

Using Flipgrid for teaching practice: Pre-service student teachers' reflections and lessons learnt

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Abstract

Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, South African universities have, like other universities worldwide, been faced with the transition from face-to-face classes to online teaching. Teaching practice (TP) coordinators (university lecturers responsible for the work-integrated learning component of teacher training programmes) found themselves having to improvise and innovate to meet this sudden pedagogical change by revisiting conventional TP models and approaches and finding new ways to give student teachers valid and constructive alternatives to face-to-face classes when these were suspended (Carrillo and Flores, 2020; Hojeij and Baroudi, 2021; Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison, 2020). From the perspective of pre-service student teachers at a South African university, this case study reviews the effectiveness of 'Flipgrid', a social-learning video platform, which was successfully integrated into a third-year TP module. One of its greatest strengths proves to be its ability to provide pre-service student teachers with the opportunity to gain confidence in their teaching abilities.

1. Introduction

In 2021, Flipgrid, as an alternative platform to Microsoft OneDrive, was implemented and integrated into the teaching practice (TP) of Year 3 at a South African university, to provide pre-service student teachers with the opportunity to share their voice and practise their teaching during this time of crisis. It was unclear whether Flipgrid could successfully fulfil the purpose of virtual teaching and/or replace physical school visits as had been the norm for this university's student teachers. However, by practising and applying specific teaching strategies and methods, students were able to share with their peers and lecturers the videos they felt satisfied with. The deployment of Flipgrid provided the opportunity for the presenters, their peers and education lecturers to observe the presenters 'in action' for the first time. The lesson videos and lesson plans, having been shared on Flipgrid by their creators, were distributed to the respective specialisation lecturers for evaluation and feedback. Over 3,700 video submissions by 322 third-year, pre-service student teachers were made. In this paper, the author would like to share the experiences of ten randomly selected pre-service student teachers, to highlight some of the strengths and weaknesses of Flipgrid as a platform for TP. Recommendations are also made to TP coordinators who are considering using Flipgrid as a platform as part of the work-integrated learning component of teacher training programmes.

2. Understanding Flipgrid

Unlike many other platforms, Flipgrid (www.flipgrid.com) is a free and user-friendly video discussion platform which facilitates collaborative and social learning between students (Stoszkowski, 2018). Taylor and Hinchman (2020, p.26) define Flipgrid as “a *valuable experiential learning tool*” which “*enables educators to engage students in a variety of learning and assessment activities*”. Flipgrid can be accessed via a web-based browser on a computer or via the mobile application (Stoszkowski, Hodgkinson and Collins, 2021). According to McClure and McAndrews (2016), Flipgrid, in its original form, limited – to ninety seconds or less – students’ opportunity to critique articles, to reflect and to demonstrate understanding of course content. Now, it allows video responses of up to ten minutes, so opening up new and better possibilities for engagement with the course. Taylor and Hinchman (2020) point out that Flipgrid can be utilised, among other purposes, as a tool for both group discussion and assessment.

Flipgrid’s functionality is based on two types of navigation options, namely the educator dashboard (requiring the creation of a Flipgrid educator account) and member view (requiring a join code or custom link). The platform employs grids and topics. A grid created for a course houses the topics (discussions) (Green and Green, 2018). By entering a join code or by clicking on a custom link, students are able to upload their discussion videos on a specific topic. Before submitting a video, students can each record their screen and add photos and effects, together with a hyperlink and music. When a video has been uploaded, others (those who have access to the code or link) can view it and post public or private comments about it. Such responses can be given in a written format or a video of up to ten minutes). This feature gives course coordinators and fellow students the opportunity to provide constructive formative feedback about the work. The educator or course coordinator manages the videos in the dashboard. In each topic, the number of video responses, total views, views per video, number of comments and hours of engagement are provided. All of these can reflect the students’ and lecturers’ online presence and their engagements with the posted discussion videos. Flipgrid has many more strengths – and some weaknesses – as summarised by Stoszkowski (2018).

3. Case study findings

This section presents some of the main findings that resulted from the reflections of the ten pre-service student teachers on the use of Flipgrid.

3.1 Unfamiliarity and lack of privacy

At first, students’ lack of familiarity with Flipgrid caused some of them anxiety and frustration. In some cases, the size of a video was problematic (Student 9), while, in others, the students experienced challenges with uploading (Student 4). Fortunately, after the first week, a significant reduction in requests for technical support indicated that users were feeling more comfortable about the practicalities of the platform. Also, before Flipgrid introduced the ‘backdrop’ option (launched in August 2021), students had to record their videos in their rooms or personal spaces. Thus, their private physical backgrounds were readily visible and, understandably, when peers

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and lecturers were able to view what they had produced, they were clearly self-conscious about, say, their 'home situation' (Student 1). The lack of privacy makes students feel uncomfortable about recording and sharing their lesson presentations.

Student 9: *"Submitting the lesson on Flipgrid was also what I least enjoyed because I was challenging sometimes the videos will be too big or too small."*

Student 4: *"What I enjoyed least about the experience was the reliability of the app as it had a number of flaws which always resulted in us as students submitting late usually I can load a video for hours without loading it into the app for us to submit."*

Student 1: *"At first I was very nervous, when I saw that all my peers could view my video and that they would have been able to commented on my lesson. Whether it could have been good or negative comments it would have rattled me. I wanted everything to be perfect from the place where I standing in the video to the correct content of the material that I would use. I honestly wouldn't want my peers to judge me or my home situation."*

3.2 Connectivity issues

Flipgrid requires users to have a device with a functional camera – such as a laptop, mobile or tablet – and good internet connectivity. In some cases, students had to borrow devices from family members, neighbours or community members to record their lesson presentations. While it is easy to assume that most, if not all, students have access to smart devices and good internet connectivity in our contemporary high-tech world, that is certainly not the case. Having to stay at home to reduce COVID-19 transmission meant that not all of them had access to the high-speed fibre internet available on campus. Despite the university's supplying internet data to all the students, this challenge persisted. It resulted in the stalling and failure of video uploads to the platform (Students 2, 5 and 6). The majority of students (approximately 80%) at this university are from the Northern Cape Province, where, in some remote districts, internet access and connectivity tend to be poor and restrictive. Poor connectivity was a major cause of the student teachers' anxiety.

Student 2: *"...connectivity issues made it more difficult to effectively keep up with Flipgrid, it required data because VPN was not in support of."*

Student 5: *"During the 3 weeks of virtual teaching, I also experienced connectivity issues, and there were times when I did not have data to submit my lesson or to find teaching media."*

Student 6: *"Sometimes slow connections make it difficult to upload the video."*

3.3 Opportunities for teaching and reflection

It is evident from the pre-service student teachers' reflections that the creation and uploading of teaching videos to Flipgrid contribute to their confidence, preparedness and the overall quality of their lesson presentations (Students 8, 5 and 10). Flipgrid provides a non-threatening learning

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environment for pre-service student teachers (Students 6 and 1) because unlimited attempts are allowed and students can upload the lesson presentation video that they feel is 'up to standard' (Students 7 and 5). By watching and re-watching their own teaching videos and the videos of their peers, students reflect on their teaching and are able to rectify their mistakes in their next recorded video (Students 3 and 10).

Student 8: *"What I most enjoyed about using Flipgrid for virtual teaching was that I got to gain experience in the process of giving lessons (i.e., doing lesson plans, preparing content, presenting the lesson) without having to do contact lessons, but from home."*

Student 6: *"What I most enjoyed about using Flipgrid for virtual teaching was that it allowed me to present a lesson without any fear or pressure of the live classroom. I was pretending as if I was in a real classroom and this made me feel confident as it prepared me for the real classroom. If I have made a mistake, I was able to restart a video."*

Student 1: *"What I enjoyed most about using Flipgrid was the fact that I saw it as a safe haven. I felt comfortable and could teach, without feeling as if a lot of people were looking at me. I could plan my lessons and do and re-do the videos if I was not satisfied with the video that I had made. There were no negative comments made on our videos from our peers. This made me feel courageous to keep on doing them. Doing these videos gave me a chance to reflect back on what I could have said or done to improve the lesson. It kept me on my toes and eager to do more of the lessons."*

Student 7: *"I was able to present my lesson with imaginary learners and after watching the lesson I have recorded for reflection purposes and to improve the lesson with. Flipgrid teaching and learning can be perfect or amazing since as a student teacher if there was anything that can be improved in the recorded lesson, there was a chance to record another lesson that is improved."*

Student 5: *"What I most enjoyed about using Flipgrid for virtual teaching was to see myself teach. By taking videos, I could watch it over and over again and improve on my weaknesses and know my strengths. I also had the opportunity to practice my teaching skills and to build confidence in teaching, because I had a chance to rectify my mistakes before sharing my teaching with others and opening myself to judgement. During the 3 weeks of virtual teaching, I became more creative, because I had to improvise. Since I had no learners in my class, I made my own learners from paper. I lived myself into teaching and imagined that it was real learners to ensure that there is interaction amongst me and the learners."*

Student 3: *"... once you present, there was a chance for us to reflect on our lessons and go backwards in our reflections, so we could rewind or change what we did not like about our presentation, something that does not happen in a regular class setting."*

Student 10: *"What I most enjoyed about using Flipgrid for virtual teaching was being easy to teach and having confidence in myself while teaching. The pressure of having to stand in front of the class and teach was not there I could just plan my lesson and record it and that will be all."*

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Another thing is that Flipgrid app was easy to use and it stored our lesson videos where I can always go back to reflect on my videos as well as on other fellow student videos on how to do better for my next video lesson.”

3.4 Absence of learners

Unfortunately, Flipgrid does not replicate the real classroom, offering only one-way communication and lacking actual interaction with learners. The physical absence of learners means that pre-service student teachers feel that they need to imagine learner responses to their questions or their particular style of teaching. The experience therefore lacks authenticity because it feels ‘scripted and planned’ (Student 7). They voiced their desire to manage real-life challenging classroom situations, such as ill-disciplined learners (Students 5 and 8).

Student 5: “What I least enjoyed about using Flipgrid for virtual teaching was the absenteeism of learner reaction, since I had to respond as the learners. Furthermore, I did not have the opportunity to practice how I will deal with difficult learners. Although I could have pretended that there was difficult learners, it is not the same as with real learners, because you never know what to expect.”

Student 6: “I had to pretend as if there are learners in front of me. However, this makes me to feel like I am speaking alone because I had to ask questions and answer them by myself. Sometimes I was losing focus because I felt like I am speaking alone.”

Student 7: “I was teaching imaginary learners which is different to teaching learners since the learners responses are scripted and planned unlike when teaching learners because as a teacher you don’t know what type of answers learners will give and how they will behave in the classroom. With Flipgrid everything was sort of rehearsed. Teaching imaginary learners sometimes wasn’t challenging as teaching learners.”

Student 8: “Having no one in attendance to present lessons to, denies teachers the chance to gain experience in working with students. More specifically, student participation in class, how to deal with disruptive students, and keeping students involved and interested in lessons.”

4. How to use Flipgrid effectively for teaching practice: lessons learnt

Despite all the challenges reported by students, the deployment of Flipgrid for TP was relatively successful because most pre-service student teachers managed to upload their teaching videos and were assessed by lecturers. Except for more obvious recommendations such as that students should have access to proper technological devices and internet connection, the author makes the following recommendations which might make Flipgrid more effective for TP (including assessments).

Firstly, to demonstrate complete lesson presentations effectively, multiple video submissions may be necessary. The current ten-minute video length restriction might be sufficient neither for student teachers to showcase their teaching competencies nor for lecturers to make reliable

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assessments. To break the lesson up into a number of smaller videos – for example, part 1 (introduction), part 2 (body) and part 3 (conclusion) – works well.

Secondly, before students submit their videos, they are provided with the opportunity to name their video and to add more details. Flipgrid has a nametag option that can help to organise video submissions by large groups of students. Similarly, pasting a link to the lesson plan (via, for example, OneDrive and Google Drive) into the 'link' field before submission means that the students' video presentations and lesson plans will be located in one place, thereby increasing accessibility and streamlining assessment.

Thirdly, with large student groups and multiple video submissions per student, it is important to consider carefully the naming of topics within a particular grid. While to do so according to subject area might be considered logical, it depends on staffing capacity within an education faculty. Fortunately, the moving of videos from one grid to another can be done by the educators.

Fourthly, Flipgrid's August 2021 deactivation and removal of the rubric functionality can affect the summative assessment of lesson presentations for TP. TP coordinators will have to propose alternatives if they are to grade students' work on Flipgrid.

Lastly, TP coordinators should not rely too heavily on the exported 'comma-separated values' (CSV) data file. While the file is useful for record purposes and has a summary of the submission made, the file format and the layout are not user-friendly. Accessing videos and analysing video submission data using this file are time-consuming. Details regarding a specific video submission can be more easily retrieved direct from an individual's video.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this case study was to focus on the effectiveness and practicality of Flipgrid as a social-learning platform, primarily from the perspectives of pre-service student teachers from South Africa. It was found that Flipgrid can be used by university education faculties to help pre-service student teachers to practise their teaching competencies. The successful implementation of Flipgrid into TP is largely dependent on internet connectivity and the support made available to students. The case study also makes valuable recommendations that can be useful to TP coordinators in education faculties. Since 2021, the author has continued to use Flipgrid as an assessment tool in a variety of education modules (other than TP). With the majority of student teachers now back on campus, complaints have been minimal. That said, the search for alternative platforms has continued, especially for a free online platform that allows video submissions longer than ten minutes. The author is planning, in a follow-up paper, to share a detailed analysis of students' reflections of the pedagogical value of submitting videos on Flipgrid.

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