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Flexibility and Presence in HyFlex Learning: Adult Learners' Experiences in Korean Continuing Higher Education

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This qualitative case study explores adult learners' experiences of HyFlex learning in Korean continuing higher education, focusing on how flexibility and learning experiences vary across participation modes. In-depth interviews were conducted with nine adult learners enrolled in HyFlex courses at a Korean university. Thematic analysis was conducted inductively, and the resulting themes were subsequently interpreted using the Community of Inquiry framework as an interpretive lens. Four themes were identified: participation choices under practical constraints, interaction experiences across modes, perceived advantages and limitations, and suggestions for improvement. Adult learners selected participation modes in response to work, family, health, and commuting constraints rather than preference alone. Online and recorded participation supported learning continuity, whereas face-to-face participation provided richer opportunities for instructor interaction, peer connection, and meaning-making. Opportunities for teaching, social, and cognitive presence differed across participation modes. The findings suggest that effective HyFlex implementation for adult learners requires not only flexible access but also pedagogical and institutional support that promotes meaningful participation across modes.

Key words: HyFlex learning, Adult learners, Community of Inquiry, Flexible learning, Educational presence, Higher education

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Ⅰ. Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions have accelerated the adoption of online, hybrid, blended, and flexible teaching and learning models. Among these, HyFlex (Hybrid-Flexible) learning has received growing attention as an instructional model that enables students to participate beyond temporal and spatial constraints. HyFlex courses allow students to choose, on a session-by-session basis, whether to participate face-to-face, synchronously online, or asynchronously through recorded lectures (Beatty, 2019). Recent systematic and scoping reviews indicate that HyFlex research in higher education has expanded rapidly, addressing student engagement, learning outcomes, satisfaction, instructional design, instructor workload, and technological support (Barr & Luo, 2026; Cumming et al., 2024; Mahmud et al., 2026).

HyFlex is not merely a technological arrangement for broadcasting or recording face-to-face classes. Rather, it is a pedagogical model that combines learner choice with the provision of meaningful learning opportunities across participation modes (Beatty, 2019). Previous studies have reported that when appropriately designed, HyFlex supports learner autonomy, satisfaction, and continued participation, while yielding engagement and learning outcomes comparable to traditional face-to-face instruction (Mahmud et al., 2026; Müller & Mildenberger, 2021; Müller et al., 2023). For adult or part-time learners balancing work, family responsibilities, and academic study, such flexibility may be especially important for sustaining participation in higher education (Stone, 2022; Xavier & Meneses, 2021).

However, HyFlex learning does not always produce equitable or positive experiences. Studies have identified challenges such as increased instructor workload, technological difficulties, feelings of exclusion among online participants, interactional gaps across participation modes, weakened social presence, and concerns about assessment fairness (Cumming et al., 2024; Dawkins, 2022; Detyna et al., 2023; Razali & Tasir, 2025). Thus, although HyFlex expands access and choice, it does not automatically guarantee comparable, high-quality learning experiences. The central tension in HyFlex learning lies between flexibility and the quality of learners' educational experience: the same structure that enables choice may also produce unequal experiences of interaction, belonging, and engagement.

To examine this tension, the present study draws on the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework which conceptualises meaningful educational experiences in terms of teaching, social, and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2000). In HyFlex environments, where multiple participation modes coexist, the framework offers a way to consider how learners experience instructional support, relational connection, and opportunities for meaning-making across modes.

Despite the growth of HyFlex research, several gaps remain. First, much existing research has focused on broad undergraduate students or specific course contexts, often emphasising satisfaction, engagement, or learning outcomes (Barr & Luo, 2026; Mahmud et al., 2026). Second, many studies have relied on surveys or outcome comparisons, leaving limited understanding of why learners

choose particular modes in their everyday contexts and how they experience interaction and community across modes. Third, HyFlex research has been conducted primarily in North American and Western higher education contexts, leaving research in Asia and the Global South relatively limited(Modise & Dlamini, 2026). Further research is therefore needed to examine how these previously identified benefits and challenges manifest in different cultural and institutional contexts.

The Korean higher education context makes this issue increasingly relevant. Driven by national initiatives designed to strengthen universities as platforms for lifelong learning, Korean universities are expanding their scope beyond traditional-age students to encompass adult and lifelong learners. For instance, the second cycle of the Lifelong Education at Universities for the Future (LiFE 2.0) initiative expanded support to 50 higher education institutions, reflecting a broader policy shift toward adult learner-friendly higher education (Ministry of Education, 2023). Concurrently, the rise of inter-university shared courses and regional collaborative education has intensified the demand for instructional models that transcend institutional, geographical, and temporal boundaries. As HyFlex has already been piloted in Korea as a model for inter-university collaborative courses, it holds clear potential relevance for these emerging forms of higher education (Choi et al., 2024).

However, the rising demand for flexible learning has not been accompanied by equivalent pedagogical and institutional readiness for HyFlex implementation. Korean studies have identified unsuitable instructional environments, increased instructor burden, and difficulties in interacting with remote learners (Lee & Han, 2022). Furthermore, HyFlex-based inter-university courses have revealed limitations in internet connectivity, audio transmission, and screen sharing that require further infrastructural support (Choi et al., 2024). Thus, the practical demand for flexible participation is expanding at a time when pedagogical, technological, and institutional support for HyFlex implementation remains uneven across Korean higher education. This gap is particularly critical for adult learners whose participation in higher education is often constrained by employment, family responsibilities, caregiving, health, and commuting distance. Understanding how these learners experience flexibility and presence in existing HyFlex environments is therefore necessary not only to evaluate the educational value of HyFlex, but also to inform the design of emerging adult, shared, and lifelong higher education systems in Korea.

Taken together, these developments point to three interrelated issues that require closer examination. First, it is necessary to investigate how adult learners negotiate participation choices when flexible learning opportunities intersect with the competing demands of work, family, health, commuting, and other aspects of adult life. Second, because multiple participation modes coexist within HyFlex courses, researchers must examine how learners experience interaction, instructional support, and opportunities for meaning-making across these modes. Third, it is necessary to identify how these experiences relate to sustained academic participation and what forms of pedagogical and institutional support adult learners perceive as needed.

Against this background, this study qualitatively explores adult learners' experiences of HyFlex learning in a Korean university, using the CoI framework as an interpretive lens. It focuses on how adult learners make participation choices within the context of their everyday lives, how they experience interaction, instructional support, and meaning-making across participation modes, and how these experiences influence their continued participation in higher education. The inductively identified patterns are subsequently interpreted in relation to teaching, social, and cognitive presence. Through this approach, this study aims to deepen the understanding of HyFlex learning in the everyday realities of adult learners, offering design and support implications for lifelong and continuing higher education.

Accordingly, the following research questions were addressed:

1. How do adult learners in a Korean university negotiate participation choices in HyFlex courses within the practical constraints of their everyday lives?
2. How do adult learners experience interaction, instructional support, and opportunities for meaning-making across different participation modes in HyFlex courses?
3. How do adult learners perceive their participation and learning experiences as supporting or constraining sustained academic participation, and what improvements do they suggest for HyFlex course design and support?

Ⅱ. Theoretical Background

1. HyFlex Learning and the Principle of Equivalency

HyFlex learning is distinguished from conventional hybrid or blended learning by the learner's continuing choice among participation modes. Beatty (2019) conceptualized HyFlex design around four principles: learner choice, equivalency, reusability, and accessibility. Among these, learner choice and equivalency are particularly relevant to this study. Learner choice allows students to select a participation mode according to their circumstances, whereas equivalency requires that different modes provide meaningful opportunities to achieve comparable learning objectives. Equivalency does not necessarily imply that learning activities or experiences must be identical across modes; rather, the educational opportunities available through different modes should be sufficiently robust to support meaningful learning.

This distinction is important because providing technical access to multiple modes does not in itself constitute effective HyFlex design. Previous studies have identified challenges, including technological difficulties, uneven interaction, reduced social connection, increased instructor workload, and differences in participation across modes (Cumming et al., 2024; Detyna et al., 2023; Mahmud et al., 2026). Thus, a central challenge in HyFlex research is how to support learner choice and flexibility while maintaining meaningful and sufficiently equivalent learning opportunities across participation modes.

2. Flexible Participation and Adult Learners in

Higher Education

Flexibility has particular significance in adult and continuing higher education. Adult learners commonly combine academic study with employment, family responsibilities, caregiving, health concerns, and other life roles. Consequently, temporal and spatial flexibility may determine whether learners are able to participate continuously in higher education, rather than simply making learning more convenient. Research on adult student persistence has shown that continued participation is shaped not only by academic factors but also by learners' broader life circumstances and institutional environments. Bergman et al. (2014), for example, found that educational aspirations, institutional responsiveness, and family encouragement played important roles in adult students' persistence. More recently, Lee (2025), using Korean longitudinal data, found that academic factors played a significant role in adult learners' dropout intentions, underscoring the importance of considering the academic conditions that support persistence among adult learners. Taken together, these findings highlight the need to consider both learners' life conditions and the institutional arrangements that support continued participation.

Research on flexible and online learning has similarly suggested that expanding access alone is insufficient unless learners are also supported in maintaining participation and persistence (Stone, 2022; Xavier & Meneses, 2021). From this perspective, participation choices in HyFlex learning should not be understood only as expressions of individual preference. For adult learners, choosing synchronous online or recorded modes may represent a negotiated response to competing responsibilities and changing life circumstances. Examining these choices therefore provides insight into how flexibility functions in adult learners' everyday lives and how it supports sustained academic participation.

3. Community of Inquiry and Presence in HyFlex Learning

The CoI framework provides a useful lens for examining the quality of learning experiences across participation modes. It posits that meaningful educational experiences emerge through the interaction of teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2000). Teaching presence involves the design, facilitation, and instructional support that allow learners to experience the instructor as available and responsive. Social presence refers to learners' ability to experience relational connection, communication, and belonging within a learning community. Cognitive presence encompasses learners' engagement in exploring, connecting, reflecting on, and constructing meaning from course content.

Subsequent research provided substantial support for the use of the CoI framework in online and blended higher education. In a review of research on the framework, Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) highlighted the interrelated roles of teaching, social, and cognitive presence in shaping online learning experiences. Similarly, Stenbom's (2018) systematic review of 103 empirical studies demonstrated that the CoI frame-

work is widely used to evaluate learning experiences and compare instructional settings across diverse online and blended contexts. These studies validate the CoI framework not only for examining access to learning, but also for evaluating the quality of interaction, instructional support, and meaning-making within technology-mediated learning environments.

In this study, cognitive presence is understood as learners' perceived opportunities to engage in meaning-making processes, such as elaborating ideas, connecting course content with examples or prior experience, reflecting on different perspectives, and developing understanding through interaction. Concentration, immersion, and motivation are not treated as components of cognitive presence itself; rather, they are regarded as conditions that may facilitate or constrain learners' engagement in such meaning-making processes. This distinction is maintained throughout the interpretation of the findings.

The CoI framework is particularly relevant to HyFlex learning because the coexistence of multiple participation modes may create different conditions for teaching, social, and cognitive presence. HyFlex-specific research has begun to demonstrate this relationship. In a study of a HyFlex engineering course, Buckley et al. (2024) found that the joint support of teaching, social, and cognitive presence contributed to students' learning and sense of belonging, with opportunities for live questioning, cross-modal interaction, and collaborative activities playing crucial roles. Such findings suggest that the quality of a HyFlex learning environment depends not merely on providing access to multiple modes, but rather on how opportunities for interaction, connection, and meaning-making are designed across those modes. The CoI framework therefore provides a conceptual basis for examining whether learner choice and access are accompanied by sufficiently comparable opportunities for meaningful participation and presence across participation modes.

Ⅲ. Methods

1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore how HyFlex courses are experienced and perceived by adult learners in a university context. This methodology allows researchers to gain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and the meanings they construct within specific contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

HyFlex instruction is a relatively recent instructional model in higher education, and research examining learners' lived experiences in such environments remains limited. In particular, few studies have explored how adult learners experience HyFlex learning while navigating the complex contexts of their daily lives. Given this research gap, a qualitative approach is appropriate for understanding the contextual and experiential aspects of adult learners' participation in HyFlex courses.

Following the perspective of qualitative case study research (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014), this study examined adult learners' experiences of HyFlex learning as a single case situated within

<Table 1> Data Sources

Data Source	Data Type	Informants	Purpose
Context of HyFlex course implementation	Informal explanations	Two instructors from two majors	To understand the institutional context of HyFlex courses
Adult learners' HyFlex learning experiences	In-depth interviews	Nine adult learners	To explore learners' experiences in HyFlex courses

a specific institutional context. The research site was an adult-learner college at a Korean university offering HyFlex courses, with participants drawn from adult learners who had firsthand experience in these classes.

2. Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in two stages, as summarized in Table 1. First, to understand the broader context of HyFlex implementation, the researcher informally consulted with two instructors teaching these courses across two majors within the adult-learner college. These instructors were selected because of their direct experience operating HyFlex courses and their ability to provide insights into variations in course organization and participation arrangements across programs. Conducted individually through face-to-face conversations, the consultations focused on the purposes of HyFlex implementation, available participation modes, program-level operating procedures, and practical challenges encountered during course delivery. These consultations were used solely to understand the institutional and instructional context of HyFlex implementation. They were not treated as formal interview data, included in the thematic analysis, or used as evidence for the study's substantive findings. Second, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with adult learners who had experienced HyFlex courses, encouraging them to freely describe their learning experiences.

3. Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) enrollment in an adult-learner college, (2) completion of at least one HyFlex course, and (3) experience with one or more participation modes (face-to-face, synchronous online, or recorded lectures). Nine adult learners participated, representing varying ages, occupations, and majors, as shown in Table 2.

<Table 2> Participant Characteristics

Participant	Gender	Age Range	Occupation	Year of Study	Major	Interview Mode
P1	Female	40s	Office worker	2nd year	Major A	Online
P2	Female	50s	Instructor	2nd year	Major B	Face-to-face
P3	Female	60s	Homemaker	2nd year	Major B	Face-to-face

Participant	Gender	Age Range	Occupation	Year of Study	Major	Interview Mode
P4	Female	60s	Instructor	2nd year	Major B	Face-to-face
P5	Male	50s	Office worker	4th year	Major C	Face-to-face
P6	Female	40s	Social worker	3rd year	Major A	Online
P7	Female	40s	Self-employed	2nd year	Major A	Face-to-face
P8	Female	20s	Office worker	4th year	Major C	Online
P9	Male	30s	Office worker	4th year	Major C	Face-to-face

<Table 3> Interview Protocol

Interview Topic	Sample Questions
Participation choices in HyFlex courses	How did you usually participate in HyFlex classes (face-to-face, synchronous online, recorded lectures)? What factors influenced your choice of participation mode?
Interaction experiences	How did you experience interaction with the instructor and other students in HyFlex courses? Were there differences depending on the mode of participation?
Technology and learning environment	How did you perceive the technological environment and learning platforms used in HyFlex classes?
Overall learning experience	How did HyFlex learning affect your learning experience (e.g., engagement, understanding, workload)?
Advantages and limitations	What do you consider the main advantages and limitations of HyFlex courses?
Suggestions for improvement	What improvements would you suggest for HyFlex courses in the future?

4. Definition of Key Terms

To prevent ambiguity, the key concepts used in this study are defined as follows:

(1) Recorded online participation

Recorded online participation refers to watching recorded lecture videos after the class session.

(2) E-learning

In this study, e-learning refers to asynchronous online courses delivered through the university's learning management system (LMS), typically consisting of pre-recorded lecture videos and online learning activities.

5. Interview Procedures

In-depth interviews were conducted between June and July 2025, either face-to-face or online, depending on participants' preferences. Each participant took part in one individual interview lasting approximately 60 minutes.

A semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide discussion while allowing flexibility in

responses. The protocol included questions on participation choices, interaction experiences, technological environment, learning outcomes, and improvement suggestions, as shown in Table 3.

To enhance the quality of the interview protocol, two faculty members with experience in HyFlex teaching and adult education reviewed the questions, and their feedback was incorporated prior to data collection.

6. Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using iterative qualitative thematic analysis within a case study approach. All interviews were transcribed verbatim in Korean and repeatedly read to gain familiarity with the data. The primary researcher first identified meaning units relevant to the research questions and assigned initial codes that remained close to participants' expressed meanings. Similar codes were then compared across participants and grouped into provisional categories. Through an ongoing comparison of similarities and differences, these categories were refined into 14 subthemes. The relationships among these subthemes were subsequently examined and organized into four overarching themes that captured broader patterns in adult learners' HyFlex learning experiences.

The analytic progression from meaning units to initial codes, subthemes, and overarching themes can be illustrated by the following examples. P9's account of participating online when an unexpected work obligation prevented face-to-face attendance was initially coded as "work obligations limiting face-to-face attendance." This code was compared with similar accounts concerning family responsibilities, health, and commuting constraints, leading to its grouping under the subtheme "Choices made under practical constraints," within the overarching theme "Participation choices in HyFlex learning." Similarly, P1's account of being unable to engage in peer communication while other students interacted face-to-face was coded as "limited participation in peer interaction while online" and grouped under the subtheme "Imbalance in peer interaction across participation modes," within the overarching theme "Interaction experiences in HyFlex courses."

The primary coding and thematic analyses were conducted by one researcher. Rather than using the CoI framework as a predetermined deductive coding scheme, themes were generated inductively from participants' accounts and subsequently interpreted in relation to teaching, social, and cognitive presence. Specifically, during the interpretive and discussion stages, experiences concerning instructor support, peer interaction, relational connections, and opportunities for reflection and meaning-making were mapped onto these three forms of presence. Representative quotations were selected after establishing the thematic structure, and were translated into English following the analysis.

7. Trustworthiness

To enhance trustworthiness, several procedures were employed. First, the primary researcher repeatedly checked developing codes, categories, and themes against the original interview tran-

scripts and maintained analytic memos throughout the analysis. This continuous engagement helped ensure that the final thematic structure remained grounded in participants' accounts.

Second, following the initial analysis, two faculty members with relevant educational experience reviewed the coding structure, 14 subthemes, four overarching themes, and selected representative quotations. One member specialized in designing and teaching HyFlex courses and the other possessed extensive experience teaching adult learners in higher education. These reviewers assessed whether the themes were adequately supported by the interview data, whether the conceptual boundaries among themes were clear, and whether alternative interpretations were warranted. Their feedback was subsequently cross-referenced with the original transcripts to refine the thematic descriptions and boundaries as appropriate. The two faculty members served as peer reviewers of the analytic results rather than as independent coders of the full dataset.

Third, representative quotations were provided throughout the findings to demonstrate the connection between participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretations. Detailed descriptions of the institutional setting, HyFlex course operation, and participation conditions were also provided to support the confirmability and transferability of the findings.

Ⅳ. Results

1. Context of HyFlex Course Implementation

(1) Program Structures and Participation Patterns

This study's participants belonged to three of the eight majors offered by the adult-learner college, where HyFlex courses were implemented differently across these majors. Although the college aimed to support continuous participation despite temporal and spatial constraints, the actual format of major courses varied by departmental policies and course characteristics. While some courses were offered face-to-face or through e-learning, others adopted HyFlex arrangements. These differences provided an important context for understanding how participants perceived HyFlex learning and made participation choices.

In Majors A and B, HyFlex learning was introduced through a shared course connected to a certification track. The course was originally offered by Major A as a face-to-face evening class, while students in Major B—whose major courses were concentrated on Saturdays—participated mainly through recorded lectures. Initially, students were not clearly informed about the full range of participation options; consequently, many understood the format as relatively fixed: Major A students attended in person, while Major B students participated online. As the instructor and students became more familiar with the HyFlex format, participation options gradually became more flexible. Students in Major A began using online participation when necessary, and

students in Major B were also allowed to attend face-to-face classes if they wished. However, synchronous online participation was not used in this course.

<Table 4> Participants' HyFlex Learning Experience and Participation Modes

Case	Year	Major	HyFlex Learning Experience	HyFlex Participation Mode
1	2	Major A	Face-to-face / Online	Face-to-face / Online
2	2	Major B	Face-to-face / Synchronous / Online	Online / Face-to-face
3	2	Major B	Face-to-face / Synchronous / Online	Online
4	2	Major B	Face-to-face / Online	Online
5	4	Major C	Face-to-face / Synchronous / Online	Face-to-face / Online
6	3	Major A	Face-to-face / Online	Face-to-face
7	2	Major A	Face-to-face / Online	Face-to-face / Online
8	4	Major C	Face-to-face / Synchronous / Online	Face-to-face / Online
9	4	Major C	Face-to-face / Synchronous / Online	Face-to-face / Online

Major C presented a different context. Because its students included more working adults and long-distance commuters, all courses in this major were offered in a HyFlex format. Both instructors and students therefore had greater familiarity with HyFlex learning. Major C had also developed operational guidelines: students who wished to participate synchronously online or through recorded lectures were required to submit reasons and obtain approval, while students who primarily attended face-to-face classes could participate online up to five times during the semester. These arrangements showed how flexibility was managed differently across programs and provided an important background for interpreting the participants' HyFlex learning experiences. Table 4 summarizes participants' HyFlex learning experiences and participation modes.

(2) HyFlex Classroom Environment

Since 2024, the university has established dedicated HyFlex classrooms equipped with cameras, high-performance microphones, large monitors, smart boards, and recording systems. These classrooms were designed to support face-to-face, synchronous online, and recorded participation within a single learning environment. Zoom facilitated real-time online attendance and class recording, and videos of the recorded sessions were subsequently uploaded to the university's LMS for later access. Instructors relied on the integrated microphones to ensure lectures were seamlessly livestreamed, and remote students joined the live sessions through Zoom.

This environment was intended to support both face-to-face and online learners within a single instructional space. However, technological limitations sometimes prevented instructors from fully utilizing the available systems. Difficulties

with equipment operation, uneven audio transmission, and delays in screen switching occasionally reduced the quality of online participation. Consequently, the information available to online learners was not always equivalent to that available to face-to-face learners. Nevertheless, the HyFlex infrastructure provided an important foundation for supporting adult learners' continued participation, despite constraints of time and place.

<Table 5> Themes and Subthemes of Adult Learners' HyFlex Learning Experiences

Theme	Subthemes
Participation choices in HyFlex learning	Choices made under practical constraints
	Coexistence of preference for face-to-face learning and use of online modes
	Evolving participation choices over time
Interaction experiences in HyFlex courses	Simultaneous experience of accessibility and distance from instructors
	Imbalance in peer interaction across participation modes
	Learning conditions and constraints shaped by technology and environment
Perceived advantages and limitations of HyFlex learning	Expanded opportunities through flexibility and accessibility
	Learning motivation fostered by the liveliness of face-to-face classes
	Difficulty concentrating and weakened learning motivation
	Inequity across participation modes
	Weakening of relationships and program cohesion
Suggestions for improving HyFlex courses	Need for pedagogy and assessment suited to HyFlex teaching
	Strengthening participation structures for remote and online learners
	Improving technical and operational support systems

2. Adult Learners' HyFlex Learning Experiences: Thematic Analysis

As shown in Table 5, analysis of the interview data yielded 14 subthemes, which were subsequently organized into four overarching themes: (1) participation choices in HyFlex learning, (2) interaction experiences in HyFlex courses, (3) perceived advantages and limitations of HyFlex learning, and (4) suggestions for improving HyFlex courses.

(1) Participation Choices in HyFlex Learning

Choices Made Under Practical Constraints

For this study's participants, choosing a mode of participation in the HyFlex courses was not simply a matter of learning preference; rather, it was a strategic decision made within the practical constraints of adult life. Participants frequently described situations in which attending face-to-face classes was difficult due to work schedules, family caregiving responsibilities, health problems, and commuting distances. In such cases, they se-

lected online or remote participation to avoid absence and continue studying.

"In my case, I only use the online option when there is a family ritual or when my boss suddenly says we have to go to a company dinner. When the executives suddenly decide to have dinner together, it becomes difficult for me to skip it, so those are the two situations in which I use it." (P9)

"Honestly, I don't really see many advantages in online classes. The only advantage is that it serves as a backup when I cannot attend in person. In terms of the quality of the class itself, I didn't think it had any strengths at all." (P6)

These accounts suggest that online participation was chosen not for convenience or preference, but as a secondary alternative to prevent disruption of their studies.

Coexistence of Preference for Face-to-Face Learning and Use of Online Modes

Most participants expressed a clear preference for face-to-face classes over other modes of participation. They explained that in-person classes enhanced concentration, provided a wider range of examples, enabled immediate questioning and interaction, and fostered a stronger sense of classroom involvement. Additionally, they encouraged deeper study and created opportunities to build relationships with others. By contrast, while they acknowledged benefits of online participation—such as saving time and allowing them to review missed or difficult content—they generally viewed it less favorably because of reduced concentration and technological issues.

One participant described the appeal of face-to-face learning in the following way:

"What I really want is to hear the professor's examples and ask questions right there in class and get immediate answers. In online classes, it is difficult to hear those kinds of examples. It feels more one-directional. In face-to-face classes, I can communicate not only with the professor but also hear the thoughts and opinions of other students, and that was also a really good part of it." (P1)

At the same time, adult learners actively used online or recorded lectures when their schedules required it. Their participation choices reflected a practical logic: attending face-to-face where possible and engaging online where necessary. In this sense, face-to-face and online participation were experienced not as mutually exclusive alternatives, but as complementary modes.

"I'm not very good at concentrating on online lectures, and I feel that going to class in person is the most reliable way to really study. But even though I say I chose face-to-face classes, during the beginning of the month or closing periods at work, I often have to work late, and then I have no choice but to use the online option." (P8)

Evolving Participation Choices Over Time

Participants also described their mode of participation as dynamic rather than something fixed from the beginning. At first, their choices were shaped by departmental culture or how instructors initially introduced the course, leading them to perceive face-to-face or online participation as relatively fixed. As the semester pro-

gressed, however, participants adapted their participation modes to better suit their individual needs. This shift suggests that participation choice in HyFlex learning was not static, but evolved as students gained a better understanding of the format through direct experience.

"At first, I heard that I could just take the class online, so I kept doing that. The face-to-face class was in the evening, and I thought maybe I should try going sometime, but an older student told me there was no need to go, so I didn't. Later, when I had to submit a medical note and ended up attending in person, I thought, 'I should have done this much earlier.'" (P2)

(2) Interaction Experiences in HyFlex Courses

Simultaneous Experience of Accessibility and Distance from Instructors

Participants generally evaluated their interactions with instructors more positively when they attended face-to-face classes. In-person participation made it easier to ask questions, receive feedback, and feel immersed in the class. In contrast, when they participated online, they found it much harder to engage with the instructor and rarely experienced meaningful opportunities to ask follow-up questions or receive direct feedback. Thus, the way participants experienced instruction differed significantly depending on the mode of participation. While HyFlex learning increased access, it also produced disparities in the quality of interaction.

One participant explained this contrast vividly:

"When I participated online in that class, I was almost like an observer. There was hardly any interaction. But when I attended face-to-face, I realised that this professor wasn't just someone who knew the subject academically; this was someone who really knew it in practice. I could feel that only when I was there in person. Online, I could only imagine it. When I actually went to class, I saw how carefully the professor handled everything, and I thought, 'This is actually really good. I definitely want to come again next time, and I want to study more before I do.'" (P2)

Imbalance in Peer Interaction Across Participation Modes

Unlike traditional e-learning classes, HyFlex courses allowed participants to interact with their peers, an interaction many students regarded as an important learning resource. In particular, face-to-face discussions and collaborative sharing were highly valued because they enabled students to hear other learners' thoughts and experiences firsthand. In classes involving group activities or practical exercises, face-to-face participants were able to interact more naturally, which often strengthened both learning engagement and a sense of belonging.

However, participants who joined online described limited opportunities to participate in discussions and collaborative activities, which gradually distanced them from the flow of the classroom and relationship-building with peers. As one participant simply put it, "There was no communication online, because we were just watching the recorded lecture." (P7) These findings suggest that although HyFlex learning expands access, online participants may become relatively margi-

nalized if the class remains structurally centered on those who are physically present.

Another participant described this sense of im-balance as follows:

"That's the thing about HyFlex. If it were a fully online course, then nobody would really be communicating. But in HyFlex, I know I can't go because of my situation, while other people are communicating there, and I'm the one who can't. That makes a difference." (P1)

Learning Conditions and Constraints Shaped by Technology and Environment

Participants generally viewed the implement-ation of HyFlex classrooms positively, yet they repeatedly mentioned technological limitations during actual operation. While the instructor's voice was usually audible to synchronous online participants, their classmates' voices were often difficult to hear. Furthermore, screen- switching delays and camera angles that failed to capture classroom interactions made it difficult for online learners to follow the flow of the class.

As one participant noted, *"I heard that the professor's voice was recorded, but students' voi-ces were hard to hear. Students said several times that they couldn't hear properly." (P3).*

In recorded lectures, discussion and sponta-neous questioning were often absent, which re-duced the sense of participation. At the same time, technology did not only function as a limitation. In some classes, online tools were used to support collaboration between face-to-face and remote learners. These findings suggest that the HyFlex environment was not merely a delivery system, but a set of learning conditions that shaped who could participate, how they could participate, and with what degree of inclusion.

(3) Perceived Advantages and Limitations of HyFlex Learning

Expanded Opportunities Through Flexibility and Accessibility

Participants repeatedly identified the greatest advantage of HyFlex learning as its ability to minimize absenteeism and support learning continuity. When work schedules, business trips, family caregiving, or health problems made face-to-face attendance difficult, HyFlex courses al-lowed them to continue participating rather than abandon the class altogether. When recorded lec-tures were available, participants also valued the ability to review missed or difficult content later at a time that suited their schedules. These expe-riences suggest that HyFlex learning functioned not merely as a convenience, but as a practical mechanism for maintaining learning continuity when adult learners faced unavoidable constraints.

"It is really helpful that learners can choose between face-to-face and remote participation depending on their situation that day. For adult learners, that is a huge advantage. Once, I was almost an hour late to the last class because of work. I had told the professor in advance, but since it was the last session, I was very curious about what had happened. After I got home, I watched the first part of the class, and it was really helpful to be able to review what I had missed." (P1)

Learning Motivation Fostered by the Liveliness of Face-to-Face Classes

Participants also regarded the opportunity to attend class in person as an important value of HyFlex learning. As many courses at the adult-learner college were delivered through e-learning, the liveliness and immediacy of face-to-face classes stood out even more strongly. In-person participation enabled learners to experience the instructor's facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures, and spontaneous examples, alongside other students' reactions. As a result, participants experienced the class not simply as information delivery, but as a shared learning process created in the moment. Some participants said that they approached the same content more seriously and deeply in face-to-face settings than in e-learning classes.

As one participant explained:

"Human communication is not just about voice; facial expressions and other things are conveyed vividly together. Online, that doesn't happen. In face-to-face classes, everything is transmitted much more vividly, so knowledge is conveyed better, and even my own attitude becomes different. That was a huge advantage." (P6)

Another participant expressed a similar view:

"In e-learning, the professor just leads the lecture and we receive it one-sidedly. But in HyFlex, it's not like that. It feels like we are talking together and growing together. It feels more human, and I think it is a really good way of learning." (P4)

These findings indicate that for adult learners already accustomed to e-learning, face-to-face participation in HyFlex courses was not merely an option but a meaningful experience that restored and reinforced learning motivation.

Difficulty Concentrating and Weakened Learning Motivation

Despite the convenience of HyFlex learning, participants reported that concentration was easily disrupted and learning motivation weakened in online and recorded settings. In particular, recorded lectures were described as both advantageous and problematic: while they offered flexibility, they also made it easier to leave the lecture playing while doing something else, thereby reducing immersion. Participants also noted that HyFlex lecture videos were often much longer than regular e-learning videos, which increased the burden of participation.

"In regular online classes, you usually watch three 25-minute videos. But in HyFlex classes, it feels like watching three 50-minute videos. It's almost twice as much." (P3)

Similar difficulties were reported in synchronous online participation. Delays in screen switching, background noise, and instructor-centered one-way communication made it difficult for learners to keep up with the lesson flow. Thus, while HyFlex learning expanded access to learning opportunities, it also produced different levels of immersion and motivation depending on the participation mode.

Inequity Across Participation Modes

Participants also pointed out that the quality of experience was not equally guaranteed across

face-to-face, synchronous online, and recorded participation modes. Face-to-face participants described a stronger sense of "learning together" through exposure to the instructor's expressions, gestures, spontaneous dialogue, and other students' reactions. By contrast, online participants reported gradually feeling excluded from the flow of the class. Technological problems—such as difficulty hearing students' comments—along with limited opportunities to participate in discussions and collaborative tasks, repeatedly widened the experiential gap between modes.

These disparities also shaped how students perceived fairness and engagement. Some participants felt that remote learners appeared more passive, while others noted that online participants experienced a sense of relative deprivation because they could not fully join classroom interactions. These findings suggest that while HyFlex learning broadens participation choices, it may also intensify experiential gaps among modes if equivalency is not actively designed into the curriculum.

Weakening of Relationships and Program Cohesion

Finally, participants pointed out that HyFlex learning negatively impacted departmental cohesion and relationship-building among students. As face-to-face participation decreased, time spent together naturally declined, leading to fewer collective activities like end-of-semester gatherings and departmental events. As more students participated online, opportunities to interact face-to-face diminished, communication became less frequent, and some participants felt that even classmates within the same major no longer knew each other well. This relational distance ultimately weakened emotional bonds, diminished a sense of belonging, and limited opportunities for collaborative learning.

One participant described this shift clearly:

"Once HyFlex started, the cohesion within the major really fell apart. When I was in the first year, we used to gather often—for end-of-semester parties, meals after class, or dinners with professors. But now, if ten people used to gather before, now fewer than half that number show up, or the event gets cancelled because too few people come. In terms of cohesion, it has really become very loose." (P8)

(4) Suggestions for Improving HyFlex Courses

Need for Pedagogy and Assessment Suited to HyFlex Teaching

Participants emphasized that HyFlex courses should not simply involve recording and broadcasting face-to-face classes, but must be supported by intentional instructional design suited to the HyFlex format. Some participants reported confusion because the purpose and operational logistics of these courses had been insufficiently explained, particularly regarding when and how different participation modes could be used. They also noted the difficulty of designing discussions and activities that meaningfully integrated both face-to-face and remote learners.

Concerns were also raised about assessment. Participants worried that assessment systems relying heavily on online testing could create fair-

ness problems, given the ease of searching for information, sharing materials, and using AI tools in online environments. These experiences suggest that HyFlex learning requires not merely a technical conversion of traditional classes, but a broader redesign of pedagogy, participation, and assessment.

Strengthening Participation Structures for Remote and Online Learners

Participants reported that students joining synchronously online or via recorded lectures often remained on the periphery of the class. In particular, when questions and discussions centered on face-to-face participants, online learners found it difficult to express their opinions or interact. Consequently, participants called for additional interactive channels for online learners—such as discussion boards, question windows, and small-group spaces—to present opinions and receive feedback.

Participants also suggested that designing collaborative learning structures to include both online and face-to-face learners could strengthen relationship-building and a sense of belonging within the major. These findings indicate that HyFlex learning must move beyond merely expanding physical access to creating participatory structures that engage online learners as equal participants.

Improving Technical and Operational Support Systems

Finally, participants frequently highlighted the need to upgrade the technical environment and operational support for HyFlex classes. Specifically, they mentioned recurring audio issues, such as the instructor's voice being relatively clear while students' voices were not adequately transmitted, combined with background noise and delayed screen switching, all of which caused online learners to lose the flow of the class. Furthermore, participants expressed concern regarding the recording and sharing of HyFlex classes, fearing that personal experiences or sensitive examples discussed during class could be unintentionally exposed beyond the classroom. Some noted that they felt comfortable speaking openly in a traditional face-to-face class because they assumed their words would remain within that room, whereas recorded videos created uncertainty about how widely their disclosures might circulate.

"There was a moment when I suddenly realised something. In our major, personal experiences often become examples in class. In a face-to-face setting, only the people in that room know about it. But once it is recorded online, I realised that it could be exposed somewhere beyond my knowledge." (P7)

Participants also viewed managing equipment, recording, and connectivity problems while simultaneously teaching as an excessive burden for instructors. Consequently, they argued for systematic support, including upgraded equipment, clearer guidelines on the scope of recording, measures to protect sensitive disclosures, and designated technical support staff.

Ⅴ. Discussion

1. Flexibility and Sustained Participation Negotiated

Within Adult Learners' Life Constraints

This study explored how adult learners experience HyFlex learning in Korean higher education, with particular attention to how flexibility and presence are enacted across participation modes. The findings demonstrate that adult learners' participation choices were not simply expressions of learning preference, but negotiated decisions shaped by the practical constraints of adult life. Participants chose online or recorded sessions when face-to-face attendance was hindered by work schedules, family responsibilities, health conditions, or long commutes. Although many participants preferred face-to-face participation, online modes served as a critical mechanism to continue learning when in-person attendance was unfeasible.

These findings extend previous research emphasizing learner choice, autonomy, and flexibility as key benefits of HyFlex learning (Beatty, 2019; Mahmud et al., 2026). In this study, however, flexibility was experienced less as an unrestricted freedom or convenience and more as a pragmatic prerequisite for sustaining academic participation under competing life demands. For adult learners managing unpredictable schedules and multiple roles, online or recorded participation enabled them to avoid absences and continue learning when face-to-face attendance was difficult or impossible. This interpretation aligns with research on flexible and online learning, which suggests that access alone is insufficient unless learners are supported in maintaining participation and persistence (Stone, 2022; Xavier & Meneses, 2021). The distinctive contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that, for adult learners, HyFlex flexibility functions as a prerequisite for learning continuity rather than an optional feature of course delivery.

In the context of this study, HyFlex appeared less as a fully developed pedagogical model systematically grounded in Beatty's (2019) principles of HyFlex design, and more as an operational arrangement partially introduced and adapted in response to the practical constraints surrounding adult learners' attendance and participation. This finding suggests that, although HyFlex can expand flexible participation opportunities for adult learners, its effects can be realized consistently only when supported by clear guidance on participation modes, consistent operational standards, and institutional and pedagogical support for managing the quality of learning experiences across modes.

2. Uneven Presence Across Participation Modes

When the inductively derived findings were interpreted through the CoI framework, distinct participation modes appeared to create varying conditions for instructor support, peer connection, and opportunities for meaning-making. These patterns can be understood in relation to teaching, social, and cognitive presence. Viewed through this lens, access to the same HyFlex course did not necessarily result in equivalent experiences of interaction, connection, and learning across participation modes.

First, teaching presence was experienced most strongly during face-to-face instruction. Participants described face-to-face classes as spaces where

they could directly observe the instructor's tone, facial expressions, gestures, spontaneous examples, and practical expertise. These elements made the instructor feel more accessible and dynamic, thereby fostering deeper learner engagement. By contrast, online or recorded participation often limited opportunities for immediate questions, follow-up interactions, and real-time feedback. Some remote participants described themselves merely as "observers," indicating that access to course content does not necessarily guarantee access to the instructor's full teaching presence. This finding aligns with prior research emphasizing the importance of instructor presence and intentional facilitation for sustaining engagement in HyFlex environments (Mahmud et al., 2026; Razali & Tasir, 2025).

Second, social presence differed substantially across participation modes. Face-to-face participation enabled spontaneous peer interactions, informal conversations, group activities, and a stronger sense of belonging. Participants regarded hearing other learners' thoughts and experiences as an important learning resource, particularly in discussion- or practice-based classes. Conversely, online and recorded participation reduced opportunities for peer interaction. While remote learners could access the class material, they were less able to participate fully in the relational and communal dimensions of learning. This finding aligns with previous studies indicating that communication, social presence, and community formation can weaken in HyFlex environments when cross-modal interactions are not intentionally structured (Cumming et al., 2024; Mahmud et al., 2026).

Third, conditions for cognitive presence varied significantly by participation mode. Face-to-face classes provided immediate opportunities to ask questions, hear spontaneous examples, encounter peers' perspectives, and connect course content with ongoing discussion, thereby giving learners opportunities for reflection and meaning-making. These dynamics were evident in participants' accounts. For example, P1 valued hearing the instructor's examples, asking questions to receive immediate responses, and listening to peers' perspectives. Such opportunities allowed learners to evaluate course content through concrete examples and multiple perspectives, supporting the elaboration and construction of meaning rather than the passive reception of information. By contrast, synchronous online and recorded participation modes sometimes limited these opportunities due to difficulties hearing peer comments, fewer opportunities for follow-up questions, and more one-directional communication. Participants also reported lower concentration and motivation in certain online settings; these are conceptualized here as conditions that facilitate or constrain cognitive engagement rather than as components of cognitive presence itself.

Taken together, the findings reveal a central tension in HyFlex learning. The issue is not simply that online participation may involve less interaction—as has been reported in online and blended learning research—but that different participation conditions coexist within the same course. Remote learners were aware that spontaneous interaction, discussion, and relationship-building were occurring among face-to-face participants, while they themselves faced more

limited opportunities to engage. The principle of equivalency in HyFlex design assumes that learners should have substantive opportunities to achieve comparable learning outcomes across participation modes (Beatty, 2019). The present findings suggest that such equivalency becomes difficult to realize when opportunities for teaching, social, and cognitive presence differ across modes. Equivalency does not require learners in every mode to have identical experiences. Rather, the findings suggest that each mode should provide sufficiently meaningful and comparable opportunities to access instructor support, engage with peers, ask questions, encounter multiple perspectives, and construct meaning from course content. Therefore, the key challenge of HyFlex learning is not simply to provide multiple participation options, but to ensure equitable engagement and meaningful presence across those options.

3. Implications for HyFlex Design in Adult Higher Education

The findings offer several implications for HyFlex pedagogy and institutional support in adult higher education. First, HyFlex courses should be designed as more than recorded or livestreamed versions of face-to-face classes. When online learners are positioned mainly as passive viewers of a classroom-based lesson, they risk remaining at the periphery of the learning process. Effective HyFlex design therefore requires intentional structures that support participation across modes, such as online discussion boards, real-time chat, shared documents, question channels, and hybrid small-group activities. These structures can help remote and recorded participants contribute meaningfully, rather than simply access course content.

Second, teaching, social, and cognitive presence must be deliberately supported across all participation modes. Instructors should actively include synchronous online learners and students who watch recorded lectures by repeating in-class comments, addressing online questions, providing post-class summaries, and creating feedback channels for recorded participants. Social presence and relational belonging should also be treated as core design concerns. As this study showed, reduced face-to-face participation can weaken peer relationships and program cohesion. HyFlex courses for adult learners therefore need structured peer interaction, cross-modal collaborative tasks, and community-building activities that help learners feel integrated into a shared learning community. Cognitive presence can also be strengthened by segmenting recorded lectures and pairing them with guiding questions, reflective prompts, or follow-up tasks.

Finally, institutional and technical support is essential. Participants repeatedly pointed to problems related to audio transmission, screen switching, camera angles, and uncertainty about the scope of recording. They also raised concerns about privacy when personal experiences or sensitive examples were recorded and shared beyond the immediate classroom. These findings highlight the need for clear institutional guidelines regarding recording, privacy protection, participation expectations, and assessment fairness. Instructors also require technical support to prevent them

from having to manage equipment, online participation, recording, and teaching simultaneously. This aligns with recent HyFlex research emphasizing that successful implementation depends not on technology alone, but on infrastructure, instructor preparation, and pedagogical support (Barr & Luo, 2026; Detyna et al., 2023; Mahmud et al., 2026).

4. Contributions, Limitations, and Future Research

This study makes several contributions to HyFlex and lifelong higher education research. First, it provides qualitative evidence from a relatively underexplored context: adult learners' experiences with HyFlex learning in Korean higher education. While much of the existing HyFlex research has been conducted in North American and Western contexts—often focusing on general undergraduate students' satisfaction, engagement, and learning outcomes—this study extends the contextual scope of HyFlex research by focusing on adult learners in South Korea. Consequently, it raises questions about how previous findings may transfer to institutional contexts where HyFlex has been introduced later and less systematically than in North America.

Second, this study contributes to the literature by interpreting adult learners' HyFlex experiences through the CoI framework. The findings indicated that flexibility alone does not determine the quality of HyFlex learning; rather, adult learners' experiences depend heavily on how the three forms of presence were sustained across participation modes across participation modes. This CoI-based interpretation explains why learners value the flexibility of online participation while still preferring face-to-face classes for interaction, motivation, and belonging. Furthermore, it clarifies how online access can support learning continuity while simultaneously introducing relational distance and lower engagement.

Third, this study highlights the importance of relational belonging and program cohesion in adult HyFlex learning. The weakening of peer relationships and departmental cohesion emerged as a significant issue, suggesting that HyFlex implementation affects not only individual learning experiences, but also the social structure of adult learner programs. For adult learners balancing higher education with multiple life responsibilities, a sense of connection is particularly vital for sustained participation. Future HyFlex research should therefore focus more on community formation, relational engagement, and inclusion across participation modes.

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted within a single adult-learner college at one Korean university, with a limited participant composition. Seven of the nine participants were women, and they represented only three of the eight majors offered. Consequently, the findings may reflect the gender and program composition of the sample and should be interpreted as contextually situated rather than broadly transferable to all adult learners or disciplinary contexts. Furthermore, HyFlex courses were implemented differently across the three majors, meaning differences attributed to participation modes cannot be fully disentangled from differences in program- or course-level implementation. Some participant experiences may have stemmed from dif-

ferences in course organization, participation rules, and instructional practices across majors, rather than the participation mode alone. This contextual variation should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Second, although informal consultations with instructors were used to understand the context of HyFlex implementation, this study did not systematically examine the perspectives of instructors, administrators, or technical support staff through formal interviews. Including these perspectives would provide a more comprehensive understanding of HyFlex implementation. Finally, this study focused on learners' self-reported experiences and did not directly assess learning outcomes or behavioral indicators of engagement.

Future research should examine HyFlex learning across more diverse adult and lifelong learning contexts including different majors, institutions, and learner populations. Multi-institutional and cross-cultural studies could further clarify the extent to which these findings are transferable across different educational settings. Comparative research across face-to-face, synchronous online, and recorded participation modes could examine how opportunities for teaching, social, and cognitive presence are shaped by course design and institutional support. Longitudinal studies are also needed to explore how adult learners' participation choices, sense of belonging, and engagement change over time. Additionally, future studies could combine qualitative interviews with CoI-based surveys or other quantitative measures to examine how the three forms of presence relate to persistence, engagement, and learning outcomes.

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성인학습자의 하이플렉스 수업 경험:
유연성과 현존감을 중심으로

이 정 민*

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본 연구는 대학의 하이플렉스(HyFlex) 수업에 참여한 성인학습자의 학습경험을 유연성과 현존감을 중심으로 탐색한 질적 사례연구이다. 이를 위해 국내 대학의 하이플렉스 수업에 참여한 성인학습자 9명을 대상으로 심층면담을 실시하였으며, 주제분석을 통해 귀납적으로 도출된 결과를 Community of Inquiry (CoI) 모형을 해석적 틀로 활용하여 해석하였다. 분석 결과, 실질적 제약에 따른 참여 방식 선택, 참여 방식별 상호작용 경험, 하이플렉스 수업의 장점과 한계, 개선 요구의 네 가지 주제가 도출되었다. 성인학습자들은 직장, 가족, 건강, 통학 등의 여건에 따라 참여 방식을 선택하였으며, 비대면 및 녹화 참여는 학습의 지속성과 접근성을 높이는 데 기여하였다. 반면 대면수업은 교수자와의 상호작용, 동료와의 연결, 질문과 토론을 통한 의미구성의 기회를 보다 풍부하게 제공하였다. 또한 교수적·사회적·인지적 현존감을 경험할 수 있는 기회는 참여 방식에 따라 차이가 나타났다. 이러한 결과는 성인학습자를 위한 효과적인 하이플렉스 수업 운영을 위해 유연한 접근성뿐 아니라 참여 방식 전반에서 의미 있는 참여와 현존감을 지원하는 교수설계 및 제도적 지원이 필요함을 시사한다.

주요어: 하이플렉스, 성인학습자, 탐구공동체 모형, 유연성, 현존감, 평생교육

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