

Chapter 4

Flipping First-Year English: Strengthening Teacher–Student Conferencing through Online Modules

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the development, implementation, and assessment of an online module that addresses argument writing for First-Year English classes at University of Wisconsin – Whitewater. The author offers a blueprint for the development of online modules—from planning and funding to implementation and assessment—in order to offer new approaches to the flipped or inverted classroom that may be of particular interest to courses in the Humanities, specifically English. The chapter also offers advice and best practices for instructors interested in developing such modules in order to supplement student learning and create more effective conferencing strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The university is a constantly evolving space, with seemingly endless access to online technologies. Campuses across the country are remodeling and refurbishing dormitories, offices and common-use spaces with wireless Internet connections and access stations. Recent studies (Ross, 2011) show that “87 percent of current college students considered their institution’s technology in their decision to attend that school” (para 2). If access to technology is a motivating factor for choosing one school over another, one can assume that colleges and universities are making the availability of technology a top priority in order to woo potential students. Ostensibly, the university classroom is not exempt from such attention. As such, education technology continues to take many forms: online courses, hybrid courses, creation of blogs, and the flipped (or inverted) classroom are just a few. As individual instructors reimagine the use of technology in their classes, this list will continue to grow.

The online classroom has continued to make headlines over the past decade, but trends appear to be moving toward the flipped classroom, commonly understood as the swapping of in-class lectures/content delivery and outside-of-class assignments and activities. In a basic flipped classroom, students access

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0783-3.ch004

lectures or lessons outside of class; in-class time is spent applying these lectures or lessons through discussion, laboratory experiments, etc.

This chapter will share the recent experiences of a group of four instructors in the Department of Languages and Literatures at University of Wisconsin-Whitewater who are moving beyond the basic flipped classroom to a module-based approach to teaching and learning. Specifically, it will discuss the development of an online module designed to help English 101 and 102 students to develop their argument writing skills; the module includes brainstorming, considering and responding to counter-points and different perspectives, and developing strong theses. “Online module,” here, describes a component of instruction (essentially, a lesson) that can be moved into an online delivery system. The innovation of the module is not simply the creation of flipped lessons, but assignments that would support teacher-student conferencing, an incredibly important part of the composition classroom. This module should adequately prepare students for their conferences. With that goal in mind, its strength is that it improves upon the previous scholarship on the flipped classroom. This module does not simply move the lectures online, which is a feature of basic flipped classrooms; instead, it moves lectures, exercises, drafting and reflection online, understanding that the lessons offered need to be reinforced with application.

The module is also useful and noteworthy in a second important way. Not all instructors will assign the entire module; most instructors will choose which sections and videos to assign to their students. So, if instructors felt they had covered close reading in class, they could omit that section from their students prep work. As material was considered for inclusion in the module and videos, instructor choice was an important factor. When the scripts were written and filmed the scripts, they were divided into assignable pieces, in some ways modularizing the modules. This would allow instructors to direct their students to specific sections or videos that they wanted them to focus on. For example, the section on Brainstorming can be assigned and watched without having to also watch the previous videos.

The hope is that this chapter will also contribute to the small, but growing, body of literature on flipped classrooms in higher education. As such, it is organized with an eye towards clarity and replication. The first section of this chapter will provide a brief history of flipped classrooms and the modifications made for university students in the Humanities. The next section will discuss the rationale and funding sought for the creation of the online module at University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. Then, implementation of the module will be discussed. Finally, the chapter will include assessment of the module from students and instructors who piloted it over AY 2013-2014 and propose revisions moving forward and for a department-wide roll out planned for spring 2015.

BACKGROUND

History of the Flipped Classroom

The *flipped*, or *inverted*, classroom is one in which the material usually covered during class time is delivered outside of class; and, the work usually done outside of class is done during class. Not surprisingly, high schools have enthusiastically embraced flipped classroom models, and much of the scholarship on the flipped classroom is coming directly out of high school instructors’ experiences. Often, high schools have even greater obstacles to student learning than colleges: *e.g.* inconsistent or shrinking funding, fluctuating curriculum, instructor and student retention, and extreme variances in student preparation.

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