Challenges to Overcome and Scaffolding to Build on: Flipping a Humanities Course in a Chinese University

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ABSTRACT

While current research on the flipped classroom generally focuses on test results and (or) student/teacher perceptions as a measurement of its pedagogical efficacy, students’ adaptation to it and the essential conditions for its application are rarely explored. This exploratory case study aims to rectify this by examining how university students adapted to flipped classrooms implemented in a public university in East China. The findings suggest that while the flipped model is impeded by entrenched polarity between students in terms of their learning dispositions and academic competence, students do develop a prototype of theories of learning, a sense of better self through learning from their peers and an awareness of the importance of intrinsic motivation. A gradualist approach is thus proposed for implementing flipped classrooms, which requires longitudinal studies accordingly to understand its long-term effects on learning behavior hitherto left unexplored.

KEYWORDS

Active Learning, Adaptation, Flipped Classrooms, Pedagogy, Transition

INTRODUCTION

Over the past five years, the global higher education sector has seen an increasing uptake of a teaching model called the flipped classroom, characterised by the optimised use of face-to-face meetings between teachers and students (Bergmann & Sams, 2014)—an optimisation that responds strategically to the pressing challenge of declining student engagement (Yin & Wang, 2016; Coates & McCormick, 2014). The flipped classroom is a pedagogical approach in which students’ first encounter with new concepts moves from the group learning space of the classroom to the individual learning space at home, pre-packaged in structured activity, with the resulting group space transformed into an interactive learning environment where the instructor guides students through interactive and higher-order learning processes (Talbert, 2017). The flipped classroom model, whose applications vary widely across grade levels and subjects, differentiates itself from the traditional one by committing to active learning, which is marked by engaging students in doing things, thinking about what they are doing (Bonwell & Eison, 1991) and (co)constructing their own knowledge (Handelsman, Miller, & Pfund, 2007).

Existing empirical studies on the flipped model generally focus on a snapshot of test results through quasi-experiments (Yu & Wang, 2016; Hsieh, Wu, & Marek, 2016; Cobb, 2016; Hung, 2015).
and (or) student/teacher perceptions through surveys (Forsey, Low, & Glance, 2013; McNally et al., 2016; Hao, 2016) as a measurement of its efficacy. This leaves unaddressed the critical question of students’ experiences in adapting to the kind of engagement required of them to make the most of this classroom model. Guided by a theoretical framework of transition and adaptation, this paper reports on an exploratory case study that seeks to address this gap by examining Chinese undergraduates’ readiness to acculturate to a partially flipped humanities course. Two questions are asked to guide this research: 1). How do Chinese students’ experiences of adapting to the flipped classroom bear on their perceptions concerning teaching and learning? 2). What significance does flipped model of learning hold for Chinese students?

**COMPLEXITIES IN EVALUATING FLIPPED CLASSROOM**

Results emerging from empirical studies on flipped classrooms are mixed and reveal a complex picture. Flores, del-Arco, & Silva (2016), Hsieh et al. (2016) and Yu & Wang (2016) suggested that the adoption of flipped model leads to better student test performance and higher student satisfaction compared with the traditional approach. It is worth noting that the three studies claiming double gains for flipped classrooms over the traditional approach make too oversimplified a conclusion without taking into account potential biases built in design that may lead to their self-fulfillment. Flores and colleagues (2016) claimed the flipped model’s achievement gain by comparing academic results of student cohorts from three consecutive academic years, with only the flipped classroom cohorts given a special treatment of continuous assessment for remedial purposes. Apart from relying on the writing test to measure students’ writing skills, which was susceptible to raters’ subjective bias, the rigor of Yu and Wang’s study (2016) was further weakened by hypothesising better academic achievements and student preference for the flipped classroom over the traditional one. Hsieh et al. (2016), while perceiving the extra amount of time and effort required of students as a significant contributing factor in achievement gains of flipped classroom, did not address this issue by ramping up time commitment requirement and (or) time efficiency for the traditional mode of teaching in a way that levels the time playing field.

Others (Adnan, 2017; Skrypnyk et al., 2015; Yong, Levy, & Lape, 2015), however, suggest that the jury is still out. Adnan (2017), in comparing her flipped and lecture-based EFL classes, found no significant difference on scores achieved from midterm/quizzes and final e-portfolios. Even in essay writing where she did find flipped cohort significantly outperformed their non-flipped counterpart, she attributed this gain to essay writing being used as a classroom activity. In a comprehensive overview of meta-analyses on blended learning, Skrypnyk et al. (2015) pointed to additional time and resources input as a confounding factor in evaluating a pedagogical innovation compared with the traditional model. Cognizant of the subtlety involved in ruling out effects of confounding factors, Yong et al. (2015) ran a 4-year controlled study on flipping an undergraduate introductory calculus course. In this study, interactive lectures with elements of active learning were given to the controlled cohort and all student participants had generally high self-efficacy and positive attitudes about learning science and mathematics. The researchers reported no statistically significant effect on student achievement and attitudes due to reversal of teaching procedures per se, speculating that contextual factors such as strong group-work culture, equal access to instructional resources and opportunities for real-time questioning during lecture may mitigate the advantages supposedly enjoyed by the flipped model.

Complexities are also seen in students’ pedagogical preferences and learning dispositions. Cobb (2016), in assessing a controlled quasi-experiment with flipping the course American Government, admitted that achievement data may not seem to favour flipped classroom, but reported that more types of positive comments were made by students from the flipped section compared with those made either by the traditional or online section. Her findings are compatible with the observation made by McNally et al. (2016) that student preferences are not a reliable predictor of higher final grades. Moreover, research shows that even when students are frustrated with the flipped model itself, they
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