Hybrid-Learning Experience of Thai Business Graduate Students at A Private University in Thailand: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Aims. To explore hybrid-learning experiences among Thai graduate students: five master's Degrees and five doctoral Degree students from business school at an international private university in Bangkok, Thailand, and connect it with the literature reviews.

Background. In hybrid course formats, the instructional components of traditional face-to-face classroom settings and online learning environments are combined and taught to students in a single course. An increasing number of educational institutes and universities are adopting hybrid education in order to broaden the range of educational options available to graduate students.

Designs. Qualitative phenomenology research was used in this study.

Methods. Interpersonal interviews were conducted with ten participants: five master's degree students and five doctoral degree students who enrolled in hybrid courses at a business school in an international private university in Bangkok, Thailand.

Results/findings. Based on interview analysis, the results were identified into three themes: flexibility and life management, the relationship between lecturers and students, and lastly, technology and online class activities.

Conclusions: A new challenge for many schools and educational institutes, hybrid education provides students with flexibility, time management, life management, online interaction, and the use of technology. This makes hybrid education an attractive option for students. On the other hand, it presents challenges regarding social contact, the need for technical skills, and the acquisition of learning experience.

Keywords: Hybrid-learning environment, phenomenology, Thai graduate students, hybrid course

INTRODUCTION

Since 2019, there has been a global coronavirus pandemic, and the virus was found in Wuhan, People's Republic of China (Ciotti et al., 2021). It swiftly spread throughout the world, resulting in a financial crisis and a global economic downturn. The emergency health situation of the COVID-19 pandemic has changed people's behavior from offline to online throughout the world to reduce the physical transmission of COVID-19 among people. The closure of universities and schools impacts students' continuing education and studies. Online education is not a new method; emphasis has been paid to schools, colleges, and institutions making the switch to encounter social change and offer more convenience (Adedoyin, 2020). The limited face-to-face teaching opportunities for many educational institutions internationally, e-learning has been significantly developed to address social demand (Dias et al., 2020). Educational institutions have been compelled to change due to the restrictions on physical engagement that have rendered most traditional modalities of instruction, evaluation, research, and scientific discourse ineffective (Byrnes et al., 2021). Many educational institutions' management teams and scholars have raised questions concerning online education's quality, experiences, and preparation.

After the recovery from the pandemic crisis, numerous education institutes and schools continue to use hybrid instruction, which offers both onsite and online environments to provide more convenience and education choices for students who cannot travel to class and students who work regularly. It is very important for instructors to comprehend how to employ a variety of online learning equipment and in-person classroom activities to increase student participation and track student progress to plan and teach hybrid courses. For graduate students who work full-time and part-time, hybrid courses can be a good answer to student demand during the economic slowdown and pandemic situation. Graduate students who have obligations such as employment, family, and house location find hybrid courses appealing (Owston, 2013). Graduate students frequently mention the convenience of flexible scheduling, faculty involvement, feedback, and the combination of in-person and online contacts as reasons for their choice of hybrid courses (Li & Irby, 2008; Morris & Finnegan, 2008).

Hybrid Education

Internet-based education is having an effect on conventional higher education because online components are increasingly being incorporated into courses taught in a traditional classroom setting (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). The purpose of combining traditional classroom instruction with internet-based instruction is to make the most of the strengths inherent in both online and in-person instruction in order to present students with a learning environment that is more conducive to their development as learners than either mode of instruction can be on its own (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003).The online or face-to-face mode of instruction is not superseded by the hybrid delivery method, but rather, it is built upon to produce new and more efficient learning environments (Kok, 2013). The reconceptualization and redesign of a course or program for delivery in a blended setting constitute hybrid learning (Vaughan & Garrison, 2005). There is no single formula for building blended courses; rather, hybrid learning designs vary greatly based on the nature of the course content, the audience or students, the course objectives, the instructor, and the available technology (Benbunan-Fich, 2008). For instance, hybrid simulation enables students to acquire advanced technical and non-technical skills training in a realistic setting (Kjellin et al., 2014).

Instructional components of traditional face-to-face classroom settings, as well as those of online learning environments, are mixed in hybrid course forms.

Hybrid course forms can also be referred to as blended, blended, or blended learning (Tu & Adkins, 2022). Alternately referred to as web-enhanced, combined, or mixed-mode learning, these instructional strategies are becoming increasingly popular (Hall & Villareal, n.d.). The number of hybrid classes available in higher education has increased dramatically quickly due to altering student demographics and expanding initiatives to make courses more accessible to students (Klimova & Kacetl, 2015). Hybrid courses is appealing to a wide variety of students, including those who have a crowded class schedule in addition to juggling a variety of career and family responsibilities at the same time. As colleges strive to attract more diverse student populations in an effort to slow the rate at which the expense of higher education is increasing, it is anticipated that hybrid course formats will continue to gain popularity.

In this study, the researcher will use a phenomenological research approach to investigate hybrid-learning experiences among Thai and international graduate students: Master's Degree and Doctoral Degree students from business school at an international private university in Bangkok, Thailand.

Problem Statement

Many universities and colleges in Thailand have been offering hybrid-learning environments since the recovery of the Covid-19 pandemic situation. The hybrid-learning degree for graduate students has gained more popularity. It is well-suited for people who wish to study without worrying about attending classes, leaving their jobs, family commitments, etc. However, it is still new for some Thai universities to provide hybrid education for graduate students. There is room for Thai higher education institutes to improve their education systems to meet the graduate student demands in the current educational market. Individual graduate learners have different learning styles, study preferences, and attitudes toward hybrid instruction. The results will be the recommendation for scholars, faculty members, and future researchers to develop hybrid education for graduate students that match the student preference.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How is your experience learning business courses via hybrid learning mode?
2. How does a hybrid-learning environment impact your learning experience and relationship with your lecturer and classmates?
3. What challenges do you face while studying a hybrid-learning mode?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To investigate the phenomena of Hybrid-learning experience among Business Master's degree and Doctoral degree students at a private international university in Thailand.
2. To study insightful thoughts of business graduate students toward the hybrid-learning courses.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher chose the "qualitative phenomenological approach" to examine the shared ordinary meaning of graduate students' hybrid-learning experiences because it studies people's natural environment experiences and the fact that they come from both individuals and groups (Creswell, J.W., & Poth, C.N., 2018). Moustakas, C. (1994) stated that phenomenology offers a deep understanding of a phenomenon as many people encounter it. Phenomenological research seeks to understand meaning by fusing the experiences of those research samplings and researchers (Magrini, 2012). Van Manen (1990) said that phenomenology research is an interpretative process of a phenomenon by studying people who share the same or similar experiences (Van Manen, 1990). The phenomenological approach gave the researchers a bigger viewpoint to recognize the deep thoughts of graduate students toward the hybrid-learning courses.

SELECTION OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Purposeful sampling was used in this research to choose graduate students who enrolled in the hybrid course at a business school in an international private university, in Thailand. The hybrid courses were taught in the English language. Alase, A. (2017) suggests that the 5-25 research participants who have encountered the phenomenon are a decent number of phenomenological studies. Creswell, J.W. and Poth, C.N. (2018) stated that 3 to 4 people or 10 to 15 people are suitable research participants for a phenomenon study. Hence, the researcher selected ten graduate students: five master's degree students and five doctoral degree students for this study.

DATA COLLECTION

The researcher conducted interviews with five master's degree students and five doctoral degree students for this phenomenon study. The research assistant recruited research participants who distributed information to potential research participants who were qualified for the research goal. Once the potential samplings returned the consent to join the research, the researcher contacted them to arrange an online interview at their convenient time. The research participants were voluntary, and all personal information was kept confidential. The in-depth interviews were conducted via video conference and the data collection was taken place from October 1 to October 10, 2022. The semi-structured interview was used to allow flexibility and open-ended questions for samplings to express their opinions toward their hybrid-learning experiences. The interview took approximately 30 minutes per research participant, and a digital recorder recorded it. Then, the sound was transcribed into written content, and the researcher coded them into data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this part of the report, the researcher will address some of the study questions by providing some data findings. The findings concerned graduate students' perceptions of their hybrid-learning experiences, and they were examined based on the transcription of interview information and the voice recording. The researcher referred participant by their fictitious names, such as participant master student 1 (PM1) and participant doctoral student 2. (PD2). Three themes were identified, and all research participants were asked to share their hybrid-learning experience. The interview was conducted in Thai language and was later translated into English transcription.

Theme 1: Flexibility and life management

Students who had to balance full-time work and family responsibilities found that the online components of hybrid courses gave them the freedom to set their own pace for the learning process, which was helpful given their hectic schedules.

"Hybrid courses help me to feel the convenience and reduce stress in traveling to classes. Traffic jam in Bangkok is very bad, and it took long time to travel from my workplace to the university. If I finish my work late, I can study online via Zoom platform" (PM1).

"I find business hybrid courses suit my busy life. As I am a store manager, I do not have much time to contribute to my study. However, I want a master's degree in business for my career path. The hybrid business classes save my time in studying and going to class on a weekday." (PM4)

The above explanation makes it clear that graduate students enrolled in hybrid learning courses benefit from increased flexibility in terms of both the convenience of their studies and the amount of time they need to devote to the many other responsibilities they have in their lives. When students are given the option of attending class in person or online, according to their individual preferences, they experience significantly less stress. The most significant benefit of hybrid classes is that they provide a forum that gives students who have various responsibilities the flexibility they need to make the most of their time.

"I have two sons, and I do not really have time for my study and work. Hybrid courses save my time studying, so, I have more time to spend with my family. My workload is already heavy. I have better life management in terms of work and study because I can work faster at home rather than in a physical classroom. However, if I have to study accounting and finance, I will go to physical classes to study with my classmates." (PM3)

"I work as a physician at an international airport in the northern part of Thailand, and I find it difficult for me to study onsite at the university that I want to study. I have a sister who is working in Bangkok. I sometimes take an onsite class in Bangkok when I visit my sister and mostly study online in my hometown. I really enjoy the hybrid courses because it gives me access to the education choices that I wish. It helps me schedule my life after work."(PD2)

According to the above transcription, one of the advantages of hybrid education is that it allows students to choose where they want to do their schoolwork and study based on how convenient it is for them. This is in relation to a study that was conducted by Joel Barker on the advantages of hybrid classes in community colleges. The findings showed that individuals now have the option of completing their coursework from a location that is more convenient to them rather than making numerous visits per week to the institution where they are enrolled (Barker, 2015). The keywords "convenience, flexibility and schedule" can also be referred to as flexibility in education, life balance, and time management.

Theme 2: Technology and Online class activities

A hybrid learning environment that includes both on-campus and online classes has benefited greatly from the incorporation of technology. The course content was frequently presented in online settings, such as lectures using presentation software like PowerPoint and online conferences using Moodle and Zoom. These types of activities were carried out in virtual and

onsite classrooms. However, there are a few obstacles to overcome when utilizing technology and to connect to the Internet.

> *"I prefer studying in the physical class on the main campus because I do not have to face any technical problems. If I have to study via Zoom, I always forget my zoom password to enter online classes, and the new features of zoom give me a headache. The professor requires online and onsite students to attend the online game and quiz during class activities. I always ask for help from my teacher or classmates. If I am at home, life will be hard for me." (PD4)*
> *"I am a senior lecturer at a university in Bangkok. Hybrid education is something new and challenges my abilities. I think it is good for me because I can adapt it to my work. However, I admit that I have technical problems during the hybrid course. It takes time for me to learn a new platform."(PD5)*

It was shown by a response from a doctoral student that the use of technology by students to participate in hybrid classes and engage in online activities with their instructors, such as online quizzes, discussion forums, and games, requires students to have a certain level of technical expertise.

> *"Internet connection is the most important part of my hybrid education. Low internet connectivity really harms my learning experience because the video conference is delayed and slow."(PM5)*
> *"For me, the challenge of hybrid learning is the internet. I cannot study without internet because my teacher often asks students to complete many assignment online"(PM1)*

The above findings of the interview revealed that it is essential for students to have a sufficient Internet package in order to participate in hybrid classes. The student's overall learning experience is negatively impacted by an internet connection that is either poor quality or unstable. Because of this, students may need to make an investment in a high-speed internet package for their education.

> *"As I am using Zoom for my work, I have no issues with the hybrid course. I know how to attend an online meeting, present the work online and discuss group work. However, I find that my professor always has a problem in dealing with technology facilities in online classrooms, causing the delay of instruction and disrupting my concentration." (PD5)*
> *"I have no problem with technology in studying. I feel that hybrid education is not different from a regular classroom as I can send questions to my teacher via email and zoom meetings. During group work, a video conference is an effective tool where my classmates and I can share online class materials and my computer screen."(PM1)*

It is essential for professors teaching at universities apply effective use of technology in the dissemination of information to their students and in the enhancement of classroom participation by students who are physically present in the classroom as well as students who are taking part in an online conference. Students are expected to have a fundamental understanding of technology in order to participate in hybrid classes and make effective use of technology when completing online assignments and in-class activities. It appears that students who are comfortable utilizing various technology forms tend to enjoy hybrid education.

Theme 3: Relationship between lecturers and students

During in-person class sessions, the graduate students emphasized the significance of active participation and the availability of opportunities to engage in conversation with both the instructor and their fellow classmates. Students who like to learn through personal contacts benefited greatly from in-person classes. One master's degree student said,

"I need to spend time with my classmates and teacher to feel the classroom and education. Face-to-face communication between my teacher and me impacts my deep understanding of what I am studying. I am close to my classmate in class rather than online classmates." (PM3)
"I do not have any friends in the hybrid education environment. Before enrollment, I hope to meet more people from various backgrounds and I can expand my social network. But it is different from what I hope."(PM4)

According to the findings of the analysis of the interviews, one of the problems that has been highlighted is that some students may despise hybrid education since they prefer having face-to-face interaction with their lecturers and classmates. Being related with online teaching is the limited opportunity for students and instructors to engage with one another (ASLAN EFE et al., 2022). Online student-teacher interactions are considered to be inauthentic and lack the spontaneity that in-person teaching provides (Niemi & Kousa, 2020).

"I feel the high space between me and my classmates. Mostly, I study via Zoom only, and I do not have much chance to know my classmates after classes. It is good for my time management, and introvert person like me."(PD5)

The student demand for individualization in learning and lifestyle, as well as improved relationship management, can be met through hybrid educational models. According to the transcription, a doctoral student (PD5) expressed satisfaction with the decision to study online rather than attend onsite classes. It enlightened us to the fact that learners have a variety of learning styles, and that it is a significant challenge for lecturers and educational institutions to strike a balance between these styles in order to achieve hybrid education's desired outcomes.

"I think interesting online activities and lecture's teaching methods can increase the positive relationship between students and lecturers. As my teacher often ask students to join group discussion and group assignment by random selection, I get to know more classmates during group work." (PD2)

The level of student satisfaction and learning may be affected by the amount of debate and activities that occurs inside online classes. The quality and success of the hybrid course content that takes place within an online course is directly related to the overall success of the course (Maddix, 2012). One possible impetus to construct a positive reputation between students and teachers is the provision of fascinating education and online activities. This might be interpreted as a further challenge for lecturers, who are tasked with enhancing their instructional practices in order to create a pleasant and engaging hybrid learning environment for their students.

RESEARCH LIMITATION

The location of the study, the criteria for sampling, and the size of the sample were all factors that contributed to the study's limitations. All of the participants enrolled in the same university in Thailand and the hybrid courses were taught in English. The interview was conducted in

Thai and then later translated into English transcription. The age range of the students started from 22 to 63 years old, the different age ranges was a research limitation. The online interview took place, and it was difficult to observe the physical action of research participants while interviewing. Time limitation was an issue in data collection.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The most recent study discovered that hybrid education needs to be engaging and motivating and should also enable researchers to understand the subject matter. When there was a combination of the qualities of online tools and face-to-face contact, students felt as though they had the support of their teachers in addition to the convenience of being able to work at their own time. This was made possible by the fact that they could work on their own schedule and time. The author conducted interviews as part of a study using a qualitative phenomenological methodology to gain a comprehensive understanding of hybrid-learning experiences among Thai graduate students. This includes students pursuing master's degrees as well as doctoral degrees.

The transcription was analyzed and coded into three categories: relationships between lecturers and students, technology and online class activities, and flexibility and life management. In order to enroll in a hybrid education program, students need to have at least the most fundamental technical skills, and instructors need to be proficient in the use of technology to deliver interesting classes, create effective in-class and online class engagement, and deal with students who come from learning preferences in the most efficient manner possible.

It is necessary for schools and higher education institutes to adopt new technologies and innovations in the era of digital business in order to improve the quality of instruction and expand their education choices in order to survive the disruption that will be caused by technology. A rise in demand for blended education may result from the development of additional technological features and the training of educational professionals in the delivery of information. Due to increased student demand, an increasing number of educational establishments are now offering an increased number of hybrid courses. These courses give students the flexibility to study wherever it is most convenient for them. Research on the hybrid-learning experiences of students in other educational fields, areas, and levels of education, such as undergraduate degree students, can be conducted in the future.

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