

Journal Article

**Pracademia – Role Modelling HyFlex Digital Pedagogies in Youth Work Education**

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# **Pracademia – role modelling HyFlex digital pedagogies in Youth Work Education**

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## **Abstract**

This research evaluates the experience of educators and students engaging in HyFlex learning experiences on a university Youth Work programme during the Covid-19 pandemic. Adopting a mixed methods approach the research identifies challenges, opportunities, and possibilities of HyFlex learning. The research explores how digital skills gained in the classroom supported students to be more confident in role-modelling these to deliver Digital Youth Work and support them in a post-covid environment. HyFlex pedagogies supported the development of pracademics, creating opportunities for learning in the classroom and translating this into real world practice. Themes of time, technology, accessibility, and communities of practice (COP) are also discussed. Recommendations are made for future Higher Education practice which can be applied beyond Youth Work programmes.

## **Key Words**

*Youth Work, Pracademia, HyFlex, Digital Learning, Education*

## **Introduction**

Research by Levita et al. (2020) identified negative outcomes of the Covid-19 pandemic for young people. One profession well placed to support young people post-pandemic is Youth Work. Youth Work seeks to create opportunities for learning through pedagogy based on informal education; where conversation, relationship, and experiential learning, are foregrounded (Jeffs & Smith 2005). Youth Work generally occurs face-to-face, however due to pandemic-related lockdowns and the changing needs of young people, Youth Work delivery adapted through an accelerated growth and delivery of Digital Youth Work (Escamilla & Lonean 2021).

Digital Youth Work is the implementation of digital media, tools, and technology (European Commission 2018), and can occur both online and offline, using digital media as; a *medium* to communicate with young people, an *activity* using digital tools and technology, and/or as *content* during face-to-face Youth Work sessions (Blassnig et al. 2017). Whilst Digital Youth Work has been considered a continuum of traditional Youth Work (Melvin 2015; Harvey 2016), it also requires Youth Workers to have a different set of skills and knowledge. Most Youth Workers gain the knowledge and skills required for the role whilst studying for a professional qualification within a Higher Education Institute (HEI) in the UK, where Youth Work is a degree entry profession.

The concept of HEI's being a physical place was challenged as teaching moved online during the pandemic (Marsicano et al. 2020). Delivery methods varied across HEIs with some solely providing online learning, some offering a blend of online and face-to-face learning, and others electing a hybrid model of delivery (Nweke et al. 2022). One such model is HyFlex which combines two core elements; a mix of online and offline synchronous learning opportunities, and the support for ongoing choice and flexibility in how students engage in the learning (Beatty 2019). All students learn together participating in planned classes either remotely or face-to-face simultaneously (Nweke et al. 2022). This was the approach adopted by a Youth Work programme at an HEI in North Wales, UK. Youth Work academics found themselves in a challenging and pioneering position; navigating the need to support students' Youth Work education in the classroom, supporting students to learn to deliver Digital Youth Work, all whilst developing their own skills in digital pedagogy and Digital Youth Work. Thus, Youth Work academics often consider themselves to be 'pracademics'; crossing the borders of practitioner and academic (Posner 2009), and straddling spaces occupied by practice and scholarship, industry, and research (Scanlan et al. 2022).

Currently there is lack of theoretical and practical literature about HyFlex (Nweke et al. 2022), and minimal research focused on student engagement (Nelson et al. 2022). There is a need for academics to reflect on their pandemic teaching experiences (Donham et al. 2022) to ensure lessons learned from HyFlex experiences inform future inclusive, flexible, and sustainable pedagogy (Compton et al. 2023). This empirical paper discusses reflections of Youth Work educators and student evaluations of HyFlex learning experiences so that creative practice can be developed within and across practice disciplines. The objectives of the research were 1) to analyse the reflections of Youth Work educators to explore some of the challenges,

opportunities, and possibilities for a HyFlex pracademia, 2) to analyse student feedback of challenges, opportunities, and possibilities from engaging in HyFlex pracademia, 3) to explore the application of HyFlex approaches for developing students Digital Youth Work skills, and their ability to support young people post-pandemic, and 4) to make recommendations for future Youth Work pedagogical practice.

## Literature Review

Definitions of online learning are used interchangeably with other concepts such as distance learning and e-learning (Moore et al. 2011). However, online learning is more than students having access to information online (Naffi 2020). It is a planned digital pedagogical approach (Kenzig 2015) that requires significant preparation time (Rosen 2021; Bărbuceanu 2022). HyFlex is one approach; combining face-to-face and online synchronous or asynchronous delivery simultaneously (Beatty 2019). The HyFlex model offers students flexibility to choose their preferred learning and engagement method and involves delivering the same course in three ways; synchronous face-to-face (in person), synchronous online (students can join the face-to-face class in real time), and asynchronous online (recorded online for students to engage in their own time) (Foust & Ruzybayev 2021; Miller et al. 2021). HyFlex learning aims to be student-centred, student-directed, multimodal, involve students in active learning, and encourage active participation (Beatty, 2019). Whatever learning mode the students choose, they can participate in the course without diluting the quality of teaching or compromising learning. For Raman et al. (2021, p.28) ‘in this model, remote students would fully participate and equally benefit from all learning tools, such as discussions, activities, and assignments, in the same manner as face-to-face students and accomplish the same learning outcomes.’

HyFlex has since become the ‘new normal’ for some HEIs (Krsmanovic 2020), including the researchers’ own programme. The Youth Work team created asynchronous online learning content for students to engage with before and after taught synchronous classes. Students could participate in the synchronous classes face-to-face when restrictions allowed or via video technology. Students in the classroom were encouraged to bring laptops and headphones to connect with the video technology too, allowing for connectivity and online group work between those online, and those in the class. Synchronous sessions were recorded so that those not in attendance could engage when it suited them, and all students could review what was covered. Thus, students were engaged in multimodal and highly flexible learning (Zehler et al. 2021). Although much has been written about Youth Work pedagogy (Achilleos & Douglas

2019; Seal 2019), there is little about online learning in Youth Work education, or evaluations of HyFlex. In tandem there is a need for reflection on pandemic teaching experiences (Donham et al. 2022).

Existing research has demonstrated positive outcomes for students and challenges for effective implementation of HyFlex. Nweke et al. (2022) found no significant differences between the assessment outcomes of students who joined online and those who joined face-to-face in a HyFlex Cyber-Security course. They also found that students reported a sense of control over their studies and were able to develop digital skills. Despite initial concerns about student drop-out and reduced student satisfaction, this was not the case (ibid.). Magana et al. (2022) concluded that HyFlex provided students with a comparable learning experience to traditional in-person delivery, with Graffy (2021) echoing similar findings. Donham et al.'s (2022) study garnered positive feedback about clarity and structure, flexibility and a sense of belonging by those engaged in HyFlex learning. This sense of belonging provides a connectedness in the form of creating COP (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger,1998). Although research has been conducted across a range of HEI programmes there is no previous research into HyFlex pedagogy and Youth Work. This research seeks to address this gap, identifying positives and opportunities from staff and students' experiences.

Positive student outcomes from HyFlex learning only comes from purposeful pedagogic design and delivery (Beatty 2019). Mentzer et al. (2023) argue that whilst HyFlex can meet student psychological needs, this can only be achieved against a backdrop of academic facilitation. This requires educators to understand three components; cognition (an understanding of how people learn), instruction (how the learning experience can be facilitated), and technology (how the technology can improve instruction and learning) (Mayer & Moreno 2003). Each of these components could be a barrier to effective HyFlex learning and the educator's role is fundamental to successful online learning (McPherson & Nunes 2013). Challenges can occur where both students and academics attempt to manage dual learning spaces synchronously (Nelson et al 2022), as well as potential issues of what Boyer-Davis (2020) terms 'technostress'; the inability to adopt or cope with new technologies in a healthy way. Educators and students must overcome their own barriers in the use of technology and technical expertise (Wilson 2003). Teaching support for those delivering HyFlex learning could enhance the experience (Bell et al. 2014; Bower et al. 2015; Han et al. 2022). Nweke et al. (2022) also reported challenges including internet connectivity, competency in using online platforms, and

a lack of access to appropriate hardware as most students engaged via mobile devices. This is echoed by others who highlight the importance of having the digital infrastructure and technology in place to deliver HyFlex learning (Beetham 2015; Chen et al. 2017; Romero-Hall & Vicentini 2017). Thus, an understanding of Mayer and Moreno's (2003) cognitive, instructive, and technological components have influenced the data collection design and analysis of this research.

Wider structural issues are considered by Nelson et al. (2022), highlighting concerns of socio-economic disparities, and appropriate home learning environments as challenges to engagement in HyFlex. Most students on the Youth Work programme mirror those in Donham et al.'s. (2022) study who were first generation to come to university, from low income and marginalised groups, and so these issues are particularly prevalent. Whilst technology can have benefits in terms of improving access to educational opportunities for non-traditional learners and those with disabilities or additional learning needs (Moore et al. 2011), it can also be a force that segregates students with disabilities into an unequal learning environment (Riccobono 2012). HyFlex learning may be one way to support those students who are silenced and may not yet have a voice (Seale 2013); supporting them to thrive (Donham et al. 2022). This research was open to exploring additional barriers and challenges to HyFlex for both students and academics, to identify lessons from the pandemic and inform future innovation and inclusion (Compton et al. 2023).

One of the major advantages of HyFlex is that it supports students to become more digitally fluent (Gaber et al. 2023); to be adaptable and develop the technological skills required in an everchanging digital world (ibid.). This is important for Youth Work students and academics, to ensure that have the skills and knowledge to engage with young people in digital spaces through Digital Youth Work. The National Occupational Standards for Youth Work (CLD 2019) were updated to include a competency where Youth Workers demonstrate their ability to 'engage with and empower young people to make use of digital media in their daily lives' (ibid.). The Youth Work Strategy for Wales (Welsh Government 2019) also stresses the importance of using digital tools to optimise Youth Work approaches and create safe virtual and digital spaces for Youth Work (ibid.). Therefore, Youth Work educators, many of whom also remain in practice, need to unite the world of academia and practice as 'Pracademics' (Scanlan et al. 2022); to learn and role-model the digital skills required to ensure future Youth Workers can deliver Digital Youth Work.

Pracademia allows theoretically enriched knowledge to positively impact on practice (Eacott 2022), and the conversion of theory into reality (Wilson 2015). For Dickinson et al. (2022) pracademia has distinct advantages in terms of preparing students for ‘real world’ practice; taking what is learned from the classroom and academics and applying it in practice (MacDuff & Netting 2010). For Posner (2009), pracademia also translates into improved career prospects if teaching is grounded in practice and reflects contemporary agendas and issues. Using Hollweck et al.’s. (2022) model of pracademia, HyFlex learning encourages Youth Work students **and their educators** to engage in knowledge mobilisation (how to do Digital Youth Work), develop community membership (reducing isolation and increasing connectivity amongst students and educators to share learning and knowledge and put digital skills into practice), whilst also responding to systemic challenges (in this case a global pandemic, the need to learn in new ways, and develop their own Digital Youth Work skills to meet the needs of young people).

This research sought to explore reflections of Youth Work pracademics in application of a HyFlex approach for developing their own, and student Youth Workers’ Digital Youth Work skills. With the aim that students themselves become pracademics; making the links between theory, application, and practice (Scanlan et al. 2022) to support young people post-pandemic. From this research future recommendations can be made for utilising HyFlex approaches in HEIs in general, Youth Work programmes specifically, and cultivating Digital Youth Work skills. Such research is timely and beneficial in the longer term ‘thinking anew about what works and why’ (MIT 2022)

## **Research Methodology**

For this study the pragmatic paradigm was adopted to ‘best’ address the aim and objectives of the research (Dewey 1929 [1984]; Creswell & Plano Clark 2018). Kaushik and Walsh (2019) argue for the application of pragmatism for promoting social justice and its efficacy for “solving practical problems in the real world” (p.4) aligning with the values and principles of Youth Work. A pragmatic mixed methods approach was adopted in this study due to its flexible reflexive research design (Kaushik & Walsh 2019; Crotty 2020), allowing the researchers the

freedom to adapt different approaches as required. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were adopted to triangulate the data in the analysis.

## Methods

### Reflection

For the qualitative element of the research reflection was used as the method; commonly recognised to support and enhance self-analysis, learning from experience and critical thinking (Coulson & Harvey 2013). The qualitative reflective tool devised consisted of six key questions or prompts, to guide the reflection around challenge, benefits, possibilities and learning for future. Four youth and community work practitioners took part in the reflection. Dickinson et al. (2022) state that practitioners need to continually engage in reflective practice to ensure what they are teaching is contemporary and not out of touch. As the researchers and students engaged with HyFlex as “learning by doing” (Gibbs 1988), it was imperative for the researchers to check in with the practices and pedagogical approaches used, alongside the appropriateness of the methods employed within the research study. This was mirrored in studies explored within the literature, where Donham et al. (2022) and Compton et al. (2023) adopted a reflective methodology for their research into staff experiences of HyFlex learning. Furthermore, Poth (2018) discusses the value of reflection and reflexivity offering validity within mixed methods research; positioning the methodology for studying complex social objects, in this case experiences of HyFlex learning.

### Questionnaire

A questionnaire was also adopted to gather data and analyse student experiences and attitudes towards HyFlex learning. This provided quantitative data for the research, as well additional qualitative commentary. An online questionnaire was developed for students to reflect on their experience of HyFlex, drawing on qualitative (closed questions) and quantitative (open-questions). The closed questions sought to gauge a wider empirical understanding of the students’ evaluation (Flick 2020) and experience of using HyFlex; alongside, encouraging students to engage in critical reflection of their own practice (e.g. Digital Youth Work skills and technological skills). Mirrored within the literature, Gaber et al. (2023) also successfully adopted a questionnaire to gain student evaluation data in relation to HyFlex learning on a civil engineering programme.

Student participants were identified using purposive sampling (Robinson 2014). The criteria for inclusion in the research included students who had engaged in HyFlex learning on a youth

and community work programme (both undergraduate and postgraduate) during the Covid-19 pandemic. The sample consisted of students identified as being of first generation to attend university, from low-income and marginalised groups, echoing the sample drawn from Donham et al. (2022). A total of 24 students completed the questionnaire.

The analysis of the reflections and qualitative elements of the student questionnaires was undertaken using a thematic coding method (Braun & Clarke 2008) employed to identify commonalities and discrepancies around the challenges, opportunities and possibilities. The iterative process involved the researchers engaging with Braun & Clarke's (2008) six stages of analysis. The themes were triangulated, cross-referenced and collated into umbrella categories, used to shape the discussion and recommendations of this piece.

## **Findings**

### **Digital Pedagogy**

It is hard to provide a single definition of pedagogy (Shah & Campus 2021). According to Tes (2023), pedagogy incorporates teaching theory, teaching methods, and assessment and feedback, or more simply, teaching methods and practice. In terms of pedagogy, two sub-themes emerged relating to challenges educators and students faced through Hyflex delivery, time and technology.

The data indicated that the amount of time involved in adopting new teaching methods presented challenges for the Youth Work educators, especially the time involved in managing expectations of students and the organisation. Comments included:

*“Meeting expectations of students, self and organisation – uploading recordings afterwards is all time consuming.”*

*“Supporting students to understand a different pedagogical approach takes time.”*

*“Time to learn applications, create content and develop online content is needed.”*

*“Time and space to develop innovation and creativity is needed, I tend to do the same thing because there is so much to do.”*

Pedagogical challenges also presented themselves due to poor student digital literacy and the time required to support students to learn new digital skills to engage in HyFlex delivery. This was noted by students themselves who commented that in the set-up of HyFlex learning:

*“There’s lots of repetition and taking up of time in classes.”*

*“Tutors seem to have mastered the skill, but sometimes it can take a while to set up.”*

*“Supporting students at home with tech issues was difficult, in the class different students could help each other.”*

Possibilities were identified to meet this challenge, though, including time to support both staff and students to develop the skills required to understand digital pedagogy. Recommendations included

*“Ongoing improvements in digital learning and digital skills for staff and students.”*

*“Students developing tech skills and engaging with digital pedagogies.”*

*“Work with students so that they can understand the pedagogy of online learning and HyFlex.”*

*“Supporting students to develop IT skills required to engage in HyFlex.”*

*“A specific unit/session looking at the ways to study digitally.”*

The sub-theme of time was closely linked to the sub-theme of technology as a further challenge in HyFlex pedagogy. From a student perspective, this was due to the existing university infrastructure and issues of digital poverty. Educators reflected that the technology and infrastructure was not in place to support HyFlex delivery, including stable internet connection, cameras, and microphones.

*“University structure was not in place – students at home could not hear those at the back of the classroom.”*

*“To be more engaging in all classes not just some, to be able to have the microphone and camera on the whole class through the lesson.”*

Students also commented:

*“The internet kept dropping off in class – needing students to message others in private WhatsApp groups to inform what’s happening.”*

*“My computer is very slow!”*

### **Improved Digital Skills**

The challenges of finding time for a digital pedagogical approach and technology, also presented opportunities for staff and students as data suggests that digital literacy improved for both.

Table 1

Item	poor %	? %	excellent %
How would you rate your information technology skills before starting on the Youth & Community work course?	46	17	37
How would you rate the quality of the synchronous online learning tasks and activities provided for the course you do with others?	0	50	50
How would you rate the quality of the synchronous online learning tasks and activities provided for the course you do on your own?	0	29	71
How would you rate your information technology skills now That you have engaged in HyFlex learning on the Youth & Community course?	0	25	75
How would you rate your confidence in delivering digital youth work now that you have been engaged in HyFlex approach to learning yourself?	13	38	50

\* percentages have been rounded so may not always add up to 100%

Table 1 presents the five questions that invited students to rate how their skills and learning had developed using HyFlex. Nearly half of the students rated their information and technology skills as poor (46%) before they began using Hyflex. After completing the year none of the students rated these skills as poor. A t-test (comparison of the mean scores between these two questions) demonstrated that this difference was statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ) with the mean score increasing from 2.83 to 3.79). Overall, the results presented in Table 1 demonstrate that students have a positive experience of, and have grown in confidence in, using HyFlex. The only caveat is that two of the 24 students (13%) are not confident in their ability to deliver Digital Youth Work following their engagement with the HyFlex approach, however 50% of students are now more confident to do this.

From a staff perspective, the qualitative data demonstrates improved digital skills and creativity in their application.:

*“Students could get creative and develop creative skills with assessments online... Canva, canvas, Kahoot for presentations.”*

*“Students could undertake synchronous assessment of poster presentations and other group work and be assessed online ... importantly for students to access to feedback and review their own participation and contribution.”*

For the students, improved digital skills were highlighted with statements including:

*“I feel I have much more knowledge regarding various different forums for learning.”*

*“I have been able to understand how better to use various forums in order to support young people when face to face wasn’t always an option. For example, I participated in an online youth council meeting when it wasn’t allowed to happen face to face.”*

### **Accessibility**

The data generated an opportunity generated for HyFlex teaching because it promotes inclusive and accessible methods of teaching and learning. Whilst the technology presented challenges it also provided additional means of interaction and participation among students.

Table 3 presents a more detailed picture of which aspects of HyFlex learning students have found most advantageous.

Table 2

	<b>yes</b> %	<b>no</b> %
I am able to study at times that suite me better	62	38
I can catch up on work I have missed face-to-face in class	46	54
I am able to work with other students who are in different parts of the country	58	42
I have learnt how to use new technology that benefits my personal development	67	33
I have learnt how to use new technology that benefits my professional practice	54	46
The online learning tasks help me prepare for class	79	21
Sessions are recorded which can be reviewed at a later date	79	21
I am not always confident to speak in class so I prefer to use the chat function	4	96
I don’t have to factor in time or travel costs	21	79
Online learning tasks and alternative formats have helped me due to learning differences	21	79

Over half of the students report benefiting from being able to prepare for class and review their learning at a time that is convenient for them. Thus, 79% of students agree online learning tasks help prepare them for class and they appreciate being able to review recordings of sessions.

Over two-thirds (67%) of students agree that engaging with technology has supported their personal development. The assumption that online learning facilitates participation is not supported by the students with only 4% agreeing that they use the chat function because they do not feel confident to speak in class.

Positive comments from Youth Work educator reflections included:

*“Allowed students with additional needs different ways to access and engage, captions, chat, review recorded session.”*

*“Allowed students who are less interactive in class to communicate in different ways.”*

*“Technology made classes more interactive, and hopefully fun.”*

*“Recorded content could be rewatched.”*

Data from student questionnaires exposed that the flexibility of HyFlex teaching made the course accessible, highlighted by statements such as:

*“Being able to come face to face. In a busy house it's hard to make time for the whole day at home with no distractions. Having the option to come into class was a bonus for me.”*

*“I liked the flexibility if I couldn't attend one week then I could still have access to the information.”*

*“The ability to go between online and in person has helped balance my schedule.”*

*“Activities have been well thought out and I've been able to engage fully!”*

*“The online learning tasks are helpful in understanding work in class.”*

*“I have found these tasks really beneficial as they have given me the opportunity to further my learning whilst working at my own pace.”*

## **Community of Practice**

Table 3

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	not at	?	very much
	all		so
	%	%	%

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To what extent has a HyFlex approach to learning enhanced your face-to-face learning in the classroom?	8	42	50
To what extent has HyFlex learning helped you to feel part of a wider community of students?	8	21	71
To what extent has learning via the HyFlex approach supported Your youth work practice?	8	21	71
To what extent has your experience of HyFlex learning increased your ability to support young people post the covid-19 pandemic?	12	42	46

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Table 3 presents the four questions that invited students to assess how much HyFlex learning had supporting their learning and practice. Only one of the twenty-four students has a negative view of the approach for their own learning. Nearly three-quarters of the students agree that the approach has helped them feel part of the wider student community and supported their Youth Work practice.

A Community of Practice is a concept that combines socialising with learning to form a group of people who have formed increasingly complex relationships over time (Lave & Wenger 1991) through a common interest (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). This notion was highlighted as a theme in the data as Youth Work educators reflected on engagement with partners, students and current opportunities.

*“Easier partnership work, it removes travel time, it’s greener, and is more efficient.”*

*“Partners from the field could join and participate in groups and teaching more easily. They didn’t have to travel into uni, so they can join from anywhere. This opens up opportunities for collaborative work and widens the community of practice.”*

As well as future possibilities for programme development presented by engaging in HyFlex delivery:

*“Collaborative teaching with partners, especially internationally, this is something we are looking at developing to improve student experience.”*

*“Continue to develop networks outside of the local area and country, we have the opportunity to offer teaching across the country and internationally with face-to-face content.”*

The research also reveals that students studying remotely and in the classroom value the fact that students can join from anywhere and that their community of practice has widened:

*“We are able to work with other people who live far away and would not normally get the chance to work with them.”*

*“Meeting people from other parts of the country has been fun and interesting.”*

*“There have been very little occasions where I have felt as though my fellow students have been reluctant to work together with me and help me, so overall the approach has supported the growth of a community, especially within my classroom.”*

## **Discussion**

Youth Work educators participating in this research project were tasked with addressing the challenges of combining informal education pedagogy with restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic. This meant adopting a HyFlex course design that enabled educators to develop their own digital skills to apply in Digital Youth Work practice, and supporting students to engage in classes face-to-face, online, asynchronously, and synchronously (Foust & Ruzybayev 2021; Miller et al. 2021). Pedagogy was a theme that ran throughout the data as Youth Work educators and students reflected on the new ways of leaning, teaching, and assessment and specific pedagogical challenges of time and technology.

Whilst it was assumed that academics could learn new technology and transform this into online learning (Naffi 2020), to be utilised in their own Digital Youth Work practice; digital pedagogies require specific planning (Kenzig 2015). The role of the Youth Work educators in this project was central to successful HyFlex teaching, learning, and assessment (McPherson & Nunes, 2013). A particular challenge highlighted for educators was the increased amount of time involved in adapting to new HyFlex approaches. In terms of pedagogy, the research indicates that educators need time to ensure that they avoid personal “technostress” (Boyer-Davis 2020) whilst supporting students to manage and cope with new pedagogical approaches. The twofold nature of HyFlex learning spaces can be difficult for students and educators to manage together (Nelson et al. 2022), this research shows how that impacted on the Youth Work educators’ pedagogy due to the additional work time involved in managing their own

digital literacy (Wilson 2003) to ensure that students were supported. The pandemic meant that educators had to adapt quickly, rather than having the time to plan for HyFlex delivery. Research suggests that up to a year of preparation time is required (Rosen 2021), whilst the volume of preparation in correlation to other pedagogical approaches is noted by others (Bărbuceanu 2022). If cognition, instruction, and technology are essential to successful learning in HyFlex pedagogy (Mayer & Moreno 2003), time is needed for educators to become successful in each of these areas.

Whilst unsuitable technology infrastructure for HyFlex delivery has been previously evidenced as an issue in HyFlex approaches (Romero-Hall & Vicentini 2017), appropriate infrastructure is essential for educators to demonstrate their abilities (Beetham 2015). Although accountability for developing a pedagogically appropriate technology infrastructure is not raised in the data or widely discussed in the literature (Gregory & Lodge 2015), the data demonstrate that students and educators want to have the right infrastructure in place for their HyFlex experiences. According to Beetham (2015), it is typical for organisations to develop technology infrastructure before thinking about developing staff to ensure that it is established effectively. Wang et al. (2017) propose that instruction is needed before delivery to reduce technical difficulties. This research project suggests that neither the infrastructure nor the staff development were in place, validating the premise that Youth Work educators and students in this project were indeed pioneers of HyFlex delivery at their institution. Pioneers who, in the context of Covid-19 accepted that technology was unreliable (Naffi 2020) but recommend that this does not remain the case for future practice. The importance of functioning technology has been evidenced in investigations concerning blended synchronous learning (Bower et al. 2015) and there is research that advocates for appropriate support for addressing technology issues in class (Han et al. 2022). However, this research evidences the challenge of technology for both students and educators and the possibilities of improved digital capability for future practice. Furthermore, the data analysis verifies the need for teaching support (Bell et al. 2014; Han et al. 2022) through recommendations from educators and students that learner support is in place to manage technology and engage fully in HyFlex pedagogies.

In contrast to the challenges presented by technology, the research indicates that HyFlex approaches promotes inclusive and accessible pedagogy. This is important because Youth Work education should reflect the values of professional practice by ensuring learning spaces are inclusive and interpersonal (Wood et al. 2015). The literature shows how technology

supports access to teaching and learning for non-traditional learners (Moore et al. 2011), and this is substantiated by student participants who have not travelled conventional journeys into Higher Education, face multiple deprivation, and/or have additional learning needs. Youth Work educators reflected on the opportunities presented by technology for inclusive and accessible practice, supporting reflections reported in previous literature (Mentzer et al. 2023). This also supports the assertion that technology can support education for everybody (Riccobono 2012) and provide a voice for those who may not have one (Seale 2013). The research demonstrates that students value the flexibility and accessibility of HyFlex approaches facilitated by technology. Therefore, the research reveals there is a tension between the challenges and opportunities that technology and HyFlex pedagogy presents.

Despite the challenges outlined above, the data demonstrates that HyFlex learning can lead to students reporting an improvement in their own information technology and digital skills, and thus feeling more confident in delivering Digital Youth Work with young people. This replicates the findings of Gaber et al. (2023) and Nweke et al. (2022) who also reported that students became more digitally fluent after engaging in HyFlex learning experiences. For student Youth Workers and educators, this is particularly important as they tread the ground as pracademics; role modelling and applying learning in the classroom to real life practice (MacDuff & Netting 2010). In this case, HyFlex supported students and **academics** to move through Hollweck et al.'s (2022) model of pracademia; ensuring knowledge mobilisation to respond to systemic challenges, whilst developing community membership to put new digital skills into practice. It is therefore recommended that HyFlex learning opportunities are embedded in the delivery of the Youth Work programme, so that students gain the digital skills required for contemporary Youth Work.

The ability to connect with others through HyFlex learning was also a theme in the data. It is acknowledged that there are multiple COP in Youth Work (Ord 2016; Velure Roholt & Baizerman 2012). This is evidenced in the research findings where HyFlex delivery was able to support and bring together COP of students, academics, and practitioners. Communities of Practice are often cited in the context of professionalisation in Youth Work (McCulloch 2007; Batsleer 2008; Baizerman & Velure Roholt 2016) and studies have shown that they provide meaningful opportunities for learning and putting learning into practice for all those involved (Smith 1995; Davis-Manigaulte 2012). However, this literature only relates to COP that occur face-to-face and research suggests that actively engaging in online COP is essential to

educators, students, institutes, and their local areas (U.S. Department of Education 2014). Innovative technologies can drive significant change in how educators approach learning in the digital age allowing for “communities of practice that turn the rhetoric of collaboration into the reality of personal and collective reflection in which input from peripheral stakeholders such as researchers can more fully inform practice,” (Friesen & Clifford 2003). Although, according to Schlager & Fusco (2003), technologies designed to promote COP are not always accessed by the education community, the urgency of the pandemic seems to have propelled the Youth Work educators in the research project to step into the unknown and develop their own COP in this way. These assertions are evidenced in the research findings as Youth Work educators saw opportunities, future possibilities, and recommendations for using HyFlex delivery to develop COP across the sector.

## Conclusion

Overall, the results demonstrate a positive student perception of HyFlex in terms of their own learning experience and the impact they take from learning into practice. The data demonstrate that students are aware of the developmental process this approach has on their learning over the course of the academic year. Challenges identified by educators and students included time, training, and infrastructure to engage in HyFlex learning. Opportunities included increased accessibility and improved digital skills. This led to new possibilities in feeling part of wider COP, but most importantly student experiences of HyFlex led 46% to feel more able to support young people in a post-Covid 19 digital world. Hence both students and educators have become pracademics; taking their digital learning in the classroom and applying it to Digital Youth Work practice.

This research has identified recommendations for future HyFlex approaches in HEI’s broadly and Youth Work programmes specifically. From a Youth Work perspective this involves ensuring that HyFlex approaches are embedded in Youth Work programmes so that students and academics gain the skills needed to deliver Digital Youth Work. More broadly practical recommendations include ensuring that academics have time to develop their HyFlex approach, as well as understand the technology and pedagogy. Ensuring that the technological infrastructure is in place to provide HyFlex approaches is a further recommendation for all HEIs. Possible limitations of the sample size of this small-scale research is acknowledged, and thus further research with a larger representative sample is recommended. Future research

should further explore the benefits of HyFlex learning for student accessibility and connectivity as part of a wider Communities of Practice across a range of programmes and disciplines, especially for non-traditional learners.

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