

Flexible Conversations: One Writing Program's Experience Implementing Flipped, Hybrid First-Year Writing Courses

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There are multiple approaches to hybrid instruction, and in the post emergency remote teaching educational landscape, many institutions are reconsidering how to best meet the evolving needs of students who request more flexibility in their educational process. University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMass) is no exception. UMass has developed a program, called UMass Flex, which was established to allow individual programs and departments to implement flexible instructional models that best suit the needs of their students, often called a hy-flex model and encouraged through a grant program for early adopter departments. The Writing Program (WP) Flex Fellows Grant and pilot courses ended at the close of the spring 2023 semester, and this roundtable shares experiences from three perspectives: Co-creators of the flex learning program for the WP, Dr. Aaron Tillman (full time lecturer) and Dr. Elkie Burnside (Writing Program Administrator); as well as graduate teaching associate instructor Nicole O'Connell, one of four participants in the training and pilot cohort.

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discussions of approaches, practices, and lessons learned from each coauthor: Dr. Elkie Burnside (Writing Program Associate Director), Dr. Aaron Tillman (full time Writing Program Lecturer), and instructor Nicole O'Connell (Graduate Teaching Associate). The authors have compiled advice, activities, and other artifacts from their experiences in the publicly-available Google Drive shared resource folder.

College Writing and Flex Fellows Grant

At [University of Massachusetts Amherst](#) (UMass), the [Writing Program](#) (WP) is an independent academic unit that is responsible for teaching and supporting all [College Writing classes \(ENGLWRIT 112/112H\)](#) and [Writing, Identity, & Power classes \(ENGLWRIT 111\)](#), which provides intensive reading and writing preparation for opt-in students before they take ENGLWRIT 112. Both of these courses have an enrollment cap of 15 students. Because the WP serves the entire campus—encompassing all students required to take these General Education classes—we understand the importance of providing quality instruction that is flexible enough to meet the diverse needs and varied circumstances of our students.

When the opportunity to create a proposal for the Flex Learning Fellows (Flex Fellows) internal grant project was presented through the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), we secured a grant which would allow the WP to offer 112 courses using a flipped/hybrid schedule. In the proposed model, student participants would attend one synchronous class session a week (either in person or virtually) and then work on asynchronous course projects in a self-paced model to complete course requirements. The goal of the two-year grant was to enable the WP to acquire and deploy the technology, training, and staffing necessary to increase student access to flexible learning courses and to provide an infrastructure that would help to sustain these options beyond the grant term.

Application Development Overview

The Flex Fellows Grant was offered in a university-wide grant call and administered by CTL. The information we provided for the grant was largely prescribed by the request for proposals (see [shared resources folder](#) for the final grant application). The details considered during this process were as follows:

- Who would be the departmental experts to develop and then train others on the flex teaching method developed (IF the program decided to continue with the program)?

- What course(s) could be offered in whatever format the program selected to pilot?
- How would this instructional approach align with goals for the program and larger university?
- What goals, objectives, and sustainability markers would the program use to monitor progress and success of the project?
- What technology (hardware) would fit with existing program resources to support this teaching style?
- How will participants be compensated for time and effort at developing and delivering courses in this method?

Budget considerations were developed in consultation with the CTL's designated budgetary advisor and the WP's general office manager to help address UMass Amherst specific limitations. For example, compensation for pilot participation had to meet minimum hourly stipend requirements enforced by the graduate labor union on campus.

Comparing the original grant application with the final technology used will demonstrate how the shape of the project and concept of what flex learning would be like for the WP's UMass Flex course offerings changed through the implementation and piloting stages. In particular we shifted from a significant investment in stationary, classroom based hardware (cameras and microphones) to more mobile teaching kits as a way to increase the amount of sections offered in this style. This approach was selected because classroom scheduling is often not something controlled at the program level, but mobile kits could allow instructors to customize teaching to whatever classroom spaces they were assigned. Another significant change was in the use of personnel compensation. Two pilot instructor participants withdrew from the program after our initial training meeting because the program did not appeal to them after they understood the structure more specifically. This allowed an increase in all pilot participant stipends, as well as providing for participation in the Computers and Writing conference.

Implementation and Piloting

Once the grant was awarded, in the implementation phase Elkie and Aaron participated in bi-weekly seminars with our flexible learning cohort, which included faculty teams from a range of disciplines across the university and led by participants from both the CTL and Instructional Design, Engagement, and Support (IDEAS) teams. In these sessions we focused on multimodal communication and accessible hybrid engagement. We also explored ways to create a diverse set of activities using Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

concepts—such as considering ways to make materials available in multiple formats, provide options for student responses, and encourage a range of perspectives—all while preparing for the flexible learning classes we went on to pilot in the spring 2022 semester (three sections total). In the piloting phase of the grant, four additional instructors (one full time lecturer, one part time lecturer, and two graduate instructors) were trained in flipped, hybrid writing instruction and then all participants used flex 112 course delivery in the spring 2023 semester (nine sections total).

Elkie Burnside, Writing Program Administrator, Design and Training

As Associate Director of Curriculum & Assessment, I co-developed the WP Flex Program with Aaron. After securing the grant, we met with the [2021-2022 Flex Learning Fellows cohort](#) (an interdisciplinary, cross campus group of fellows) through the fall 2021 semester to discuss strategies for designing flex courses and sharing strategies used by instructors in the grant cohort. Then, Aaron and I both piloted flex courses in the spring 2022 semester and met regularly to discuss how our courses were progressing. During the fall 2022 semester, I coordinated the WP Flex Pilot bi-weekly training with the four instructors participating in the program and continued with monthly check-ins to gather feedback on the training, while continuing to teach one flex 112 course each semester as well.

Flex and Tech Approach

We were tasked with selecting and defining the Writing Program's flex approach while working with the Flex Learning Fellows cohort guided by members of the CTL and the IDEAS teams. Drawing on the best practices established in the [Online Writing Instruction \(OWI\) Community](#) and other areas of expertise in designing and delivering online instruction, we decided to use a hybrid, flipped classroom approach. This approach was selected because we were able to provide instructors with three options to choose from when delivering the course and within these options allow students to select some of their participation and engagement methods as well.

The flipped classroom aspect is explained to instructor participants as providing materials and content for students to interact with to prepare for class sessions prior to attending class so that students can practice the skills needed in workshop style in-class sessions (TeachThought Staff, 2014).

The hybrid classroom aspect is explained to instructor participants as giving students the option to participate in class sessions as they choose after

week three of the semester (the end of the Add/Drop period at UMass). Details of these options are provided in the Hybrid Models document found in the [shared resources folder](#).

As part of the proposal process, we were also tasked with considering what technology options would suit the needs of the WP, which is primarily delivered by non-tenure track faculty, part time lecturers, and graduate teaching associates. For physical spaces, we have two classrooms scheduled by WP that are well-suited for flexible learning classes. These have two large screens, a workstation with a classroom computer and audio system, a locked box with four laptops for any student who might not have access to a portable device, and a central area that allows for some flexibility in the physical space. Future plans include modifying the physical space even more to bring in mobile/portable tables that can be separated for small pods/groups or combined for larger class discussions. However, scheduling in these classrooms is limited due to other program constraints (use for other courses, sharing with other instructional departments, etc.).

Another resource we also have is university wide Zoom accounts, which allow us to hold classes and record videos for sharing with asynchronous participants.

Ultimately, with grant funds, we purchased two [OWL meeting cameras](#) and nine remote teaching kits which include Bluetooth speakers, a web camera and stand, and a USB hub connector, all of which is contained in a portable box and labeled requesting return to the WP if found. This allows instructors to teach flex courses in a variety of classroom spaces, even those not optimally designed for this method. See the [shared resources folder](#) for details on each kit item and the process for check-out and use of each type of hybrid kit option.

Sustaining Flex Practices

Part of the grant process was to compensate early adopters and participants as they worked through developing a new instructional approach and course content. Aaron and I were paid a development stipend in year one of the grant and an on-going pilot training stipend to help other pilot participants in year two of the grant. Four WP instructors elected to participate in the pilot and each was paid a stipend for completing the training in the fall semester and giving feedback during monthly check-ins in the spring semester. See the [shared resources folder](#) for details on the stipends, training, and feedback meetings.

In collaboration with pilot participants, we are still currently considering options for how to continue to encourage participation in this teaching method when the grant funds are gone. The IDEAS staff provide a self-paced

Introduction to Teaching Online at UMass course, which we used as the basis for the WP Flex Instructor training. From that I have developed WP course content specific strategies and policies to use as instructors consider how they will change their current 112 instructional approach. See the [shared resources folder](#) for details on the training course.

Currently we are providing this training as a self-paced option for instructors to use as optional professional development. There are some early discussions about ways to incorporate the training as a part of the existing practicum structure used for second year instructors, but the WP administrative team is still exploring what the best way to encourage participation would be. We believe this training has not only added resources and further developed an infrastructure that can be used moving forward, but it has provided opportunities for other WP instructors to learn about and receive support to teach flexible classes, all helping to sustain flex practices.

On the university level, the initial Flexible Learning Fellowship group that Aaron and I were part of has continued, so more instructors across the campus are using flexible learning practices. The more this happens, the greater the incentive for the university to invest in classrooms that are equipped/suited to accommodate flexible learning.

Lessons Learned

Developing this approach for use in the WP 112 classroom (with potential bridges into other courses supported by the WP) provided several opportunities for learning along the way. Most specifically the structure and training allowed instructor participants to consider how this hybrid, flipped instructional model promotes student access and equity at a programmatic level. Pilot instructor training feedback sessions focused on what is going well and the trend in these conversations showed how instructors were considering a wider variety of options for student engagement and access to content. For example, instructors noted the ability to check in with students more one-on-one in this style of instruction; but also noted that the level of management and planning was significantly higher for these courses to provide that access.

Another lesson gleaned from the pilot feedback sessions followed the trend of the level of planning needed for instructors to provide for hybrid engagement with students. Some comments focused on the commitment teachers would need to make to become familiar with the classroom set up (which for most instructors will change each semester). Other feedback from the pilot group also noted the need for more scenario-based training and preparation to help address student connection access, to understand what students are doing to prepare for class sessions, and ways to incorporate Zoom and

physical classroom synchronous participants in workshop and peer review activities. See the [shared resources folder](#) for details on ways this feedback and that from student perception surveys have been incorporated into self-paced instructor training.

Aaron Tillman, Full Time Lecturer, Flexible Thursdays

In the fall of 2019, I joined the UMass Writing Program as a full-time lecturer. I had some experience with online and hybrid teaching, and I wanted to broaden that part of my pedagogical practice. I joined the Multimodal Community of Practice—a partnership between CTL and the Department of Online Education—to share ideas about multimodal course design and explore ways to expand learning opportunities for students. Although the pandemic impeded our work, our discussions and community resources provided a foundation for the curricular changes made during the pandemic year of online instruction and led to my collaboration with Elkie on our Flexible Learning Fellowship. Since spring 2022, I have taught two flex sections of 112 every semester.

Flex and Tech Approach

After brainstorming various ways to implement hybrid teaching methods into my flex sections of 112, I settled on a “Flexible Thursday” option that has worked well—see our [shared resources folder](#) for my syllabus and course outline details (as well as the other resources noted below). By meeting one day a week in the physical classroom (Tuesday) and providing options for the other day (Thursday), I have been able to establish and maintain class community (one of my concerns going into this process) and provide flexibility and choice for my students.

As noted on my course calendar, “Flexible Thursday” classes begin after the Add/Drop period, and students choose whether they want to participate synchronously in-person, synchronously over Zoom, or asynchronously using our Learning Management System (Moodle). After three semesters and six flex sections, I’ve found that most students opt for in-person or asynchronous participation (about an even split), with a few students choosing to participate via Zoom.

With the exception of Peer Review days when I ask students to rank participation preferences in advance, students do not have to tell me prior to class how they plan to participate. I run through the roster at the beginning of class, and those not in the room or on Zoom are expected to complete the asynchronous work for that day: labor-based assignments that are factored into their “Writing Community Participation” (WCP) grade. Once again, the

only exception is for Peer Review, which is a labor-based grade that not only counts for WCP but comprises 30% of the grade for each Unit assignment.

For my Flexible Thursday classes, I use a classroom desktop as well as my laptop. This enables me to project a shared screen in the classroom and on Zoom, while keeping the Zoom participants and the Zoom chat in sight on the other screen. I also use our remote teaching kit, placing the audio device in the middle of the room and plugging the camera into the classroom desktop. The Zoom view for my classroom computer shows everyone in the physical classroom; Zoom's gallery view shows each student zooming in, as well as a box with the students in the room.

Prior to all Flexible Thursday classes, I use the Checklist feature on Moodle to post a list of activities that we'll be completing during our class meeting; those participating asynchronously must complete the activities/assignments before the end of the day (by 11:59 pm). Prior to *most* Flexible Thursday classes, I record a video on Zoom and post it to our Moodle site. These videos provide class overviews, share learning goals, introduce key ideas/concepts, and set up the activities for that day's class. Although the videos are required viewing for asynchronous participants, they live on our LMS and serve as resources for anyone who wants to review course content. Along with my video, there are often links to outside videos or readings with discussion questions. Those participating asynchronously submit their responses in a forum; students participating synchronously engage in small group and full class discussions and are not required to post to asynchronous discussion forums.

Sustaining Flex Practices

From an instructor/teaching standpoint, sustaining flexible learning practices makes good pedagogical sense and is consistent with WP philosophy. Because every student learns and communicates differently, we want to make our materials as accessible as possible—posting documents, links, and essential course content in multiple formats and locations—and provide student choice to encourage thoughtful responses and elicit a diversity of perspectives. The more flexible we can be with our teaching practices/approaches, the richer the class experience.

With a diverse, flexible, and accessible class experience in mind, it's important to provide opportunities for student input through surveys, forum reflections, and conferencing. Providing safe spaces to elicit student responses allows instructors to become aware of and work to implement the practices that best suit our students. That flexibility, and the willingness to modify and adjust our practices, all help to enhance the learning experience. It's also important to make flexible learning part of the conversation on a program level. Encouraging

faculty, administrators, and graduate student instructors to stay aware of new approaches, share resources and effective practices, and discuss strategies that are effective for our students all help to sustain flexible learning practices.

Lessons Learned

As much as possible, we should work to develop connections that bridge on-campus and online interactions between and among students. For synchronous groups, I've found that mixing in-person and Zoom groups works well and helps broaden participation. Initially, when creating small discussion groups, I put in-person participants with other in-person participants and Zoom participants with others on Zoom. This can work, but I found that the Zoom participants felt less engaged, and it was easy to overlook those on screen when students in the classroom were volunteering. However, when groups have participants in the physical classroom and on Zoom, it's easier to get participation across platforms since students will reference and advocate for their group mates. It's also beneficial to ask or nominate students to help monitor the Zoom chat and note any efforts by Zoom participants to contribute. Instructors have a lot to think about, and it's not uncommon to lose sight of the students on screen. Students are willing and even excited to help out (see [shared resources folder](#) for suggestions)!

Ultimately, we've found that students value and appreciate flexibility and choice, and they are largely receptive to and comfortable with (what some might consider) "non-traditional" methods of learning, community-building, and engagement.

Nicole O'Connell, Graduate Instructor, Flex Assigned Groups

As a graduate student, I joined the Flex pilot program in fall 2022 for training and taught my first Flex class in spring 2023. I applied to the Flex program because of the valuable professional development it offered for graduate students. I was especially interested in the ways that a hybrid class could provide a more accessible classroom experience for students, and I was also intrigued about learning new technology.

Flex and Tech Approach

In the fall semester training, the pilot cohort, along with Elkie and Aaron, discussed approaches to "flexing" the course, including ways of designing the hybrid aspects. I decided to use the hybrid/flex groups approach for my

own class. My class met twice a week; the first day was always in-person, and the second day was the designated “flex” day. The class was split into two flex groups which, on alternating flex days, met with me for one-on-one conferences. Alongside these conferences, students would also complete a class activity on flex days; see the [shared resources folder](#) for examples. When a flex group was scheduled for conferences, they could attend in-person or synchronously online. When a flex group was not scheduled for conferences, they could attend in-person, synchronously online, or complete the activity work asynchronously online. Since I always included the in-class information in detail on our course LMS, students felt confident that they would not miss out by attending in various ways.

Sustaining Flex Practices

I will not be teaching in the WP next semester, though I will still work in the WP as a graduate assistant director of technology. In this role, I hope to support new instructors in the Flex program while they learn about teaching in this format and the different points of flexibility they have available to them.

One point of concern about the Flex program's sustainability in the WP that often arose in the pilot training was the question of extra labor. In orientation and continuing professional development within the WP, the focus is on fully in-person learning. Instructors teaching a Flex class must put in extra time and labor in order to plan and teach a Flex class. Instructors in the pilot training received stipends, but with the grant running out, we questioned: would instructors agree to go through Flex training and teach a Flex class if they were not receiving compensation for the increased labor? I believe that going through the training and teaching a hybrid class is a valuable experience for graduate students, but I am also aware of the labor disparities graduate students often face (Osorio et al., 2021; Wright, 2017). UMass has a strong graduate union, and the WP must work towards avoiding violation of union regulations as well as striving to create equitable working conditions for graduate student instructors. Because of the positive student response to the flex courses and the added accessibility flex courses bring, flex courses are certainly something the WP should continue offering, but questions still remain over what the flex course training and teaching will look like for graduate students.

Lessons Learned

Due to the pilot training, I felt confident that I had everything well planned beforehand. I had the flex day activities figured out, students understood their

options of attending, I knew how to use the Owl camera technology, and my students and I even spent a class period discussing hybrid interactions in the classroom (see [shared resources folder](#)).

However, my flex days did not turn out as expected. On weeks when Flex Group 1 was scheduled for conferences, Flex Group 1 students always all came in person, and everyone from Flex Group 2 attended asynchronously. Thus, since no one ever came synchronously online for Flex Group 1 days, I did not have to use the webcam setup.

On weeks when Flex Group 2 was scheduled, everyone in Flex Group 1 attended asynchronously and Flex Group 2 attended almost all online with only one or two students at most physically coming into class. Again, I ended up not using the webcam setup as the occasional one or two students in class felt awkward being the only ones on camera.

The consistency of the flex groups was convenient and made it easier to plan for future flex days, but it felt strange that students in Flex Group 1 had lively in-class collaboration on their scheduled flex days—these days felt like any other non-flex class—while Flex Group 2 mostly stayed quiet on their scheduled flex days, whether synchronously online or in the classroom. I felt that the two groups were getting very different experiences from the course and different understandings of what a flex class could be.

Yet, despite these differences, students of both groups overwhelmingly favored the flex format. Students appreciated having options of attending class, and the synchronous online and asynchronous options were especially helpful to students who were traveling, had family emergencies, had anxiety which made it difficult for them to come to class in person, or just wanted to be outside on a warm spring day.

While the flexible options in attending class are perhaps the most noticeable points of flex of these courses, the additional ways the class flexed also helped students engage and gain control over their learning. For example, students were often able to choose:

- The topics, formats, and audiences of their projects.
- Discussion points during the one-on-one conferences.
- Ways in which they would increase accessibility in their multimodal projects.
- As a class, due dates for peer reviews.

Providing options allowed students to make choices that would be most accessible and beneficial to them. Furthermore, and because some students prefer more structure, the one-on-one conferences helped ensure students stayed on track and were making choices that would lead to their success in the course.

Conclusion: Reflections and Opportunities

Reflecting on the conversations and experiences we've shared—from our initial fellowship proposal to our ongoing teaching practices—we remain committed to the original goal of trying to meet the evolving needs of students who have asked for and benefited from more flexibility in their educational processes. As we have shown, there is not one singular way to implement flipped, hybrid instruction in writing or other academic classes. We hope the differences in approach we've described, as well as the benefits and challenges we've experienced, provide opportunities for valuable reflection; additionally, we hope the commonalities in our pedagogical techniques and the resources that have enabled us to offer flex courses for College Writing students at UMass can aid efforts to implement similar strategies at other institutions. We are grateful for and have benefited from the fellowship grant we received and the dedicated classroom spaces we have that are conducive for hybrid and hyflex instruction; however, we hope the strategies outlined and the technology displayed in our [shared resources folder](#) show that running effective hyflex courses does not require extensive resources beyond a campus LMS and video conferencing option; with nominal institutional investment, remote teaching kits can enhance and expand the experience.

The more instructors begin to implement flexible learning practices—reviewing and applying a wider range of options for engagement, access, and equity—the more students benefit and the greater the incentive for institutions to invest in the resources necessary to accommodate flexible learning. From surveys, discussions, and experiences, one conclusion remains clear: students value and appreciate flexibility and choice, and they are largely receptive to and comfortable with flexible methods of learning, community-building, and engagement.

Shared Resources

Teaching and training resources for flex learning can be found in our publicly available [shared resources folder](#).

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