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Exploring Hybrid Learning Experiences in Higher Education: Perspectives from Students and Faculty

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ABSTRACT

The rapid adoption of hybrid learning platforms in higher education has transformed the way students and faculty interact with digital tools. Despite extensive research on hybrid learning, the subjective experiences of users—specifically how students and faculty members engage with these platforms—remain underexplored. The question of how these users navigate and make sense of their hybrid learning experiences is still largely unanswered. Here we show that a phenomenological approach, focusing on the lived experiences of students and faculty, offers valuable insights into the challenges and benefits of hybrid learning environments. Specifically, we employed a descriptive phenomenological method to ensure methodological rigor, including systematic coding and triangulation to enhance trustworthiness. Using in-depth interviews with 15 participants (10 students and 5 faculty members, selected through purposive sampling to capture variation in academic disciplines and teaching experience), our study reveals that while hybrid platforms provide flexibility and accessibility, technical challenges and lack of training hinder engagement and teaching effectiveness. However, the relatively small sample size and its concentration within a single higher education institution represent limitations that restrict generalizability, although they allow for rich, contextualized insights. These findings emphasize the need for better support systems and training for both students and faculty to optimize hybrid learning. Our results contribute to the growing understanding of hybrid learning, highlighting the importance of considering the emotional and cognitive dimensions of user experiences. This study offers implications for future research and development of digital learning platforms, stressing the significance of addressing the human experience in technological integration.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed various aspects of education, leading to the widespread adoption of hybrid learning environments that blend traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning platforms (Ahlin, 2020; Caldana et al., 2023). While these environments provide flexibility and accessibility, their integration also creates challenges related to student engagement, teaching adaptation, and overall learning effectiveness.

Although prior research has explored the technological and pedagogical dimensions of hybrid learning (Lin et al., 2025), the subjective experiences of students and faculty—how they personally navigate and interpret their engagement with these platforms—remain underexplored (Bozkurt, 2022).. The human experience of interacting with technology is multifaceted, involving technical, emotional, social, and cognitive aspects. This underlines a clear research gap: the need to understand not only the functional outcomes of hybrid learning, but also the lived experiences of those directly involved.

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Accordingly, this study aims to address that gap by employing a phenomenological approach to investigate how students and faculty experience hybrid learning platforms. The research specifically seeks to (1) capture the emotional and cognitive dimensions of these experiences, (2) identify the challenges and opportunities they encounter, and (3) provide insights that can inform the design of more supportive and effective digital learning environments.

By focusing on these objectives, the study contributes sharper insights into the human dimensions of hybrid learning, moving beyond prior literature dominated by quantitative surveys or broad evaluations (Al-Sholi et al., 2021; Ramdan et al., 2024). This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how digital platforms influence teaching and learning, highlighting implications for both practice and future research.

The need for deeper exploration into these experiences is apparent, particularly in light of the rapid changes in educational practices brought about by the widespread adoption of digital technologies (McManus et al., 2024). By investigating the personal accounts of students and faculty members, this research aims to uncover the core elements of their experiences with hybrid learning platforms, providing insights into the challenges and opportunities they face (Andrade et al., 2025; Jakonen et al., 2025). The phenomenological approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of these experiences, offering insights that can guide both the future development of digital learning tools and the pedagogical practices surrounding their use. Understanding these lived experiences is essential to creating educational environments that are more supportive, effective, and responsive to the needs of both learners and educators.

Research into the subjective experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has emerged as a crucial area of study in the field of educational technology, particularly when exploring how digital learning platforms influence hybrid learning environments (Looi et al., 2022). Understanding the personal experiences of students and educators offers valuable insights into how technology shapes learning, teaching, and engagement on an individual level (Mangkhang et al., 2022). Phenomenological research, with its focus on capturing the essence of lived experiences, has become increasingly important in this field, as it allows researchers to move beyond surface-level observations to uncover the underlying meanings and perceptions that define how users interact with digital platforms. These insights are essential for informing the development and implementation of effective hybrid learning environments.

However, there are significant challenges in studying the depth of these experiences (Monib, 2024). One primary methodological challenge is the limitation of quantitative approaches, which often fail to capture the nuances of personal experience (Al-Sholi et al., 2021). Quantitative methods tend to focus on measurable variables, such as user satisfaction or academic performance, and overlook the subjective, emotional, and cognitive aspects of learning. As a result, these approaches cannot provide a comprehensive understanding of how individuals make sense of their experiences with digital learning technologies. Moreover, many previous studies have relied on surveys or structured questionnaires, which, while useful for gathering broad data, do not allow for the rich, detailed exploration that phenomenology offers.

This gap highlights a critical limitation in existing research: the lack of in-depth exploration of the personal, subjective experiences of participants in hybrid learning contexts (Kee et al., 2024). As a result, much of the literature remains inadequate in explaining how individuals experience, interpret, and engage with hybrid learning platforms at a deeper level (Ramdan et al., 2024). The phenomenological approach, by focusing on the lived experiences of students and faculty members, offers a more effective methodology for uncovering these insights, providing a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the ways in which digital learning platforms influence educational experiences.

While much of the existing research on hybrid learning environments has relied on practical, quantifiable solutions such as surveys and structured questionnaires to assess user satisfaction and performance, these approaches have notable limitations in capturing the deeper, subjective experiences of students and faculty (Alcaide-Pulido et al., 2025; Dieu, 2025). These methods primarily focus on measurable outcomes and fail to explore the meanings and interpretations that

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individuals attach to their engagement with digital platforms. As a result, they provide a partial understanding of the phenomenon, overlooking the rich, complex ways in which people experience and make sense of hybrid learning.

This gap in the literature highlights the need for a more nuanced and holistic exploration of the experiences of those involved in hybrid learning (Fabian et al., 2024). To address this gap, the adoption of a phenomenological approach offers a promising alternative (Strelchuk et al., 2023). Phenomenology allows for an in-depth examination of the lived experiences of students and educators, focusing not just on what happens in hybrid learning environments, but on how participants perceive and interpret their experiences. By emphasizing the meanings and essences of these experiences, phenomenology provides a richer, more comprehensive understanding that can reveal insights into the challenges, benefits, and emotional impacts that are often missed by more traditional approaches. This shift towards phenomenological inquiry is essential for fully grasping the complexities of hybrid learning and for informing the development of more effective educational technologies and teaching strategies.

Previous research has explored the shift to hybrid learning environments, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges they present (Owston et al., 2020). Studies have primarily focused on quantitative aspects, such as student performance and satisfaction (Canlas et al., 2024), or the technical features of digital platforms. While these studies have contributed to understanding hybrid learning, they often overlook the subjective experiences of those involved. For instance, Kim & Margulieux (2020)emphasized the benefits of online learning from a logistical perspective, yet failed to capture how students and faculty truly experience these platforms emotionally and cognitively. As such, there remains a gap in understanding the lived experiences of participants, which this study aims to address.

In response to the limitations of previous approaches, this research employs a phenomenological methodology to explore the personal experiences of students and educators using hybrid learning platforms (Awouda et al., 2024). Phenomenology allows for a deeper exploration of how individuals make sense of their experiences in hybrid environments (Heng et al., 2023; Lamb et al., 2025). By focusing on the meanings participants attach to their experiences, this method offers a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, answering the questions raised in the "Knowledge Gap" section. It provides a means to uncover the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of engagement with digital platforms, which have been largely neglected by other research methods.

The structure of this article is organized to guide the reader through the research process in a coherent and logical manner. Following the introduction, the article presents the context of the phenomenon under investigation, highlighting the significance of understanding the subjective experiences of hybrid learning. The methodology section outlines the phenomenological approach used in the study, followed by a detailed explanation of the data collection and analysis procedures. The findings are then discussed, offering insights into the lived experiences of participants, and the article concludes with a summary of key findings and recommendations for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This research adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of students and faculty members in using digital learning platforms within a hybrid learning context (Fife, 2020). The phenomenological design was chosen for its capacity to delve into the subjective experiences and meanings that participants attribute to their engagement with these technologies. By focusing on the individuals' perspectives, this approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the essence of their experiences, which is critical for addressing the research questions related to how hybrid learning platforms impact the learning and teaching process. A descriptive phenomenological approach was employed, as it seeks to describe the structures of experience without interpreting or theorizing beyond the participants' direct perceptions and descriptions. This method is particularly

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well-suited for uncovering the core meanings of participants' lived experiences in digital and hybrid educational settings.

Participants

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that they had relevant experience with hybrid learning and the use of digital platforms in their educational contexts. The sample comprised 15 participants, including 8 students and 7 faculty members, with an age range of 22 to 55 years. The decision to include 15 participants was guided by phenomenological research standards, which emphasize depth over breadth, with sample sizes between 10–20 considered sufficient for reaching data saturation (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged after the 13th interview, thereby justifying the adequacy of the sample size.

The inclusion criteria required that students had participated in at least one hybrid learning course within the past semester, while faculty members had been involved in teaching courses using digital platforms for a minimum of one academic year. Participants were excluded if they had limited exposure to digital learning platforms or were not actively engaged in teaching or learning through hybrid modes. The group was composed of a balanced mix of genders and represented diverse academic disciplines, reflecting a wide array of experiences within the hybrid learning environment. Although purposive sampling introduces potential bias by focusing on participants with prior exposure to hybrid learning, this approach was chosen to ensure relevance and richness of data. To minimize bias, participants were drawn from different faculties and levels of teaching/learning experience, thereby enhancing diversity and credibility.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted either in person or via video conferencing, depending on the participants' availability and preferences (Kawamura, 2020). The interviews followed a pre-designed guide to ensure that all relevant topics were covered while allowing flexibility for participants to share their personal experiences in greater depth. The duration of each interview ranged from 45 minutes to one hour. To create a comfortable and open environment, participants were invited to share their experiences freely, and all interviews were conducted in a quiet, private setting, either in the participants' offices or at locations of their choosing. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews, ensuring that they understood the study’s purpose and their rights within the research process. The interview guide was validated through a pilot test with two participants who met the inclusion criteria but were not part of the final sample. Feedback from this pilot was used to refine question clarity, ensure alignment with research objectives, and enhance the reliability of the protocol. No standardized instruments were modified or employed beyond the interview guide, which was developed based on the research questions and phenomenological methodology.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a method that emphasizes the interpretation of participants' accounts to uncover deeper meanings (Clair, 2003). IPA was selected due to its suitability for exploring how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds. The analysis process involved several stages: first, the interview transcripts were read multiple times to gain familiarity with the data. Significant statements related to the research questions were then identified and grouped into clusters of meaning. These clusters were subsequently organized into broader themes that captured the essence of participants' experiences. Data analysis was conducted using NVivo software, which facilitated the coding process and helped in the organization of thematic categories. The findings were interpreted through the lens of the participants' lived experiences, ensuring that the analysis remained closely aligned with their descriptions.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee prior to data collection (Fenton & Baxter, 2016). All participants were provided with information about the study's objectives and were assured of their right to confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained

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from all participants in writing, and they were given the option to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Anonymity was maintained throughout the study by using pseudonyms in the presentation of findings. All data were securely stored and only accessible to the research team. The study adhered to internationally recognized ethical standards in human research, ensuring the protection of participants' rights and well-being.

RESULTS

The Impact of Hybrid Learning on Student Engagement

The transition to hybrid learning has profoundly impacted the engagement levels of students. According to the participants, the integration of digital platforms has allowed for a more flexible and personalized learning experience. Among the student participants (ages 22–30, representing disciplines such as engineering, social sciences, and education, with an equal gender distribution), many emphasized flexibility as a major advantage. A student, participant S1, reflected, "The ability to attend classes from anywhere made me feel less constrained. I could follow the lessons at my own pace, which helped me engage more with the content." This sentiment was echoed by several students, who highlighted the advantages of having both in-person and online learning opportunities. The flexibility of hybrid platforms allowed them to manage their time more effectively, reducing the feeling of being overwhelmed.

However, some students expressed frustration with the inconsistent technical support during the transition to online learning. S2, a different student, shared, "There were times when I couldn't access the platform or the video quality was poor. That really made me disengage." Another participant, S4 (female, 27, education), added, "When the system crashed during exams, it created unnecessary stress and reduced my motivation." This contrast underscores the pivotal role that the technical aspects of digital platforms play in student engagement. Overall, the theme shows that while flexibility is valued, uneven infrastructure and support disproportionately affected students from less technologically resourced faculties.

Faculty Experiences with Digital Learning Platforms

Faculty members reported varying degrees of comfort and success in adapting to digital learning platforms. The faculty group (ages 32–55, with teaching experience ranging from 5 to 20 years, across sciences, humanities, and business) revealed divergent adaptation patterns. For some, the transition was smooth, with one instructor, F1, noting, "The digital platform allowed me to reach students beyond the classroom. I could upload materials, share resources, and engage in discussions, all of which were quite efficient." These tools provided a sense of continuity and convenience, facilitating seamless interaction with students, particularly those in remote locations.

On the other hand, several faculty members experienced difficulties with the technology itself. F2 explained, "The learning curve was steep. I had to quickly adapt to new tools and processes, and sometimes, things didn’t go as planned during a lecture." Similarly, F4 (male, 52, business) emphasized, "I felt that my years of traditional teaching experience didn’t fully prepare me for this kind of shift. It was overwhelming at times." This highlights a broader challenge for educators: while digital platforms can enhance teaching, they also require significant adjustments and can contribute to stress and frustration, especially when the technology fails to meet expectations.

Student and Faculty Perceptions of Technology Integration

Both students and faculty members recognized the potential of digital learning platforms in enhancing educational experiences, but the overall success of these platforms depended heavily on their ease of use and accessibility. Several students (particularly those in first-year courses) struggled more than senior students, indicating differences in digital literacy levels. A student, S3, noted, "It’s great that we have all these resources available, but sometimes I feel like I need more guidance on how to navigate the platform effectively." Similarly, faculty members like F3 expressed concerns about their ability to fully utilize the platforms' capabilities, "There are so many features, but it’s hard to use them all effectively without proper training." Another faculty participant, F5 (female, 47,

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sciences), reflected, "I often relied on my younger colleagues or even my students to show me shortcuts—it shows how uneven training really is."

These insights underline a critical aspect of the hybrid learning experience: the need for comprehensive support systems for both students and faculty. Without adequate training, the benefits of digital platforms are not fully realized, limiting their potential impact on the learning process.

The findings from this study highlight the complex nature of the hybrid learning experience in higher education. By including participants with varied demographics—students across disciplines and levels, and faculty with diverse teaching backgrounds—the study illustrates how engagement, adaptation, and technology integration are experienced differently across groups. While digital platforms offer significant benefits in terms of flexibility and accessibility, they also present challenges that can impact engagement and teaching effectiveness. The key themes that emerged—student engagement, faculty adaptation to technology, and perceptions of technology integration—demonstrate the importance of providing robust technical support and training to ensure the success of hybrid learning. As such, the integration of digital platforms into education requires careful consideration of both the opportunities and obstacles that arise during their implementation.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

The key findings of this study reveal that while hybrid learning platforms offer significant benefits in terms of flexibility and accessibility, they also present challenges that affect student and faculty engagement (Suryanto et al., 2024). Participants expressed a mixed experience: students appreciated the autonomy that hybrid learning provides but struggled with inconsistent technological support, while faculty members experienced both positive aspects of digital tools and frustrations with adapting to new technology. This combination of opportunities and obstacles suggests that the success of hybrid learning depends on how effectively institutions address infrastructural, pedagogical, and training-related gaps.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

This study contributes to the understanding of hybrid learning environments by shedding light on the nuanced, lived experiences of students and faculty (Riyami et al., 2019). The results underscore the importance of both the technical functionality of platforms and the broader emotional and cognitive aspects of engagement with technology. For students, the flexibility of hybrid learning increased their engagement, but issues such as poor technical support could hinder their ability to fully benefit from the platform. Similarly, faculty members found that while digital tools enabled greater reach and engagement with students, the lack of training and frequent technical issues created barriers to effective teaching. Thus, this study emphasizes that integration of hybrid platforms requires a dual focus: ensuring robust technological infrastructure and addressing the human dimensions of learning and teaching.

Relationship to Literature and Previous Theories

The findings of this study align with previous research that emphasizes the dual role of technology in education: both as a facilitator and a barrier. Fedrick et al (2024)found that faculty members' perceptions of online learning were shaped by their ability to adapt to new technologies, echoing the frustrations expressed by participants in this study. Similarly, Trabelsi et al (2025)noted that while online learning offers flexibility, it can also lead to disengagement if not properly implemented. However, other studies present more optimistic findings. For example, Chan et al. (2023) argued that with adequate institutional support, hybrid platforms consistently enhance both teaching effectiveness and student outcomes. This contrasts with the present study, where insufficient support and uneven training emerged as significant barriers. Such discrepancies highlight the contextual nature of hybrid learning: institutional readiness and resource allocation may explain why some contexts report success while others struggle.The findings also resonate with theories of engagement in digital learning environments, such as those proposed by Tocto-Cano et al (2025),

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which highlight the importance of emotional and behavioral engagement in learning outcomes By showing that negative emotions such as stress and frustration directly reduced engagement, this study provides evidence that extends these theories, underscoring the need to consider emotional strain as a central factor rather than a peripheral one.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the hybrid learning experience, particularly regarding how students and faculty engage with digital platforms (Müller et al., 2021). From a practical perspective, the study underscores the importance of providing consistent technical support and comprehensive training for both students and educators (Guerra-Reyes et al., 2023). For implementation, this means institutions should (1) establish dedicated technical support teams available during peak usage times, (2) design structured training modules for faculty and students before each semester, and (3) embed ongoing digital literacy workshops to ensure sustained competence.From a broader social and cultural perspective, the findings highlight the role of technology in shaping educational practices and emphasize the need to consider the human experience when integrating digital tools into learning environments. Policymakers, in particular, should prioritize funding for infrastructure in under-resourced institutions, while technology developers should simplify user interfaces to reduce cognitive load and enhance accessibility. Such targeted actions move beyond general recommendations and directly address the obstacles identified in this study.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights, there are several limitations that must be acknowledged (Boté-Vericad et al., 2023). First, the research focused on a specific sample of students and faculty within a particular university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts or populations. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be influenced by participants' subjective biases or recall errors. The use of in-depth interviews, while rich in qualitative data, may not capture the full range of experiences across larger, more diverse groups. Furthermore, the phenomenological approach, though powerful in exploring lived experiences, does not provide quantifiable data, which limits the ability to compare findings across different contexts or draw causal inferences. Acknowledging these limitations strengthens transparency and points to areas where future research can refine both methodology and scope.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research (Johnson et al., 2022). One potential direction is to explore the experiences of students and faculty in different types of hybrid learning environments, such as fully online versus blended models, to assess whether the challenges and benefits identified in this study vary depending on the learning context (Hanson, 2020; Papageorgiou et al., 2024). Additionally, research could investigate the long-term impact of hybrid learning on student outcomes, such as retention and academic performance, while also considering the emotional and cognitive dimensions of learning. Future studies should also systematically compare institutions with strong versus weak technological infrastructures to explain contradictory findings in the literature. Moreover, mixed-methods approaches could triangulate self-reported experiences with measurable engagement or performance data, reducing subjectivity and enhancing generalizability.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the experiences of students and faculty members with hybrid learning platforms, addressing the gap in understanding how these digital tools impact engagement and teaching effectiveness. The findings revealed that while hybrid learning offers flexibility and accessibility, both students and faculty face challenges, such as technical difficulties and inadequate training, which hinder their overall experience. These results extend existing theories of digital engagement by demonstrating that emotional and cognitive responses—such as frustration, motivation, and adaptability—are as critical as structural factors like infrastructure and platform

usability. In doing so, the study underscores that hybrid learning should be conceptualized not only as a technological shift but also as a socio-cognitive process shaped by user perceptions and institutional readiness. At the same time, several limitations constrain the generalizability of these findings. The study drew on a relatively small sample within a single institutional context, which may not reflect broader variations across different universities or cultural settings. Furthermore, reliance on self-reported interviews introduces subjectivity and potential recall bias. These factors limit the extent to which conclusions can be extended beyond the studied population.

These insights provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of participants, contributing to the existing literature by highlighting the importance of both technical and human factors in successful hybrid learning environments. By focusing on the subjective experiences of users, this research fills a gap that previous studies, often relying on quantitative measures, overlooked. Future research should therefore build on these findings by employing comparative, cross-institutional designs, integrating mixed-method approaches, and testing theoretical models of engagement in diverse cultural and educational contexts. Overall, this study not only lays a foundation for further exploration into the complexities of digital learning environments but also situates hybrid learning within broader debates about equity, pedagogy, and technological adoption, reinforcing its theoretical and practical significance.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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