Flip The Page: Reinvigorating Literature in the Classroom through Flipped Learning

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Abstract

Flipped Learning is a new educational approach, which supports the pedagogical needs of today's students. In the Flipped approach, instructors make content available to students before class through web-based technologies, allowing for student-centered lessons. Following a Flipped approach on our literature course, literature texts were provided to students prior to class, leaving class-time free for discussion. Though effective, the design was instructor-centric. On the second course, aiming for a student-centric approach, students posted thematic artifacts onto a digital platform prior to class, and then shared their choices in class. Having tried two approaches, we wanted to compare the different classes' experiences. To do this, the following questions arose: Does providing student choice in material selection affect feelings of ownership and autonomy?; In which approach do students feel most engaged before class?; In which approach do students feel most prepared for class?; To answer these questions, data from student focus groups and end-of-semester student surveys were compared. Based on data comparison, we identified that in the second approach the students perceived higher levels of student ownership, autonomy, engagement, and preparedness. These results form the basis of how the next course can be adapted to further enhance students' learning experience.

Keywords: Generation Y and Z, Web-based Technologies, Collaborative Learning Environment, Case Study, MEF University, Student Autonomy

Introduction

Our research takes place at MEF University, in Istanbul, Turkey. MEF is the first fully Flipped university in the world. Every course at MEF, from the English Language Preparatory Program (ELPP) to all faculty courses, are Flipped. The Flipped Learning Network defines Flipped Learning as "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 where the educator guides students as they apply concepts and engage creatively in the subject matter" ("Flipped Learning Network," 2015). The main tenets of Flipped Learning are as follows. Instruction moves from being instructor-led to student-led. The instructor is no longer a "sage on the stage" but "a guide on the side" (King, 1993). Instructors provide content to students in the form of videos or digital materials via web-based technologies. This frees up class time for students to be actively involved in practically applying that content and also allows the students to become 'producers of knowledge, not consumers of knowledge' (Editors, 2013).

MEF has embraced Flipped Learning as the sole institutional, educational approach, as it believes the Flipped approach supports the pedagogical needs of today's Generation Y students and the Generation Z students of tomorrow. Today's students have grown up in a digitally connected world. They use technology in their everyday lives, and are aware that they will be expected to competently use technology when they enter the workforce. They therefore expect their education to support this by incorporating these digital technologies into their programs and maximizing their educational benefits. Flipped Learning supports this need as it incorporates technologies into its approach. Another important aspect that today's students face is that many of the jobs that exist today will not exist or will have been replaced by time students graduate. This means educational institutions can no longer prepare students for specific careers, they must teach them to be flexible to become and remain competitive in an unknown job market. Flipped Learning trains students to deal with this uncertainty, as it requires students to continually address what they know, their level of skills and competencies and what they need to do to develop these. In other words, it trains them to be autonomous learners who are flexible and adaptable to change. Finally, Flipped Learning can help to address the chasm that has appeared in the global employment market. This chasm has appeared through the erosion of middle-class jobs (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014) meaning growth is occurring at the very top of the employment market where entrepreneurial skills are required, and at the bottom where there is a growing need for lower paid service industry workers (Auerswald, 2012). This has led to "a new economy (which) favors highly skilled, highly educated workers" (Zhao, 2015: 130). However, industries at the top end of the market are currently struggling to find suitable candidates for these jobs which has led to the creation of a global talent shortage (Zhao, 2015: 131). Flipped Learning can help train graduates in the skills needed to fill this talent shortage as it encourages critical thinking, creativity, entrepreneurship, problem-solving and active involvement in developing real-life projects. Flipped Learning enables institutions to graduate the innovative and entrepreneurial employees that today's industries so desperately need.

English Literature

That brings us to the story of how we developed a Flipped literature course. While students moving from ELPP to faculty have all achieved an intermediate level of English, it emerged that many felt a need for additional support to improve their English in order to feel comfortable studying in the fully English-medium environment required in their faculty courses. In order to meet this need, instructors in the School of Foreign Languages were approached with a request to develop elective courses in areas of special interest that students wishing to continue to improve their English could take. Based on our backgrounds in the field, we felt literature could provide an ideal conduit for students to develop their English, enabling them to develop their critical thinking skills while contemplating literature in the context of issues relevant to their lives.

Literature, by definition, requires personal and analytical engagement. It challenges those who engage meaningfully with it to think critically and question perceived norms. It also asks that individuals assert themselves in this process - that they acknowledge their *self* in relation to the text and the points it is making. Literature, therefore, even in the most classic educational setting, already contains the key elements of Flipped Learning. Students read and research texts prior to class in preparation to engage in critical debate and discussion with their peers in the classroom. We therefore felt that it would be relatively simple to take a Flipped approach on our literature course; literary texts would be provided for students to read prior to class, then the practical connections to the world in which we live would be evaluated and analyzed in the actual lesson.

Design of the First Course

As we had been approached to develop a course based on students' desire to continue developing their English in their first year of faculty, we decided that the aim of the course should be to provide students with the linguistic skills necessary to succeed in their undergraduate studies; mostly speaking, but also listening, reading, and writing skills relevant to broad range of subject areas. We therefore decided to design the course so that listening, reading, and writing activities would be carefully chosen to generate and complement speaking activities. We felt this would help the students become more confident, independent, and experienced speakers of English. Due to the students wishing to further develop their English to prepare them better for faculty, the following learning outcomes were written. Upon successful completion of the course, we expected our students to be able to: 1) engage in and contribute meaningfully to formal debates; utilize the skills of active listening, polite interruption/interjection, and turn taking; and bring a debate to a close, 2)

research, plan and produce academic opinion essays including formatting, citation, cohesive devices, discourse markers, 3) research, plan and produce presentations, and field post-presentation questions effectively. Once the learning outcomes had been identified, we moved on to investigate which content to include. With the course aim and learning outcomes in place, next we moved on to the course design. We wanted to design the course in a way which would enable students to develop their linguistic skills while exploring and analyzing a range of literature, so that each week, students would engage with several different types of texts/materials (book excerpts, poems, song lyrics, articles) covering topics fundamental to the world we live in today. The students would read the texts before class, then summarise and break down the themes, critique and discuss them, and finally produce pieces of writing to show how well they had understood those themes. In order to create a cohesive design for the course, we felt the best way to organize the literature was through a variety of lenses. We therefore decided that units would have a thematic focus ('War', 'Politics and Power', 'Women's Rights', etc). Deciding on these themes was a difficult task in that the sheer breadth of the history of literature at times appeared daunting. Eventually, we decided to settle on those themes we felt were most universal across varying cultures and historical eras. Once we had the themes in mind, we had to decide on the approach within those themes. After deciding on the actual excerpts and literary pieces we would use, we uploaded them to the university LMS (Blackboard) in folders labeled according to theme. Students would read the pieces and complete tasks prior to class. These tasks would range from answering discussion questions (which would be further explored in class later), researching vocabulary, and brainstorming potential meanings of passages. The next stage was to decide how to assess students' achievement of the learning outcomes. Due to the thematic nature of the units, we decided that the most appropriate approach would be to assess the students throughout the course on their verbal skills, written skills and participation. The following assessment structure was therefore developed.

Table 1. *Assessment structure for the Understanding Literature, Understanding Life Course*

Essay	mparing a single theme or idea in two themes in two or more texts from the syllabus), (500-750 words, to be handed in by the end of Week 4). Students will be assessed on a) essay structure (correct construction of the 5 paragraphs), b) appropriate style for quoting long and short passages of text, c) tone and style (formal, distanced, little to no use of 'I'), e) word count (500-750 words).	25%
Oral Presentation	jumentative. Students will be assessed on a) use of rhetoric: questions, refutation, balance (while I agree with A, B is not right), b) use of supporting ideas/quotes from texts studied c) delivery (pauses, stress, speed etc.), d) dialogue, unplanned responses during Q & A e) timekeeping.	50%
Weekly in-class debate	idents will be assessed on a) ability to present a coherent argument during discussion using appropriate introduction phrases, b) ability to interrupt politely using phrases taught on the course, c) how clearly they verbalise agreement/disagreement through the use of target phrases, d) how well they listen actively to others, showing interest, doubt, agreement etc., and e) being able to ask for clarification as and when necessary.	15%
Class Participation	sed on a rubric - some weeks instructor graded, other weeks self or peer graded.	10%

We learned a great deal from the first run of the course. The students had taken very well to the autonomy and engagement that the Flipped approach had afforded them. However, after taking a closer look at the course, analyzing the end of semester student satisfaction survey, and sharing our reflections with various colleagues on the matter, we realized that we could do more to truly Flip our course. So, the challenge that remained was for us was to find how we could better apply the Flipped methodology to get students learning on their own terms, with their own contributions, to an even greater degree through the passion and knowledge they had clearly demonstrated. Although students had engaged in meaningful ways with the themes and content of the first course, we wanted to

explore ways in which learners would have more control over the content and direction of the course, thus increasing their autonomy and, as a result, meaningful engagement and sense of ownership.

Design of the Second Course

When designing the second course, we decided to revisit the tenets of Flipped Learning regarding utilizing web-based technologies, taking a student-centered approach, and encouraging high levels of autonomy and enquiry. In order to meet these tenets, we wanted to find a way in which we could combine the digital platforms that our students use in their everyday lives with a more student-centered, autonomous approach that would encourage them to become producers of knowledge on the course, not simply consumers as had happened on the first course. Therefore, we decided to take the following approach. We would give students the theme for the two-week period, but instead of immediately providing them with texts, we would ask them to find a relevant digital artifact (a poem, an image, a song) and upload the artifact onto a shared digital platform. This would provide a student-driven space for students to share their artifacts, their ideas and raise questions at the start of each thematic unit. The literary text would only be introduced after the students had been actively involved in developing themes and ideas at the start of each unit. Padlet emerged as a natural candidate to provide the social space in which students could share their ideas. Padlet is a website that functions as a digital display board onto which students can post a range of media (pictures, videos, texts, other documents) to express themselves. Critically, it is a shared, collaborative space for learners to engage with each other and the material, free from the direction of the instructor. The only limit we placed on student contributions was that they needed to be connected in some way to the upcoming literary theme. While the Padlet boards were driven by students, they were monitored by the instructors in order to give us the opportunity to implement Just-In-Time Teaching, a strategy developed by Gregory Novak and colleagues (Marrs & Novak 2004). In this approach, students are given pre-class tasks through an online medium that instructors can observe in real-time. Instructors can then modify the upcoming lesson based on the materials that students provide. After having decided to do this, we felt it appropriate to alter the assessment structure by changing the percentage of the overall course grade, thereby incentivizing and indicating the importance of pre-class participation. To do this, we moved 10% of the final grade from the final oral presentation and allocated it to students' Padlet contributions.

The Research

It quickly became clear to us that the course, over time, had evolved and changed in significant and sometimes unexpected ways. We therefore wanted to take a closer look at exactly what these changes were and how they affected our learning outcomes and the student experience.

We had designed the first course in such a way that followed a traditional approach to literature instruction, whereby introduction of materials was chosen and directed by the instructor. On the second course, we had added more student-driven elements as well as collaborative software in order to increase student involvement and autonomy. While our impression was that we had improved autonomy and student-centeredness, we wanted to check this against what the students were saying. The following research questions therefore arose: Does providing student choice in material selection affect student's sense of ownership and autonomy?; In which approach do students feel most engaged prior to class?; In which approach do students feel most prepared for class?. In order to answer these questions, the following data were compared between the first and second courses. Firstly, to hear what the students were saying, qualitative data from student focus groups was collected. In addition, quantitative data was collected from end-of-semester student surveys in which students were asked to respond to questions by indicating their response on a scale from 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree'. Data presented in the analysis of results represents the 'strongly agree/agree' responses. This data is available upon request.

Analysis of Results

Based on the focus groups, it became clear that students from the first course did not feel they had much ownership over the course or the materials used. When asked how much input or effect they had on the materials used, students responded by saying things like, "I felt I didn't have much control."(MEF University Student, 2015). Students from the second run of the course, however, had a different attitude, responding with, "The teachers didn't just say, 'We are going to do this'. They gave us options,"(MEF University Student, 2015) and, "I'm doing the materials the teacher gives, it's not a problem, because we have freedom to speak our minds." (MEF University Student, 2015).

Student autonomy was one of the areas in which we saw another change from course one to course two. When we asked students if they had engaged with materials before class on their own, students from the first course responded with sentences such as, "Not really,"(MEF University Student, 2015) and, "A little." (MEF University Student, 2015). In the second focus group, however, students responded differently, saying, "In my view, student-centered classes should be like the literature course is - the debates and discussions let us talk a lot and express ourselves. In class, everyone talks, and there is a connection between the students." (MEF University Student, 2015). This was also seen in the end-of-semester survey with 91% of students (32 out of 35 respondents) saying the course enabled them to express their own ideas; this increased to 95% (10 out of 11 respondents) in the second course.

Students from both courses felt that the pre-class activities and materials helped prepare them for lessons. For example, students who took the course in the first semester said, "It helped," (MEF University Student, 2015) and, "We read them, but we just talked about if we liked the literature or not." (MEF University Student, 2015). Students from the second course, however, responded more definitively, saying, "The activities helped prepare us because it was really important to read before class, otherwise it was hard to understand during the lesson. It's very useful," (MEF University Student, 2015) and, "It was fun and it helped to look at them before class." (MEF University Student, 2015).

When asked how much they had engaged with the pre-class materials, students from the first course responded from "not at all" to "a little" to "some"(MEF University Students, 2015). However, in the second course, a great difference could be seen. One student said, "I think Padlet is good for debating because we see other people's ideas about the subject." (MEF University Student, 2015). Other students responses were even more positive, including one student who responded with, "I often do some research before the class. I think it's useful to make the lesson more efficient. It's just one or two pages long. When I do that before the lesson, it helps me to figure out how to understand the topic. It enlightens me." (MEF University Student, 2015). Being actively involved in the pre-class process may also have facilitated in students' understanding of what was required of them prior to class, with 91% of students (32 out of 35 respondents) from the first course responding that they found it easy to understand what activities they needed to complete before class in contrast to 100% of students (11 out of 11 respondents) in the second course. These results and perceptions provide evidence to support our assumptions that the shift from instructor-chosen materials to student-chosen materials increases students' sense of ownership and autonomy in the course, their engagement with pre-class materials, clarity on what is required of them, and preparedness for class.

Discussion

Now in the second semester of our second year, we have experienced first hand the benefits and pitfalls of 'Flipping' the classroom. We believe there are definite advantages to the Flipped approach, not least its insistence that learners play an active role in not only what, but also *how* they learn. Of course, any learning methodology must take into account the unique characteristics that define the culture and educational background of the students within it. We believe that what this means is, though it is an ostensibly broad approach that has the potential to alter the educational landscape, the methodology has to be implemented mindfully, remembering that a successful learning experience is always the ultimate goal.

One of the goals we had in mind after the end of the first run of the course was to give students a greater say in directing the content and direction of the course. In fact, this is exactly what occurred. Padlet clearly opened a vein for students to speak their minds and take control of their learning to a greater degree. Perhaps the most happy of our realizations was that, when given this opportunity, they absolutely took advantage of it. Oftentimes, we threw out entire lesson plans that we had prepared in favor of what the students had provided on Padlet and went in a direction that was entirely student-driven.

This tells us a number of things, and leads us into a discussion of educational context. As students in many educational settings have often lamented, too frequently does the learning process rely on rote memorization of facts and test-based approaches. It is clear that imposing these kinds of environments on learners has the opposite effect to what is desired; student interest levels drop, comprehensive understanding falters, and learning - one of life's greatest joys - suffers terribly, becoming just another chore to surpass as quickly as possible. Worse, it becomes viewed as unnecessary. There must be room for inspiration in and outside of the classroom, for this is a key

element to the learning process. Happily, our experience has shown that, when you give students the opportunity to produce content, to, actively engage in what is happening in the classroom, to take responsibility for their learning - even when they are unaccustomed to having such autonomy - they will take full advantage of it.

Furthermore, applying the Flipped learning methodology to any course raises a number of interesting questions, not the least of which addresses the very nature of Flipped itself and its aims. The whole point of Flipped Learning is to empower the learner, to give them more autonomy and a greater degree of personalization in their education. But we must go further and ask, to what end? Why? As educators, we need to address the question of why we educate ourselves and our children. Is it only to survive economically? Yes, partially, but it is also much more. Human beings are naturally curious - we crave learning. In no uncertain terms, a healthy, holistic education that emphasizes the humanities as well as the sciences, is one way to prevent, as David Foster Wallace says, "...going through your comfortable, prosperous, respectable adult life dead, unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone day in and day out" (Wallace, 2009).

Perhaps the best way to sum up what we feel was the intellectual and educational focus and success of the literature course is the following quote from a student: "Maybe this problem isn't unique for our country but, many people don't read in Turkey, not much anyway. The literature class provided us with some opportunities we haven't had before - as you know this lesson provided some ability in us. I liked the debates - I think this was the most useful activity in our lesson. Everyone talked and gave their opinions. We could change their ideas, or we could change ours." (MEF University Student, 2015).

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