

Timing is flipping everything: A case study in Law that suggests student engagement depends on when the Flipped Classroom is introduced

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Introduction

The Flipped Classroom turns the traditional teaching format on its head (Bergmann & Sams, 2012). In the traditional lecture and seminar, the taught time in-class focuses on the delivery of new content. The lecturer presents this information and the students take notes. This can result in surface learning, where the student reproduces the information without reflecting on what is actually being taught (Entwistle, 2005). The opportunity offered by the Flipped Classroom, to adapt the traditional large group lecture and home study elements of a course, can lead to a more effective interactive learning environment. First-hand personal experience has confirmed the pedagogic theory: students engage in the subject matter through actively applying their understanding of the knowledge they have constructed. In the process, they often surprise themselves with how much they actually know. The benefits and challenges posed by this pedagogic approach have been highlighted previously (Simmons and Swan, 2015, Stripe and Carrier, 2015), but there remains an unanswered question. Could student engagement with the Flipped Classroom be dependent on the year of study it was introduced? It is possible to suggest that it does.

What is the 'Flipped' Classroom?

In the flipped model, the lecturer presents new content in a recorded format either direct to camera or using presentation software with a voiceover, which students view outside of the classroom. The time in-class is then freed up for activities that engage the students with the material, and allow them to reflect and analyse what has been taught. These can include working through a problem question or a scenario, or presenting their understanding of the work. Students can become active learners by talking about what they are learning, writing about what they are learning and relating it to the problem they are trying to solve (Chickering A. W, & Gamson Z.F, 1987). There is a view that new content should not be added when flipping because it negates the purpose of this teaching style (Upchurch, 2013). Brief lectures however, are acceptable on linked material (Davis, Neary, Vaughn, 2013) and this was incorporated into my approach.

Teaching on a Law Degree

Student expectation for a law degree is that content will be delivered by lectures and seminars (Varnava and Webb, 2009). This is largely because of the need to deliver a vocationally-mandated syllabus that tends to be content-heavy. The culture associated with this format is one of structured directions from the lecturer, which can potentially lead to a lack of self-discipline to prepare for classes (Alias, 2011). A content-heavy subject such as law can be supported by the in-class interaction (Wolff and Chan, 2016) that is offered by the Flipped Classroom. This model is underpinned by the need for students to study independently by watching the flipped material (Upchurch, 2013). If they do not do this, their ability to test their understanding and ask questions in class will be limited (Wolff and Chan, 2016).

First-year law students may not have good independent study skills, and the Flipped Classroom could help develop them in this area. Exposing them to flipped learning early in their degree could mean they do not become reliant on the structured directions from the lecturer. Students in the third year of their degree however, who despite having had two years to develop the necessary study skills, may find it challenging to adapt to this style of teaching. The approach is very different to structured lectures and directed learning in seminars, and at such a late stage in their degree, they may struggle to engage with this style of learning. To be informed as to whether the year of study is a relevant factor when considering the use of the Flipped Classroom would be a useful addition to the existing literature on the subject.

This case study sought to test the hypothesis that third-year law students introduced to the Flipped Classroom for the first time would find it harder to adapt from the traditional teaching format and engage with the flipped pedagogy. First-year law students introduced to this approach with only one term's experience of the traditional teaching format would find it easier to adapt and therefore engage better.

Flipping Law: The Case Study

I acknowledge that the variables in this study could have affected the final results. It would be however, almost impossible to run a controlled experiment to test this hypothesis. The biggest variable was the different numbers of students between the groups, owing to the third-years being taught on an optional course, however the number of students that completed the evaluation questionnaires was comparable. There were also different attendance rates, with the first-year law students having relatively low attendance in that year group. This may have affected the data concerning the level of engagement with the flipped material. Finally, for the purpose of the case study, the levels of ability between the two groups of students was not considered.

In the 2015/16 academic year, the Flipped Classroom was used to teach two topics, on two courses over five weeks. The flipped material for both courses took the format of short PowerPoint presentations where a narration was recorded for each slide using the screen capture tool, Panopto. The recordings were no longer than 15 minutes. Students were only required to watch one each week, and they could access them via Moodle through a link that took them directly to the recording.

Third-year law students

The Law of Evidence was an optional course that students could choose to study in the final year of their law degree. The topics included technical areas of law that were rooted in legislation as opposed to case law. These students had little or no exposure to the Flipped Classroom in their three years of study. They had to adapt to this new teaching style, so the importance of watching the flipped material before class, and the benefits of the Flipped Classroom (Wolff and Chan, 2016) were explained to them beforehand. The students had been learning the Law of Evidence for the past six months, so they were able to watch material which introduced a new legal concept, because they had sufficient understanding of the key principles in this area. For the first topic, the initial flipped material introduced specific legislation and the relevant legal rules. The in-class lecture was two-hours long so the students were given a couple of activities to enable them to test their understanding of what

they had watched. Their first activity was to identify how they would start to structure advice to a fictitious client based on a scenario they had been working on from since the beginning of the academic year. The students discussed what they had learnt from the flipped material in small groups, and used their statute books to look at how the legal rules were set out. This process was chaotic with lots of talking and noise from the discussions. The students took the opportunity to ask questions about the law and the sections of the legislation. This is in contrast to the taught lecture, where students would sit passively waiting for directions from the lecturer (Race, 2010). Students sought feedback as to their understanding. It was evident that they had to think about what they were doing, as opposed to repeating what they had been told (Bonwell & Elson, 1991). The students were brought together and given information on an additional part of the legislation which was closely linked to what they had already learnt. Then, for the second activity they started to write out their advice. They could continue their discussions whilst they did this.

In the seminar, the students presented their advice, where the success of their work during the in-class lecture became evident. The presentations showed a good level of understanding and the majority of students said how surprised they were about their level of knowledge after only one lecture. Anecdotally, many said they felt increased confidence about understanding this technical area of the law. A deeper understanding of the topic, was observed in the context that students were trying to construct their own understanding of the legal principles and apply them to the scenario in order to advise their fictitious client (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983). In addition, there was more opportunity to provide the students with timely feedback (Ramsden and Dodds, 1989:54) as to their understanding of the law following each presentation.

This format was replicated for a further two weeks for the same topic, and then for an additional two weeks on a different topic. The other in-class lecture activities were centered around the scenario and included questions on case law, quizzes and small group discussions. This placed emphasis on the in-class learning environment being dynamic and interactive (Bonwell & Elson, 1991).

First-year law students

These students were only in the second term of their first year of study and the in-class lecture was one- hour long. Their knowledge and ability, broadly speaking, was less than students who had been at university for three years because they had only just started learning about the law. The content of the flipped material therefore had to be appropriate for their ability (Bergmann & Sams 2012). The first flipped material provided a basic introduction to the topic and the relevant sections of the legislation. During the in-class lecture the students built on this knowledge through a short ten-minute presentation (Stuart and Rutherford, 1978) about the policy issues in the area. They then tested their learning through discussion and an activity. The latter took the form of giving them a very short scenario which was intended to be contentious. The students had to take on the role of a fictional judge and make a decision by applying what they had learnt so they could see first hand how this affected their thinking. This exercise promoted good discussion, in which it was evident the students were thinking about what they had learnt and the decision they had to make (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983).

In the seminars, the students answered questions in groups relating to the flipped material and their learning from the in-class lecture activity. The emphasis was on the students constructing the meaning of what they had learnt (Biggs and Moore, 1993) and in the process further embedding their learning (Ramsden, 2003).

This format was replicated for a further two weeks where the flipped material guided students through specific case law. The second topic was on the right to life which was taught over two weeks and followed a similar format. In-class activities included questions about the case law, short scenarios which required discussion and a short debate.

Evaluation

The evaluation for this case study was carried out through a two-part questionnaire. The first part focused on the use of the Flipped Classroom for the first topics and how it had affected students learning. The questions included:

- Did you watch the Panopto material each week?
- Was there a clear link between the Panopto material and the lecture activities?
- In a few words explain whether the use of the Panopto material helped your learning of the topic
- In a few words explain whether the learning activities in the lecture (the flipped learning) helped you to understand the topic better than a traditional lecture approach would have done
- In a few words explain whether you were able to test your learning better in the seminars as a result of the in-class learning activities? If not, explain why not.

The second part focused on the student learning experience over the five weeks and the students learning experience through the Flipped Classroom. The questions included:

- Did you find the Flipped Classroom beneficial to your learning?
- In your own words explain how the learning experience over the past five weeks compare to your learning experience using traditional lecture methods.
- What was of most benefit to you during the five weeks of this type of teaching?
- Is there anything you would like changed and if so what?

The limitations of this study were the short five -week period that engagement was measured over, which only provided an indication of what could result from a longer study. This study only examined engagement over two areas of law. Exploring this concept across more areas of law would provide a greater amount of data to interpret. The difference between the length of the in-class lectures also meant that learning activities for the first - year students had to be fitted into an hour, in comparison to the two hours that the third- year students received.

The response rate to the first questionnaire was broadly comparable, with 34 first -year students and 38 third-year students. Overall the results from the third-year students were very positive and showed the majority had engaged with the pedagogy much better than initially thought. 97% said they had watched the flipped material each week (*picture left*), and the same number of students said they could identify a clear link between the flipped material and how their learning was being embedded through the activities in the taught

lecture space. I have interpreted this as evidence of deeper learning (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983). The comments about how the use of the Flipped

Classroom helped their learning supported this assumption:

“it motivated me to be alert”

“it helped me to engage”

“more interesting compared to traditional lecturing styles”

“it helped me grasp the subject”

“I’m not used to this way of learning but I did find this topic easy”

“lectures made sense”

“kept me focused”

Although 82% responded positively that the in-class learning had helped them to understand the topic better than they would have done through traditional lectures and seminars, the comments from the remaining 18% identified that a few students had found it hard to move away from this:

“I prefer more structured methods of learning in lectures”

“the activities in the lecture were too long”

“I’m used to one way of learning for three years”

First-year students also responded positively to the first questionnaire. 79% said that they had watched the flipped material prior to coming to class, but 15% indicated they were watching the material *after* the taught lecture activities. This demonstrated limited engagement with the Flipped Classroom and reflects a surface approach to learning (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983) which, would only clarify for the students what they thought they understood from the learning activities (Varnava and Webb, 2009). 79% also identified the link between the flipped material and how their learning was being embedded through the activities in the in-class lecture. This data does show slightly less engagement than the third-years, but this could be because some students required more directed learning from the lecture/seminar format, and had yet to develop the skills to learn independently. The comments relating to how the Flipped Classroom had helped their learning did show engagement with the flipped pedagogy:

“clarified my learning”

“allowed for more discussion”

“I had a better understanding before the seminar”

“prior knowledge was good”

“able to test my learning”

The response rate for the second questionnaire was again comparable, with 28 first-years and 30 third-years. 97% of third-year students found the Flipped Classroom beneficial to their learning, alongside 100% of first-year students. 33% of third-year students said they wouldn't change anything about this type teaching, compared to 25% of first-year students. 80% of third-year students provided comments that indicated they liked the in-class learning activities, the structure of the teaching and the flipped material. Comments from these students as to what they would change included:

“more detail in Panopto’s”

“more group work”

“more learning activities”

“too many cases to read”

“difficult to get used to when taught by lectures and seminars”.

86% of first-year students also indicated that they liked the learning activities, the flipped material, and that they found the Flipped Classroom interesting. Comments about what they would change included:

“longer lectures”

“more debate in lectures”

“no Panopto”

“reinforce the importance of watching the Panopto”.

Across both groups there were five students that said they found the Flipped Classroom difficult to get used to. The inference here is that they preferred the traditional teaching approach for their learning (Burgan, 2006). There should perhaps be a note of caution here. Those students who feel they learn better from structured directions from the lecturer may not engage with the Flipped Classroom, and therefore may find this style of teaching potentially limits their learning on the course (Conceição, 2007).

The data from the second questionnaire caused an anomaly in the results and showed a difference in the perception of the first-year students between the first and second questionnaire. The first questionnaire indicated that they were not as engaged with the flipped material and therefore were not taking a deeper learning approach through the activities in-class. Yet after the full five weeks of teaching all of them said they found the Flipped Classroom beneficial to their learning. This does not follow the pattern set by the results of the first questionnaire.

Conclusion

The outcome of this case study is not what was expected, which was that third -year law students taught for the first time using the Flipped Classroom, would find it harder to engage with the subject matter and move away from the traditional teaching format. Conversely, students in the first year of their degree who had been exposed to this teaching approach in their first term would subsequently engage better. To a certain extent the results have undermined this hypothesis.

The number of third -year students that watched the flipped material, and were able to demonstrate deeper learning through the classroom activities suggested that they were effectively engaged through the Flipped Classroom. This could be because, as students in their final year they have learnt to work independently. It is both reassuring and expected that as third-year students they have developed this skill. Yet, it should also be considered that the Flipped Classroom encouraged these students to further their independent study and to engage with the material. If the high grades for the summative assessment on the first topic are anything to go by, their understanding of a very technical area of law reflected their level of engagement.

First -year students certainly did not indicate that they were engaged in the same way, as less of them watched the flipped material prior to the in-class lecture. A consideration here, could be that first-year students were developing their ability to work independently and engage with the material and that this could happen regardless of whether their classes are flipped or traditional. Attendance however, was low with this year group, therefore on that basis it seems much more likely that these students were not really engaged with the Flipped Classroom.

Some of the benefits of the Flipped Classroom have been evidenced in this case study, including greater student engagement with the course material, optimised use of in-class time and students actively learning (Upchurch, 2013). Critically, this case study indicates that the year of study could be a relevant factor in student engagement using the Flipped Classroom. Whilst consideration should always be given to what material is being flipped (Wolff and Chan, 2016) who it is being flipped for should also be a prominent factor. Further study of the extent to which the Flipped Classroom excludes those students who prefer traditional teaching formats (Burgan, 2006; Conceição, 2007) is required in order to truly assess whether timing is flipping everything.

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