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No More Flying On Auto-pilot

The Flipped Classroom



| By Ron Kordyban & Shelley Kinash |

Imagine boarding an aeroplane for a trip to Europe and finding out that there will not be a human pilot on board. Miraculously, the plane lands and then a few hours later you discover that you are not allowed to get off the tour bus to experience Europe. You are only permitted to sit, look out the window and listen to your tour guide. This is equivalent to what happens in the design and timing of some school and university teaching. We need an approach which will allow the traveller to enjoy and truly experience the incredible sights and sounds of the voyage.

We now know that learning happens when students are actively engaging with the curriculum. Students learn when they are wrestling with ideas, deciding which sources to include, writing papers and creating projects. These activities are mostly assigned as assessment for university students and homework for school children. The students are doing these tasks outside of the classroom when the teacher is not there. In class, students are mostly viewing content and listening to lectures/lessons that would play just as effectively online. Students are largely passive in class and active outside of class. This is exactly the opposite of what works for learning.

We also know that learning happens through active engagement. We also know that learning is accelerated when there is a trained professional (the teacher) present to encourage, question, correct and consult. We are depriving our students of active engagement with a responsive facilitator. The students are passively listening when the teacher is present, and creatively contributing when they are alone without the teacher's guidance.

The idea of flipping the classroom addresses this problem, and offers a different way for educators to approach and structure the learning process. In a nutshell, it moves the role of delivering content to the shoulders of our new digital tools, and this frees up

the valuable face-to-face classroom time for learning activities that can better take advantage of interactions with the teacher and other students.

What Is The Flipped Classroom?

The idea of flipping the class is a simple one. Change the role of the teacher from content delivery vehicle to that of learning facilitator. It is a learning philosophy which advocates the use of face-to-face time in class for activities other than delivering content – for activities which make better use of having a teacher on hand. After all, we live in a time where the information superhighway is providing all the content a student can digest, so why just duplicate that in class when you can do more?

In the flipped classroom, students get their lectures and traditional content-based lessons outside of the classroom. This could be in the form of a video, a podcast, interactive games, blog or traditional readings. Their 'homework' could involve watching the video and taking notes, jotting down questions or points to raise in class the next day.

Why Now?

The idea of students getting content at home is not new. For years students have been assigned tasks, typically reading chapters or articles, to help cover the requisite subject matter. So why has the idea of flipping the class taken a recent place in the spotlight during the digital education revolution?

There are several reasons for this, including: the availability of online resources; new tools to make resources; and an increased sharing of ideas and content through online collaboration and networks. There has been a dramatic increase in both the quality and quantity of online resources which cover subject content. Examples include the Khan Academy, Ted Talks, YouTube, various educational blogs and the ever growing list of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses).

With such a range of resources available, it is now easier than ever to provide students with a wide choice of learning tools, varied in learning styles, abilities and languages.

Another useful consequence of the digital education revolution is the increase in communication, sharing and forming of learning networks. This might be in the form of teachers sharing lesson plans, uploading rubrics onto a blog, or brainstorming new ideas on how to engage learners. The social aspects of learning are certainly not limited to that of educators. Students are getting together like never before, via social media sites, wikis and texting.

Where Do Teachers Begin? What Are The First Early Steps To Get Started In Flipping The Classroom?

Whether you have been teaching for a while or are relatively new to the craft, breaking with a traditional routine can sometimes be stressful. Here are some simple and practical first steps towards flipping your classroom.

- Think or rethink the big picture. What role as teacher will best benefit the students? How can valuable face-to-face time be used most effectively? How can learning diversity be best addressed? What do students need to help them learn? How can content be engaging and fun? How can time be made for higher order think skills such as application, debate and discussion?

- Organise your course content. A large part of inverting the class involves prioritising, ordering and packaging your subject matter suitably so that students can and will look at it and learn from it at home or via mobile devices.

- Look at new e-learning tools. There are great websites and blogs which talk about new learning tools. Ask your colleagues and friends which programs and software they use or have seen used well, or see what comes up when you brainstorm key words and try your luck with Google. Sticking to one tool might seem safe and lessen the time spent learning the system and commands, but diversity is powerful and has a greater appeal to various learning types. Do not try to learn too much at once, but once you become comfortable with one tool, think of trying others.

- Read and research. There are numerous reference sources regarding the flipped approach. A good start is the book *Flip Your*

Classroom by Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams. Other influential thinkers in this and related fields are Harvard's Eric Mazur, New Zealander Andrew Churches, Khan Academy's Salman Khan and the trio – Lage, Platt and Treglia.

What Works In Flipping The Classroom? Key Approaches, Strategies, Instructions And Technologies.

Here are some tips and suggestions which have worked for educators who have already moved ahead with the flipped classroom.

- Give yourself lots of time. Changing your basic pedagogical perspective, adapting into a new facilitator role, and creating the material to replace your old in-class lectures will not happen in a day. Take baby steps, and remember to give yourself enough time. When in doubt, make small and consistent changes. Be determined and persistent.

- Keep students and parents informed and work with them. Change can be difficult for all involved, but communication and sincerity go a long way in gaining support, or at least patience, from others. Be sure to discuss the changes and reasons with your supervisors as well. Support from above can be an important part of making it through the transition.

- Remember that there is a lot of material available online, so do not think you need to do it all. Search for videos, websites, blogs, podcasts and other resources. Not only will finding open resources reduce your workload, these materials can provide expertise in a given area, a wide range of difficulty levels, new perspectives and approaches.

- Videos tend to be a favourite among learners, since many people are visual learners. With these you can use a screen-casting software program to convert existing slide presentations easily into videos much easier than trying to make a video from scratch. Remember to keep the video reasonably short – a maximum of ten minutes if possible, ideally closer to five.

- Do not underestimate the humble podcast. Audio-only recordings may lack the visual appeal of flashy videos, but they are faster to download and make it far easier to multi-task. Students can play audio files on their mobile device of choice while at the gym, in the car, walking the dog or even playing video games.

- Keep formats and files mobile and system friendly. Remember that the more

platforms and devices which the programs will work with, the more people who can and will take advantage of what you are offering. Why limit your content consumers to one platform or device when you could include several? Using MP3s, MP4s and PDFs are a good example of universally accepted file formats.

- One concern with the flipped classroom is how to enforce students actually doing their part and watching the requisite video or other materials at home. Think about various options, including some form of assessment, checking to see if they have made any notes, online tracking, or for school children, involving parents. A flipped classroom where a large portion of the students are not prepared for class is not going to succeed. Stay consistent and fairly strict to send the right message. Try to avoid the temptation of going back to the role of content delivery vehicle if students have not done their bit.

To some students, the idea of taking responsibility for learning content out of class might at first sound like a heavy increase in their homework workload. However, once the flipped learning routine has become established, the reality is that the number of hours of homework usually decreases, and more important, the fun and sense of exploration and excitement is brought back into the learning process – for both the students and the teacher. 

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