Chapter 6

Flipping the High School English Classroom Without Flipping Out: Maximizing Tech to Make Space for Text

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how a high school English language arts (ELA) teacher recorded instructional videos for students to watch outside the classroom in order to create more time in class to use experiential techniques, such as Project Based Learning (PBL). The chapter describes how the instructor first learned about the flipped technique, began teaching at a high school organized around the flipped concept, and identified what parts of the ELA curriculum could be delivered effectively as short videos. The author describes different techniques for creating flipped videos and how flipped videos were applied in a class lesson. The chapter also examines the academic and social impact of assigning video homework on both the students and parents in the school community, and describes the different styles of videos used in the school.

INTRODUCTION

In my first years of teaching, I read In the Middle, Nancie Atwell’s 1987 ground-breaking book on using a workshop approach to teaching English language arts (ELA), and I was inspired to try her techniques. As Atwell (1987) did before me, I got a coffee can, a stack of pencils, and a pile of blank paper, plopped it all down in the
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middle of my class and said, “Go!” But instead of the heart-warming breakthroughs Atwell experienced, the students balked. They complained. They doodled. They stole the extra pencils and made paper airplanes out of the paper. So what went wrong? I learned that you can’t just copy someone else’s methods unless you understand the principles behind them before you apply them to your own teaching style and, most importantly, to the needs of your current learners.

Flipping an ELA classroom is like that. Each teacher’s style is unique, and each classroom has a distinctive chemistry that makes any one-size-fits-all approach dangerous to contemplate. When I began flipping my classroom, I fell victim to some of those prescriptive ideals, and I caution each educator to start slowly, be very deliberate and reflective about the practice, and cull the best techniques for each class each year.

I first encountered the flipped technique as I moved my classroom to a Project Based Learning (PBL) model and was looking for ways to free up class time for more collaborative and individualized approaches. I was working with the New Tech Network, (https://newtechnetwork.org) which teaches a model of PBL that begins with an entry document to pose a specific problem to be solved or product to be produced. Class time is then spent guiding students to learn the skills they will need in order to solve the problem or create the product. At the time, I was using a more traditional teaching style, which involved presenting information to students through in-class PowerPoint lectures. These PowerPoint presentations typically involved direct instruction on some aspect of the curriculum, such as literary terms, biographical information on an author, or the historical context for a novel. I noticed that I was taking anywhere from 10-20 minutes or more in class each day giving lectures using these prepared slides. I was exploring the idea of giving the students the slides to read outside of class or finding some way to record myself giving these lectures when I first started learning about the term, “flipping” in journal publications and professional development sessions. In March 2012, I attended a workshop at The Friday Institute at North Carolina State University and heard a fellow teacher speak on why she had decided to flip her middle school math class. I decided this technique might be a way for me to move the lecture-based content of my course into short instructional videos that students could watch outside of class. Berrett (2012) asks educators to consider “whether it still makes sense to deliver a lecture when students can see the same material covered more authoritatively and engagingly—and at their own pace and on their own schedule” (p.2) through the flipped classroom method. I wondered that, too. I wanted to know if I could use my own laptop or smartphone to make instructional videos, and if I should be looking for opportunities to leverage video technology and move the didactic portions of my teaching to videos.
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