Conference Research Paper

DOI: https://doi.org//10.18357/otessac.2024.4.1.360
https://otessa.org/
#OTESSA

Blended Teaching: Insights from the Playful Hybrid Higher Education Project

Sandra Abegglen
School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape
University of Calgary

Correspondence:

Sandra Abegglen
School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape
University of Calgary
Email: sandra.abegglen [at] ucalgary.ca

Abstract

The Playful Hybrid Higher Education project [https://playhybrid.education/], based in the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape at the University of Calgary (Canada) and funded by the Imagination Lab Foundation, explores how play and creativity can be integrated into hybrid classrooms, particularly in response to the shift to blended learning during COVID-19. Through interviews and surveys with Canadian higher education stakeholders, the project aims to provide urgently needed best practice guidance to enhance staff competency and improve student outcomes. This paper presents the preliminary outcomes of the project, with a specific focus on (re)imagining a creative blended university that fosters student success. By sharing initial findings, the paper offers inspiration on how playful and creative approaches can enrich the hybrid learning experience, ultimately contributing to a more engaging and effective higher education environment.

Keywords: hybrid education, playful learning, blended teaching, student success, instructional guidance, higher education

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a rapid evolution in teaching methodologies, leading to the widespread adoption of hybrid education—an amalgamation of in-person and online instruction, synchronous and asynchronous activities, and compulsory and flexible tasks. This paradigm shift has forced educators to explore innovative approaches to engage students effectively in hybrid learning environments. The Playful Hybrid Higher Education project [https://playhybrid.education/] seeks to address this challenge by investigating the integration of play and creativity into hybrid teaching practices for student success.

The Project

The Playful Hybrid Higher Education project, led by Sandra Abegglen, is situated within the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape at the University of Calgary, and funded by the Imagination Lab Foundation. It explores faculty and student experiences in the hybrid classroom to develop guidance for educators navigating this evolving education model. The research seeks to answer a pivotal question: How can faculty foster community and collective student success in hybrid environments using play and creativity?

The Study

The research is undertaken in four phases:

Phase 1: Literature Review (Fall 2022–Spring 2023)

Phase 2: Surveys (Spring–Summer 2023)

Phase 3: Interviews (Summer–Fall 2023)

Phase 4: Report (Fall 2023–Summer 2024)

The current phase (Phase 4) involves data analysis and report writing. This paper presents the preliminary findings, with more detailed results to be shared in future publications.

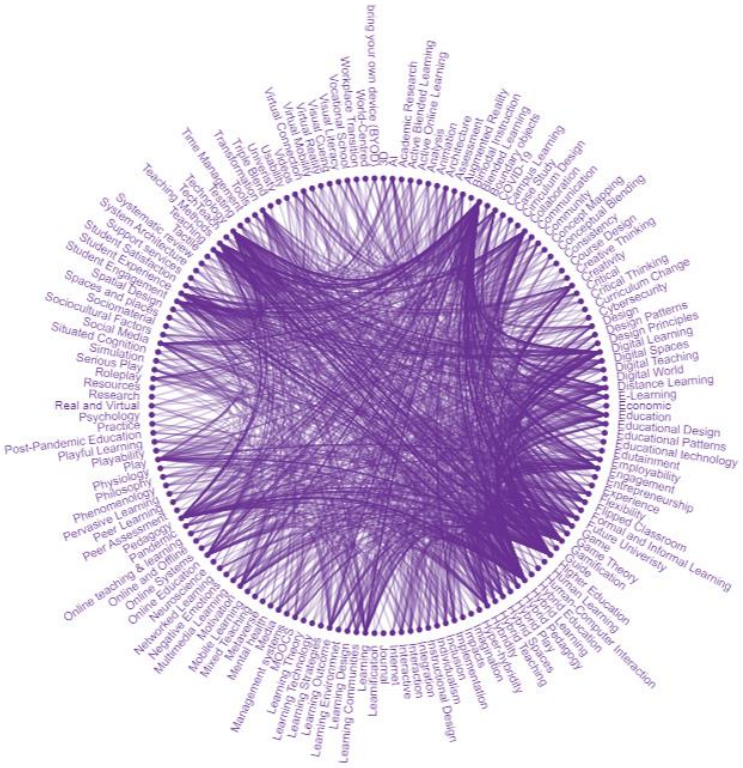
Initial Results

The preliminary analysis of the research data has revealed the following initial results.

Literature Review

Between Fall 2022 and Spring 2023, a systematic literature review was conducted on the theme of playful hybrid higher education, resulting in a database of 223 items, available as a downloadable list on the project website under a Creative Commons Licence. The initial literature review involved a search on key terminology using the University of Calgary library catalog, which was later expanded to include additional literature databases. Key definitions and terminology connections identified from these literature searches are visualized in the Network Plot below (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Keywords and Definitions Network Plot



Surveys

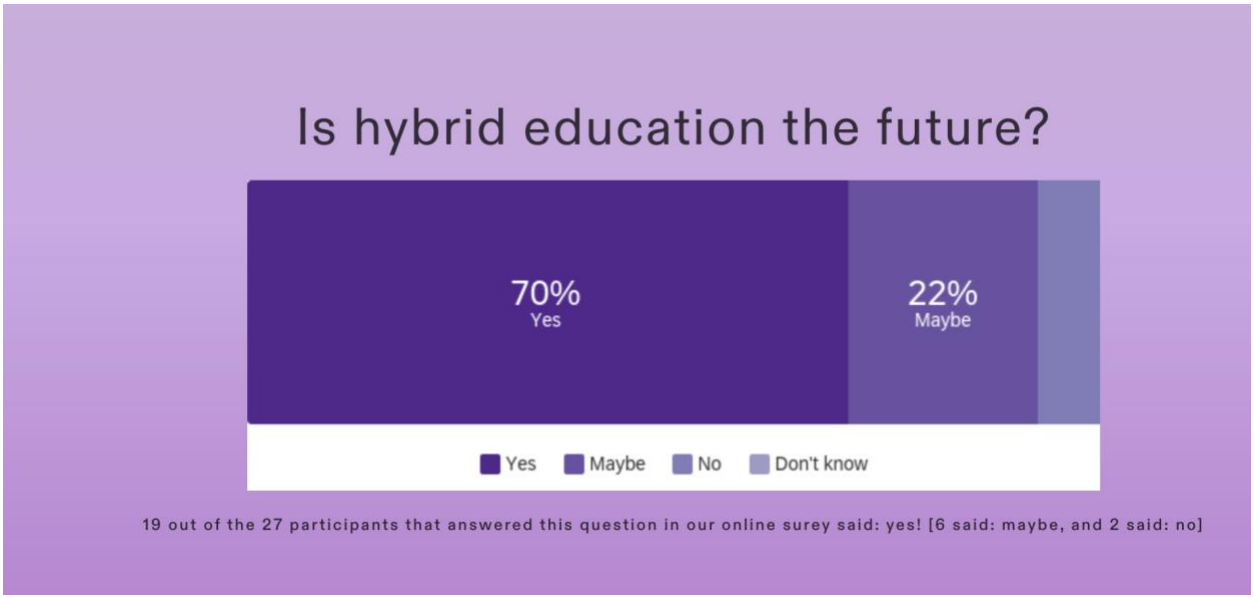
In Spring/Summer 2023, two online surveys were conducted to gather insights from higher education faculty and students about their experiences within the hybrid classroom.

Survey 01 focused on attitudes towards hybrid education as a first step in understanding faculty and student perceptions of hybrid teaching and learning (see Figure 2). This survey targeted education professionals and learners from Canadian higher education institutions and was conducted online.

Survey 02 specifically aimed at undergraduate students at the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, entering the Bachelor of Design in City Innovation (BDCI) program, although it was also open to other University of Calgary students. This online survey invited students to share their experiences across different learning modes—in-person, online, and blended—and the challenges and benefits associated with each.

Participants from both surveys highlighted the future potential of hybrid education, noting its capacity to enhance learning experiences and accessibility. However, they also raised concerns about engagement, resource availability, academic integrity, and technological support. Students, in particular, appreciated the flexibility of hybrid courses but expressed uncertainty about whether this mode could fully meet their needs, especially in terms of personalized support and interaction.

Figure 2
Survey 01 Result: Is Hybrid Education the Future?



Interviews

In addition, 13 interviews with faculty from various disciplines at Canadian higher education institutions provided valuable insights into playful hybrid higher education. The interviews covered topics such as defining hybrid education, fostering community in blended classrooms, and assessing blended learning, among others. The recordings of these interviews are available on the project website (https://playhybrid.education/Interviews), along with interview summaries highlighting key statements such as:

> “We maybe need to question the pedagogic models that we have learned under” (Matthew Parker, Assistant Professor, School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, University of Calgary).
>
> “Learning should be engaging. It should be active. It should be experiential. And, it should be fun” (Jessica Ayala, Professor, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary).
>
> “The number one trend I am seeing is improved technology. I think that Artificial Intelligence, or generative AI, will be a big part of it” (Soroush Sabbaghan, Associate Professor, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary).
>
> “If we really want to develop some of these tools, perhaps it’s AI, perhaps it’s video games, perhaps it’s simulations, perhaps it’s virtual reality, no one’s school in Canada is big enough to do it by themselves. We need to start working together, to get shared tools, to get shared experiences, for our students” (Douglas MacLeod, Centre for Architecture, Athabasca University).

> "In my opinion, good hybrid education would be, you could have people in-person, you could have people online, and whatever it is you are doing, you are somehow providing equal opportunity and equal experience to the folks that are in either venue" (Michelle Goodridge, Head, User and Access Services, Wildfrid Laurier University).
>
> "I say, play with it. Relax. And sometimes, let the students teach you" (Hoi Cheu, Professor, School of Liberal Arts, Laurentian University).

Initial Takeaways

Preliminary takeaways from the research highlight the importance of carefully blending in-person and online experiences to create successful learning environments. Faculty emphasized that a well-balanced hybrid approach, characterized by a careful integration of (new) technologies, not only enhances engagement but also fosters a sense of community among students, which can be challenging in traditional settings. Moreover, the integration of playful and creative elements was seen as a crucial factor in stimulating curiosity and motivation, making the learning process more enjoyable and effective.

Another important finding is the need for flexibility in the design of hybrid courses to accommodate diverse learning needs and preferences. Faculty noted that hybrid education provides unique opportunities to personalize learning, but it requires intentional planning and support, particularly in areas such as technological infrastructure and accessibility. Ensuring students have access to reliable technology and meaningful interaction with instructors and peers was also flagged as essential for maintaining student satisfaction and academic integrity.

Finally, the preliminary analysis underscored the value of continuous reflection in hybrid learning environments, where ongoing adjustments can optimize both the delivery and reception of course content and materials. This highlights the ongoing need for adaptability—not only from faculty and students but also from institutions. It is essential for institutions to support both faculty and students as they navigate this new and evolving teaching and learning model together.

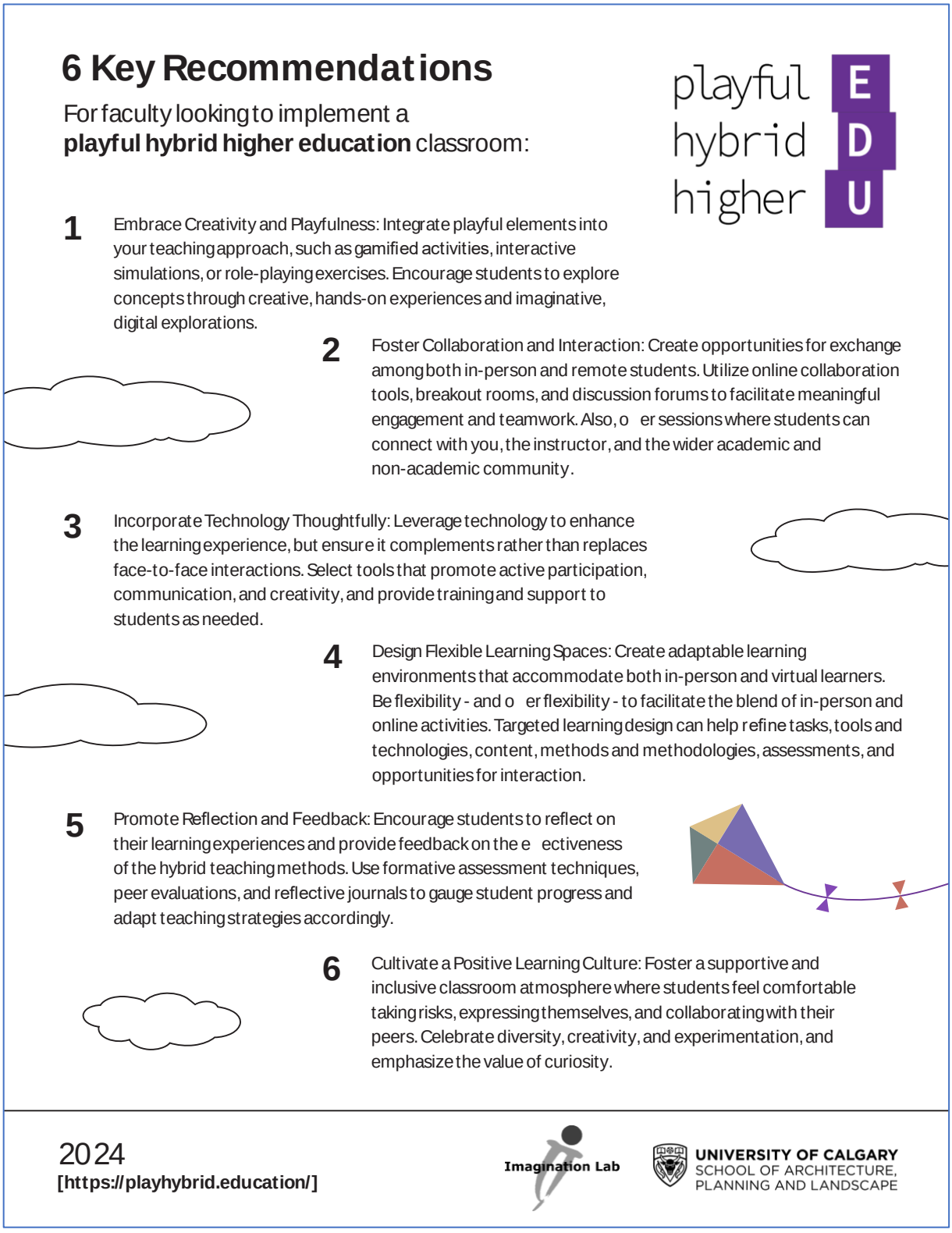
Based on the preliminary project results, recommendations for educational professionals to successfully engage students in hybrid higher education classrooms are outlined in Figure 3.

Practical Examples

Case study examples of playful hybrid teaching and learning approaches, and what this might look like in practice, can be found at the following link: https://playhybrid.education/Cases.

These case studies showcase a variety of innovative strategies employed by educators to create engaging and dynamic learning experiences in hybrid settings. Each example highlights specific methods for integrating play and creativity into the curriculum, demonstrating how these approaches can enhance student engagement, foster community, and support diverse learning needs. By examining these cases, educators can draw inspiration and practical insights for their own teaching praxis.

Figure 3
Recommendations for Educators



Author's Contributions

SA was the sole author of this paper.

Open Researcher and Contributor Identifier (ORCID)

Sandra Abegglen https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1582-9394

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to the Playful Hybrid Higher Education Graduate Assistant Researchers who have supported the project in various roles over time. These are:

Rachel Denbina, Master of Architecture, School of Architecture, Planning & Landscape, University of Calgary

Mia Brewster, Master of Architecture, School of Architecture, Planning & Landscape, University of Calgary

Sarah Wilkins, Master of Landscape Architecture, School of Architecture, Planning & Landscape, University of Calgary

Lucia Velasquez Bustos, Master of Architecture, School of Architecture, Planning & Landscape, University of Calgary

Samara Schneider, Master of Architecture, School of Architecture, Planning & Landscape, University of Calgary

Thanks go also to Dr Fabian Neuhaus, Associate Professor, School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, University of Calgary, who has supported the project in its planning and design.

Funding

The Playful Hybrid Higher Education Project is funded through a research grant by the Imagination Lab Foundation.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval for the project has been granted by the University of Calgary.

Conflict of Interest

The author does not declare any conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

More information about the project and its results can be found on the Playful Hybrid Higher education website: https://playhybrid.education/