

Flipped classroom: a student experience

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Supported by Bergman and Sams (2014), the Flipped Learning Network (2014) defines 'flipped learning' as a pedagogical method "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."

It is an approach that changes the conventional constructs of a classroom. Successful implementation relies on three components: collaboration, student-centred learning and optimised learning spaces (Bergman and Sams, 2014). In a traditional setting, the student would be presented with learning material for the first time, whereas in a flipped scenario, the student is required to engage in preliminary learning. This familiarises them with the content before the lecture, creating a session that encourages questions and debate, rather than one where learning depends solely on the educator's delivery. Often, thanks to such prior preparation, students will have studied such a wide spectrum of different aspects of the subject from a range of sources, that the learning during the lecture – of both individual students and of the class as a whole – is enriched (Kumah, 2015). The resources used in the deployment of flipped learning vary in accordance with the topic taught. Video may be recommended (its application commonly associated with the practice of flipped learning), but it is not pivotal; it should instead act as a gateway to further and deeper learning and the practitioner should remain focused on the reclamation – for the most effective use – of the time spent in class (Bergman and Sams, *op.cit.*).

My first experiences of flipped learning, a new concept to me despite my previous higher education (HE) studies, were positive. The cohort was large, comprising more than fifty student paramedics aged from eighteen to forty and representative of a diverse scope of knowledge and experience: some with backgrounds in healthcare, some having changed career from a different industry altogether and some fresh out of college. The requirement for pre-learning ensured that the students entered the classroom with similar levels of topic understanding and it helped to eliminate that sense of trepidation and vulnerability which a more traditional teaching environment can induce in participants. We were asked to do such prior learning as specific recommended reading and the viewing of topic-related videos. The increased level of enthusiasm and student engagement was noticeable. Incorporated technology and media became fundamental aids for students whose learning styles did not favour the didactic approach. For instance, Prezi was a novel alternative to the standard slide show and *Kahoot!* quizzes necessitated active participation – to take part in these, students found themselves encouraged to use their mobile devices, something they might well have found at odds with the usual imposition of restrictions in class. With points awarded for correct answers and speed, and with a much-coveted 'Curly Wurly' reward for the top three players on the leaderboard, it is not hard to understand that students completed pre-learning tasks without demur. As you can imagine, in a class consisting of fifty-seven students on a full-time course, it wasn't long before competitive instincts kicked in,

producing such a commotion that the lecturer from next door peeked in to see what was going on!

Chocolate incentives aside, the quiz was a useful tool to recap subjects covered. It gave the tutor a quick and concise method of pinpointing areas of learning that needed further work. Flipped learning also offered the opportunity for teacher-student relationship development. Time that might previously have been devoted to teaching had now been dedicated to such practical applications as practising cannulation and basic life support with mannequins and participating in role plays based on both factual and fictional case studies. These sessions did not adhere to a rigid structure creating a safe space where questions, thoughts, open discussions and debates were always welcome. Theory can be learnt, but putting it into practice can be an entirely different matter. Being acutely aware (and wary!) of the fact that the role of a paramedic is hands-on, I relished any additional time to practise and refine my techniques. On the rare occasion when I was unable to complete the pre-learning, it became apparent that it was easy to fall behind. Not only would the Curly Wurly be unattainable, but it made practical lessons difficult. Ironically, by not doing the pre-learning, I found that the workload seemed to increase twofold.

In the current digital era, when the use of the internet has become habitual and information is freely accessible, flipped learning is increasingly relevant. Whilst HE was previously heavily textbook-based, flipped learning is multi-faceted. It takes advantage of a wealth of material and comprises various elements, including online academic help-seeking and self-directed study. The flipped classroom is a contemporary take on learning well-suited to a generation that has grown up alongside Google. The notion of relying exclusively on textbooks as a means of learning is no longer realistic.

Research has shown that students who participate in a flipped environment value interaction, flexibility and accessibility (Avdic and Åkerblom, 2015): presenting students with the opportunity to learn at their own pace seemed to resonate positively - a view echoed by my peers in a collation of optional feedback. Furthermore, the variety of teaching aids connected with visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning styles (*op.cit.*) resulted in reports of greater student involvement, autonomous learning, motivation and achievement (Chyr *et al.*, 2017; Zainuddin and Halili, 2016). A shift of emphasis from teacher to learner created a student-centred approach. I certainly felt that this shift in method was positive and empowering. When there is an expectation that information will be willingly given, learners can become disengaged and indifferent. My personal drive came from the fact that if I did not complete the pre-learning, I knew I would be at a disadvantage in class. Furthermore, as I undertook the groundwork for the forthcoming session, I found that my enthusiasm grew in tandem with the interest my studies provoked.

The success of the flipped classroom relies on several factors: students' willingness to put in effort and become self-sufficient; their completion of preliminary learning tasks, on which depend growth of confidence, increase in participation and the greatest personal learning gains (those who don't complete have to play catch-up and inevitably struggle in the forthcoming lesson and subsequently); determination by the teacher to maximise the benefits of positive teacher/learner interaction to ensure a growth mindset; the teacher's creation of a safe learning space (Sickle, 2016) to allay or prevent completely those feelings of vulnerability which lead students to avoid answering questions in class for fear of being

wrong; the absolute imperative that the teacher is appropriately trained in the flipped-classroom method – someone untrained may not account for individual learning styles, with consequent adverse effect on students' engagement, motivation and interaction (Zainuddin and Halili, 2016).

When undertaken properly, flipped learning can be a rewarding and modern alternative to the traditional classroom, as the teacher and student must coexist and work together to create a united approach (Yamashita and Yasueda, 2017). Although my experience of flipped learning was enjoyable, I agree that there are limitations, as stated in the cited literature. It may not be a way of learning with appeal to mature students, who may be used to and more comfortable with conventional techniques. Furthermore, the concept may not prove popular with introverted individuals. Despite the presence of a trained lecturer who encourages all learners to participate equally, some students will always be reticent when it comes to speaking in front of a class, whilst others, more extrovert, will naturally spend more time participating and interacting with the lecturer. Educators should therefore be aware of and sensitive to the differing classroom experiences of diverse personalities and learning styles.

For teachers who are thinking of changing their classrooms into a flipped-learning environment, there are some important considerations: first, time spent in class should centre on activities that cannot be achieved at home – discussions, collaborations and group projects; second, teachers should practise what they preach – flipped learning should be adopted in all classes to ensure success; third, teachers should make use of existing material (such as the Khan Academy) rather than feeling that they must create their own. Since other sources will naturally be discovered as students partake in pre-learning activities, a platform for sharing amongst peers should be made available for use as desired (Ullman, 2013). As for students with no experience of the flipped classroom, the initial adjustment may be difficult at first, but it's essential to keep an open mind (Yildirim, 2017).

Overall, I found the flipped classroom interesting and engaging. The variety of approaches and use of appropriate technologies enabled me to become self-sufficient and to learn more effectively. Our having been able as a group to share that experience opened up opportunities to work together, discuss and question. Finally, though there is no doubt that there are positive outcomes associated with flipped learning, it is important that emphasis remains on the learners and their experience, with adjustments and improvements to the method where necessary (Sickle, 2016).

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