students. (D-1)

The advancement of technology has a profound influence on the transmission of information, particularly in the realm of education. It enables individuals to acquire knowledge without the need to physically attend educational institutions. Technology advancements enable individuals to acquire new knowledge, engage in communication, generate novel ideas, and disseminate these ideas to others. Hence, in times of crisis, such as a pandemic, when offline learning cannot be conducted, educational institutions should continue the teaching and learning process (Sutisna & Vonti, 2020) with any modalities, and hybrid learning can be taken as the option. Ayu's words below (D-2) reflect her support for the hybrid learning modality.

I support hybrid learning. This type of learning is effective under specific circumstances, like a pandemic. I would like to promote hybrid learning for nowadays learning. It helps me connect with the students. Today's life demands digital learning, so I think hybrid learning would be the best alternative. Teachers should learn a lot about hybrid learning. There have

been so many changes in students in regard to technology. As teachers, we need to go with the changes. (D-2)

Challenges in Hybrid Learning Environment

Hybrid learning transforms traditional learner-teacher roles, focusing on social processes where students co-construct knowledge, with teachers evolving to facilitation, mediation, mentorship, and coaching (Klimova & Kacatl, 2015). However, the distribution and organization of space and time within hybrid learning communities, along with the ability to access them, do not inherently promote equality. To effectively teach both in-person and remote students, teachers must focus their attention on both groups and adapt their teaching methods to meet the unique needs of each. They need to plan their teaching activities in such a way that students in class and remote students engage in similar and comparable learning activities. Ayu mentioned the issue in the following script (D-3):

What I experienced at that time...managing half of the students joining the class virtually at home, and half of them staying in the class with me. It was quite challenging to monitor them at the same time. For those studying at home... I could only communicate with them virtually, checking them once in a while ...while I was also teaching their friends in the classroom. It was not easy to monitor their active participation. (D-3)

The educational experiences of students in a physical classroom which are different from those of students learning remotely create classroom challenges (Huang et al., 2017). Remote students often experience a sense of isolation due to their physical separation from the classroom, which might lead to a more passive behavior on their part. Ayu described this (D-4):

Nowadays students generally have no technical issues in accessing digital platforms in learning. They access Google Classroom to get the content of learning and submit their tasks in the room tasks. I think internet access is not the issue. However, in my case, the challenge is in dealing with the students' different characters and styles. Disciplined students are able to work on time...even when they study at home. They have no problem with classroom assignment deadlines... to be actively respond to the teacher's instructions. Others tend to postpone it, and I need to remind them over and over again to access Google Classroom, to get them to be actively involved in learning. (D-4)

Engaging Students in Hybrid Learning

In the context of a pandemic, where online learning has become the predominant mode of classroom instruction, one of the key challenges is

ensuring student engagement. The significance of active participation in online learning cannot be overstated, as it offers students numerous avenues for engagement (Malan, 2020). Ayu's comments (D-5) to the inquiry regarding student engagement in hybrid learning during the pandemic highlight the provision of numerous opportunities for students to actively participate and maintain their involvement in the learning process:

Monitoring students' cognitive and social engagement can be done by looking at how students collaborate with their friends and also me as the teacher in learning ... both in face-to-face and in online learning. In hybrid learning, I consider students' collaborative works as their cognitive and social engagement. (D-5)

In the context of online learning, cognitive engagement has similar characteristics to cognition observed in traditional face-to-face classroom settings. The esteemed academic convention involves the systematic process of designing, assessing, and appraising educational experiences in relation to well-defined learning objectives (Cohen & Jackson-Haub, 2019). The manifestation of academic engagement can be observed in the digital content generated by students, such as their online posts, inquiries, and inclination towards seeking challenges and surpassing the minimum expectations (Deng et al., 2020), as it was mentioned by Ayu (D-6):

Cognitive engagement is monitored from their ability in understanding the teacher's instruction and working on the instructions, and how they respond to the tasks given to them. It can also be identified from what they post in the Google Classroom. (D-6)

Teachers need to balance between remote students and the class to develop engagement. However, in the context of hybrid learning, as it is stated by Ayu in the following statement (D-7), monitoring students' social and emotional engagement in online learning is significantly different from those in face-to-face learning:

It is hard to monitor how my students are socially and emotionally engaged in online learning. Their readiness in working on the instructions... the way they collaborate with friends ... are different. It is easier to see how they are socially and emotionally engaged in face-to-face learning. (D-7)

Pandemic Effects and Students' New Sociocultural Experiences

As a result of the pandemic, there has been a significant shift in the way we approach our daily lives, and online education has emerged as a prominent mode of academic instruction. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a significant milestone in the evolution of online education due to the necessity of social distancing (Khalili, 2020). The learning evolution lies mainly in the use of

the internet. The internet has revolutionized the way people connect and form social bonds, allowing for the creation of new practices, meanings, and identities. It has become a space where individuals can shape their lives, influenced by both global and local perspectives. This evolution of learning is described by Ayu in the following statements (D-8):

Hybrid learning certainly stimulates new sociocultural experiences in learning. Digital technology has brought new things and lots of things to learn. We are now having digital generations. Teachers should adapt to the new changes. Teachers should go with the demands. (D-8)

The advent and expeditious advancement of digital technologies have significantly transformed cognitive processes and behavioral patterns across various contexts, notably within the realm of education (Huang et al., 2019). In this digital age, Ayu's statements (D-9) below clarify how the issue of students experiencing a sense of disconnection from the course material, classmates, and educators has prompted a widespread perception that online learning should be viewed as a complementary approach to conventional face-to-face instruction. Ayu also emphasized that teachers should be present in both online learning and face-to-face learning (D-9).

Borderless time and space create a new way of learning. Digital technology should be used by the teacher to support their traditional teaching. However, educating students is still in teachers' hands, it cannot be done through any digital tools. A teacher's presence cannot be replaced by any means to engage students in learning. In hybrid learning, students' engagement in online learning should be constructed differently from those of face-to-face learning. (D-9)

DISCUSSION

Looking at the pandemic through the lens of event system theory (Morgeson et al., 2015), we can view it as a significant and unprecedented disruption. Through the perspective of this theory, we can delve deeper into the dynamic processes that contribute to strengths and weaknesses surrounding the event. This exploration helps us identify any possible factors potentially lead to changes or new behaviors, disrupt organizational routines, and prompt adaptation or improvisation within the educational system. Considering the future after the pandemic and determining the necessary adjustments in the post-pandemic world has become crucial as we navigate through what experts refer to as the 'maturation phase' of this ongoing crisis (Daniel et al., 2021). The current global situation has highlighted the importance of learners and teachers developing their emotional resilience, shaped not only by their individual traits and environments, but also by their interactions with others.

Ayu's concept of hybrid learning is characterized by the deliberate integration of both in-person and online learning experiences. Ayu's perspectives on hybrid learning suggest a shift in educational practices within the classroom, moving away from conventional approaches and embracing the integration of technology (Taskiran et al., 2018). The integration of advanced information and communication technology enables the facilitation of multi-modal, collaborative, and poly-synchronous modes of interaction between educators and learners. Ayu suggests that teachers should incorporate hybrid learning into contemporary teaching practices, with a focus on recognizing the strengths of this approach.

Ayu's account of the difficulties she encountered with her pupils in hybrid learning classes highlights the importance of tailoring hybrid learning to accommodate students' unique learning preferences. Following Ayu's narratives, hybrid learning faces the challenge of creating a structured online environment that caters to various learning styles, necessitating course designers to consider how students' learning preferences interact with the strengths and weaknesses of the hybrid format (Shea et al., 2015). Ayu's experience engaging her remote students also pointed out that encouraging remote students to actively participate and engage with both the teacher and their classmates in the virtual classroom should be considered a crucial approach to enhance students' involvement in the learning process. Research has shown that incorporating active learning strategies into education increases student engagement (Campbell et al., 2022) and enhances the depth of learning and collaboration with peers (Arthurs & Kreager, 2017). Thus, it is crucial for the learning process to be supported by guidance and input from instructors and peers, which can help clarify and improve the learner's comprehension (Forbes, 2023) in any learning modalities.

The acquisition of complicated concepts through active cognitive engagement is considered an essential competency for students (Cohen & Jackson-Haub, 2019; Redmond et al., 2018). Responding to Ayu's statement supporting hybrid learning, as facilitators, teachers should have the ability to promote profound cognitive involvement among students by employing activities and assessments that necessitate critical thinking, the integration of knowledge from various sources, the justification of decisions, and the provision of support for solutions (Redmond et al., 2018). Since the current development offers numerous possibilities for educators to enhance the engagement and effectiveness of learning through the use of digital media, especially in the context of teaching and learning English as a foreign language (Yordming, 2017), it is highly recommended that teachers integrate digital media into their teaching and learning methods. In today's modern society, technology has become an integral part of our lives, impacting both the physical and virtual realms, revolutionizing the way we connect with others and access a wide range of resources and communities. And the rise of social media has sparked a new

digital culture that has revolutionized the way educators and learners interact with one another (Husna et al., 2022).

According to Pittaway and Moss (2014), social engagement provides students with the opportunity to expand their own views and perspectives, enabling them to interpret the world through many lenses. Therefore, it is imperative for students to demonstrate a willingness to establish connections in both physical and virtual learning environments. The issue of engaging students' social and emotional engagement in Ayu's case remarks on the importance of constructing social engagement with both teachers and peers engaged in relation to the extensive feedback and academic support they got. The concept of social engagement pertains to the extent to which a student actively participates in both academic and non-academic activities, hence demonstrating a commitment to the learning process (Redmond et al., 2018). In the context of online environments, this phenomenon is demonstrated by the active presence of students who engage in social interactions with their peers through discussion forums and various social media platforms (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). According to Deng et al. (2020), it is important to view these exchanges not just as interactions between learners, but also as interactions between learners and teachers as facilitators. To cultivate meaningful interactions, it is imperative to acknowledge the significance of the teacher's presence, as eloquently articulated by Ayu. Teachers should actively involve the students in the process of acquiring knowledge and skills. With their irreplaceable role, teachers encompass a multitude of invaluable responsibilities and functions that cannot be substituted by any other means.

Regarding the pandemic effects and students' new sociocultural experiences, it can also be seen from Ayu's statement that the presence of teachers has a significant impact on students' engagement. As it is stated by Halverson & Graham (2019), students should assume responsibility for their learning and actively participate in the opportunities for engagement that are offered to them. Research on the implementation of engagement strategies in online courses has revealed that online students find individual and interactive assignments, the incorporation of media, and specific discussion topics to be effective in promoting engagement (Malan, 2020). Therefore, to avoid student disengagement which can occur due to factors such as a confusing course design, excessive workload, and lack of timely feedback or grading from the facilitator (Buelow et al., 2018), teachers as facilitators should demonstrate engagement by actively participating in the teaching-learning process and displaying enthusiasm towards the subject matter.

The findings of this current study indicate that cognitive, social, and emotional engagement in hybrid learning entail collaborative teaching and learning processes. In order to acquire knowledge, it is necessary for students and teachers to actively cooperate with one another. In view of the increasing sociocultural dynamics that are connected with hybrid learning, it is absolutely necessary for teachers to be present and to demonstrate the behavioral patterns

that they want their students to exhibit. This study suggests that teachers should actively interact with one another and develop meaningful linkages between the subject matter and real-world contexts, issues, and scenarios that serve as a model for the behavior of students in order to prevent students from drifting away from the learning objective.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The hybrid learning approach is a significant pedagogical strategy that encourages interactive teaching and collaborative learning. It makes it possible for students and teachers to participate in joint projects regardless of geographical or temporal constraints. The traditional roles of students and instructors are altered as a result of hybrid learning, which brings about a transformation. It emphasizes cognitive, social, and emotional processes, and it encourages active participation in the development of knowledge from both teachers and students. As a consequence of this, teachers ought to take on new responsibilities, such as those of facilitators, mediators, mentors, and coaches, in order to accommodate the evolving dynamics of the learning environment. Due to the fact that it provides students with a multitude of opportunities for meaningful interaction, it is of the utmost importance to acknowledge the relevance of active participation in both offline and online learning. According to the findings of this study, in order to foster student participation in the classroom and to create a successful outcome for hybrid learning, it is essential to bring together students and teachers for the purpose of collaborating in order to produce an output that is characterized by meaningful interaction and connectivity. This study is constrained by its focus on a single person. It is recommended that future studies use other story ethnographies to further enhance the understanding of the current findings.

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