

I-Flex: A New Teaching Modality for Post-Pandemic Recovery

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If there is one thing the pandemic has taught us, it is that in-person learning is not the only way to “do” school. During the past year, most districts have experimented with fully Virtual Learning modalities, as well as Hybrid Learning, and some college campuses have also perfected the Hyflex model. Moving into post-COVID recovery, I-Flex presents a new modality that may allow K-12 school districts and charter management organizations to make the most of the new technological skills mastered by teachers and students during the pandemic while increasing the amount of time available for intervention for students who need to make up missed learning.

I-Flex joins four other modalities that may continue to play an important role in the post-pandemic climate:

Blended Learning – Blended Learning represents the most in-person of the five modalities. In a Blended Learning model, students attend school in-person full time, and classes have blended (online) elements. For example, a course may have a Google Classroom, Schoology, Canvas page, or other online repository where teachers can post handouts, videos, and resources; where they can assign work and provide feedback to students; and where students can submit assignments. This online repository is seamlessly integrated with the in-person class, and it allows teachers to conduct their classes using a [flipped classroom approach](#) if desired.

A Blended Learning model allows for easy transition to a virtual learning day as needed. Students may use the online portion of the class to access assignments or even synchronous instruction via Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or another video classroom tool on inclement weather days. In addition, students may access a virtual class from within the school building if their teacher is ill and teaching from home or if the student is enrolled in a course at another school or community college.

The Blended Learning modality allows educators to maximize in-person schooling while integrating the best of the technology-enhanced teaching and learning strategies mastered during the pandemic.

Modalities in Brief

Blended Learning – Students attend school in person full time, and classes have online elements.

Virtual Learning - Students attend school virtually full time, and teachers teach virtually.

Hybrid Learning - Students are assigned to attend school in person on certain days per week and virtually on other days per week. Sometimes all students follow the same schedule, and sometimes different cohorts of students follow a different schedule.

Hyflex (Hybrid Flexible) Learning - Students may choose to attend virtually or in person on any given day, based on health requirements, preference, or content being covered in class. Both in-person and virtual classes occur every time the class meets.

I-Flex (Intervention Flexible) Learning - All students attend school in person for 3-4 days per week. The other 1-2 days are intervention days, during which flexible groups of students attend school in person for small group tutoring and other intervention services, and other students work from home in a virtual asynchronous format and are able to meet with teachers during virtual office hours. I-Flex allows teachers to teach grade-level content to all students, rather than holding students back who missed learning during COVID-19.

Virtual Learning – In a recent [RAND survey](#), two in ten districts claimed they have already adopted, plan to adopt, or are considering adopting virtual school as part of their district portfolio after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual Learning options will be important to accommodate families who wish to keep their children home until they are able to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19. In a Virtual Learning model, students attend school virtually full time, and teachers teach virtually as well. During pandemic-related school shut-downs, [a subset of students thrived](#) in the virtual setting. These include students who were previously “distracted, bored, or anxious” in school (Gilman, 2020). Virtual Learning is particularly well-suited for students who are technologically capable, field-independent learners who are motivated to succeed.

Hybrid Learning – In a Hybrid Learning model, students are assigned to attend school in person on certain days per week and to attend virtually on other days per week. Sometimes all students will follow the same schedule, and sometimes different cohorts of students will follow a different schedule. For example, a district might divide students into Cohort A and Cohort B. Cohort A attends school in person on Monday and Tuesday and attends virtually on Wednesday through Friday. Cohort B attends virtually on Monday through Wednesday and in person on Thursday and Friday. Using this format or variations of it, teachers either teach both groups of students simultaneously (in which case, learning activities represent a mix between those optimized for in-person learning and those most suited for virtual learning), or there are separate teachers for the virtual and in-person groups.

Another way to implement Hybrid Learning is to assign all students the same schedule. In this scenario, the teacher teaches in the same modality as the students. In K-12 settings, one or more days per week may be set aside for virtual learning. In college, the hybrid schedule usually varies by class session rather than day of the week, allowing the instructor to select the modality that is most appropriate for the planned learning activity (see the discussion of Modality Matching below). For example, the professor may choose to meet with the class in person for the first 2-3 weeks of class and then only on lab days for the rest of the semester.

Hybrid Learning may be desirable in K-12 settings to reduce the number of students in the building at a single time, to double the number of students able to be served by one physical schoolhouse, or to save a district money on transportation and operations.

Hyflex (Hybrid Flexible) Learning – In a Hyflex Learning model, students can choose to attend virtually or in person on any given day, based on health requirements, preference, or content being covered in class. Both in-person and virtual classes occur every time the class meets. This option is most often used at the college level, where transportation is not a barrier.

Sophisticated Hyflex Learning models provide each lesson optimized for two different modalities. For example, the online option may include a video of a mini lecture followed by a discussion board assignment where students record and post themselves speaking about the course content and then respond to one another’s postings. The in-class option may include a mini-lecture and then a whole class discussion.

Alternatively, Hyflex Learning can be implemented by allowing virtual and in-person students to participate in the same lesson via Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, or Zoom. In this case, lesson design will represent a compromise: some of the learning activities used will be best suited for virtual learners and some will be optimized for in-person learners.

I-Flex (Intervention Flexible) Learning – I-Flex is a model designed to meet the requirements of COVID-19 recovery. In the I-Flex model, all students attend school in person for 3-4 days per week. During this time, a Blended Learning model is practiced so that the learning management system (LMS) is seamlessly integrated into the classroom environment.

The other 1-2 days per week are considered intervention days. On intervention days, some students who have been selected for intervention attend in person. The intervention groups are flexible and can be reconfigured at intervals (e.g., monthly, by quarter), so that the students who need the most assistance with the current course content are provided intervention support. During intervention days, teachers provide instructional intervention, backfill missing content, and provide tutoring to students in the in-person intervention group.

While teachers are meeting with intervention groups, the students who are not selected for intervention log on to their LMS from home and work asynchronously on classwork and other projects, watch classroom videos, and engage in enrichment activities. They also have the option of meeting with teachers during virtual office hours to ask questions and/or receive assistance.

This model allows students who need five days of in-person learning to receive it, while allowing more independent learners flexible time to complete their work and pursue other passion projects. At the high school level, intervention days may be used to free up time for more advanced students to engage in dual enrollment courses at the local community college.

Importantly, I-Flex allows teachers to teach grade-level content to all students, rather than holding students back who missed learning during COVID-19. I-Flex requires curriculum supervisors to identify *essential* and *enrichment* standards and objectives for each course. *Essential* standards and objectives are taught to all students on in-person days and reinforced for intervention students on intervention days, and *enrichment* standards and objectives form the content that virtual students learn on intervention days.

Choosing the Right Modality

Virtual vs. In-Person

On a continuum from mostly virtual to mostly in person, the five modalities are positioned as follows:



Key: Blended (B), Virtual (V), Hybrid (H), Hyflex (HF), I-Flex (IF)

When considering which modality is best for the population of students being served, it is important to understand that there are groups of students who are likely to benefit from more in-person learning, including:

- Those who lack reliable Internet
- Those who lack devices/webcams or who are technologically averse
- English language learners
- Students with disabilities

- Young children
- Affective learners/those who seek social interaction

In addition, certain content is more effectively taught in person, including:

- Vocational programs
- Science labs
- The performing arts

As stated previously, virtual learning is preferred by students who are distracted, bored, or anxious during in-person schooling. In addition, during certain environmental conditions, virtual learning is preferred. These conditions include:

- Outbreaks of contagious disease
- Inclement weather
- Political or social turmoil

Modality Match

Due to their flexibility, some of the modalities allow for a “match” (i.e., optimization) of learning modality with classroom activities. On a continuum from Consistent to Flexible, the five models allow for modality matching as follows:



Key: Blended (B), Virtual (V), Hybrid (H), Hyflex (HF), I-Flex (IF)

As an example of modality matching, the following learning activities may be best suited for the identified context. Flexible modalities allow students to engage in each learning activity in its preferred modality:

Asynchronous off-line work – reading, independent work

Asynchronous online work – recorded lectures, videos, recordings of teacher modeling or teacher think alouds, discussion boards, virtual labs, screencast demonstrations, group editing of shared documents, video recordings of student presentations, online learning modules/games

Synchronous online work – chats, brainstorming, polls, quiz games, real-time Q&A, one-to-one tutoring or interventions, office hours

In Person – labs, performances, student sharing, informal relationship building, team building, class discussions, group work, debates, role plays, stations, one-to-one or small group tutoring or interventions, office hours

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