

Foreword

When I first heard about the concept of “flipping” the classroom and began discussing it with other English and language arts teachers, one of the consistent replies offered was usually framed in this manner:

Well, English language arts teachers have been “flipping” forever. Students read and write at home, then we review and discuss those ideas in class. I don’t see what’s so new about giving them videos to watch at home so they can read and write about those instead. We will still use class time productively to engage in deep conversations and real writing.

Of course, this is a composite of comments and recollections. Yet, the sentiment was pervasive: ELA teachers already flip. Perhaps, I reasoned, in the very best ELA classrooms that are inquiry-driven, student-centered, and focused on growth through formative assessment... yes, there is some degree of “flipping” going on.

However, my strong suspicion was that, no, the very colleagues who were questioning the need for flipping were, instead, those who most needed to understand and employ the method in their own classrooms. Far from providing students with opportunities for Socratic seminars, literature circles, writing workshop, and other methods of student-centered, teacher-supported classroom activity, these were the teachers who, unfortunately, were most likely spending class time talking at students and then providing them with a worksheet for homework.

Indeed, these were the colleagues who I most needed to reach and talk to them about the benefits of flipped, active learning and what it could do for their students. Yet, they would come back with many excuses even after I implored them to consider the approach. I was trying to figure out why they approached an innovative model with such concern or even outright disdain. There are multiple responses to this that I can offer – ranging from quite cynical to overly analytic – and I summarize each here.

1. FLIPPING MEANS THE DEATH OF THE LECTURE

One reason why colleagues who question the validity of flipping is because, quite simply, they do not want to change. Given that “Flipped Learning is a pedagogical approach in which direct instruction moves from the group learning space to the individual learning space, and the resulting group space is transformed into a dynamic, interactive learning environment” (Flipped Learning Network, 2014), I think that flipping simply scares most of them to death. Or, more succinctly, flipping means that they can’t lecture anymore.

In a conversation I had with colleagues in another department on my university’s campus, they wanted empirical “evidence” (read: randomized control trials that yielded statistically significant differences between student test scores) that flipped or hybrid instruction actually led to demonstrable gains in learning. For them, evidence consists of statistically reliable data sets showing growth between two controlled samples of students, one class who participated in a flipped model and another who were in a more traditional setting.

On the one hand, I can appreciate the need for evidence. And, there is some emerging data to support the idea that that flipped, hybrid, and other “active learning” models do, in fact have positive effects on student learning (one great example of this can be seen in the appropriately titled “Improvements from a Flipped Classroom May Simply Be the Fruits of Active Learning” by Jensen, et al., 2015). There are, of course studies that show negative or neutral effects as well, so in many ways I chalk the empirical research outcomes of, at least at the point of this writing in late 2016, as a draw.

On the other hand, I see this as a procrastination technique, a way for them to simply ignore what they know to be true both from experience and empirical evidence: the lecture is dead. Flipped learning certainly isn’t any better, on average, than traditional didactic approaches, but it also isn’t any worse. So, my response to this argument is this: if you want to be a good teacher, and you are willing to take a risk and work with your students to find positive, challenging ways to integrate technology, then why not give flipping a go?

2. TEACHER-RESEARCH IS HARD

Another (potentially more useful) response to those who question the value of flipping comes from my background and continuing interest in classroom-based inquiry. For many years, I’ve been interested in working with teacher-researchers who critically and creatively implement, assess, and refine their uses of digital reading and writing

tools with their students. Reflective practice begins with inquiry, and flipping is as good a topic to study in one's own classroom as any other.

However, teacher research is hard. Generations of teacher-researchers remind us that engaging in this type of inquiry practice takes time, energy, and effort. The cynics that I noted above may simply reply that they don't have enough time, but I suspect it is something more about the energy and effort that keeps them from doing classroom inquiry, especially around a phenomenon as complex as flipping. Moreover, teachers who are not confident with their uses of technology or who may be worried about the dreaded annual evaluation would probably choose to spend their time invested in other elements of their teaching practice, operating under the belief that the cost/benefit analysis for using flipped learning just doesn't pay out in the end.

Thus, it is worth noting that many of the teachers who share their work in this edited collection have gone through a systematic, careful inquiry process, weighing the best interests of their students with competing demands from school curriculum, state and national standards, and external assessments. Having engaged all the possibilities, these professionals have put their time and energy into flipped learning, just as generations of teacher-researchers before them have explored innovative models of instruction, most notably the reading and writing workshop.

This is challenging work, indeed. For me, as a writing project director and teacher educator, when I find a group of teachers who reflectively engage in a process of inquiry, then that kind of evidence is certainly strong enough for me to endorse the practice of flipping instruction in the ELA classroom. So, for anyone who questions flipping as a potential pedagogical approach, I want to ask them about their own priorities and willingness to engage in reflective practice.

3. TOO MUCH TECHNOLOGY

The third potential response comes from my work investigating the use of educational technology over time. As has been documented by many others, most notably Larry Cuban (1986, 2001, and his blog, <https://larrycuban.wordpress.com/>), educational history shows us that new technologies are rarely fully adopted into teaching practice. Even in an era of nearly ubiquitous devices and access to the Internet, many educators are still loathe to change teaching practices within and outside of the classroom.

I can understand their concerns: technology is always changing; there is too much technology in school already; we aren't using the technology that we have in an effective manner. The list goes on. However, something very important is often being left out of this "too much technology" conversation. There are a number of powerful forces at work attempting to gain an advantage in the educational technology

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market, and teachers need to be at the forefront of this work. On the one side of the spectrum we have corporations who promise improvements in student performance on standardized measures once a certain study tool or classroom management system is implemented. Teachers must be cognizant of the ulterior (profit) motives in the promises that these technologies make.

On the far end opposite, advocates for open educational resources (OER) argue that creating and sharing thousands of lesson plans, textbooks, instructional screencasts, and other materials with the world is the way to go. The effects of OER – both positive and potentially negative – are still in their infancy, and are being systematically examined. While the motives may be considered more pure, teachers must be aware of the ways – both positive and negative – in which OER influences how technology might be used.

So, arguing that there is too much technology, that it changes too fast, that we won't use it anyway, or that we can't really use it in an effective manner are all impractical. Education and technology are intricately intertwined, both in our past and present, as well as in our future. As always, we find ourselves at a critical time, making decisions about how learning will be shaped within our classrooms and beyond.

Thus, the teachers who are innovating and attempting to use flipped learning for curriculum, instruction, and assessment are more likely to be able to analyze these trends and make intelligent decisions about when, why, and how to use technology. I certainly want them leading the way on these decisions in the classroom and in the flipped learning environment.

4. INFORMATION OVERLOAD

Lastly, the critiques from colleagues – at least as they relate to flipped learning – often center on the idea that there is simply too much information out there, and it is impossible to make heads or tails of it all. This is a bit different than the “too much technology” argument, in the sense that these colleagues are generally comfortable with the amount and use of technology, but worry about how to search for, sift out, and ultimately curate all kinds of information including text, images, video, and other forms of multimedia.

Interestingly enough, the Association of College and Research Libraries recently revised and updated their “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education” (2015). They have created a clear and concise list of six frames for understanding, exploring, and teaching information literacy, all of which could be applied to creating flipped learning opportunities as well:

- Authority Is Constructed and Contextual
- Information Creation as a Process
- Information Has Value
- Research as Inquiry
- Scholarship as Conversation
- Searching as Strategic Exploration

Given these new frames, a final response that I might offer my colleagues is this: never before in human history have we had access to the sum of human knowledge, literally, at our fingertips. However, even with that access, we need teachers to provide us guidance and instruction, to ask important questions and push her thinking, and to evaluate our progress and offer substantive feedback. Your role as a teacher is critical, both now and in the future. We need to be modeling the ways in which the flipped model of learning allows for any of these information literacy skills to happen in a more timely, efficient, and humane manner. If that happens, then I judge that approach to be an acceptable and highly appropriate use of technology.

MOVING INTO THIS VOLUME

Given the four concerns that I noted above, I revisit the premise of many of my colleagues' complaints: English teachers have been flipping forever.

No, I am afraid we have not.

As Carl and our colleagues have argued elsewhere, "Stop waiting for the technology of tomorrow to compel you to do the work of today" (Hicks, et al., p. 73).

The authors and editors of this volume offer us insights for entering the conversation about flipping the ELA classroom in ways that, as of yet, have not appeared in any other book about this pedagogical innovation. They offer theories and approaches for particular texts and technologies. They provide insights into the perspectives of students and teachers who are experiencing the flipped classroom. And most importantly, they generate creative possibilities and new conceptions of what flipping is and can do for teachers and students in the ELA classroom.

Stop waiting. Start flipping. It's time to get started.

Troy Hicks

Central Michigan University, USA

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