

## **When the flipped classroom disappoints: engaging students with asynchronous learning**

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### ***The challenge***

Moving teaching online meant designing synchronous and asynchronous activities that would allow as many students as possible easy access to learning. A lot of educational support was available from the start of this emergency pivot, and much of the early advice recommended asynchronous teaching (Brown University, 2020) as a form of flipped classroom, or even encouraged refusal to do synchronous teaching altogether (Barrett-Fox, 2020).

What we all quickly realised was that it takes more time to teach online than it does in a standard classroom. Interactions flow less naturally, creating longer pauses between contributions; moving between breakout rooms and the main room can be messy; late arrivals and technical difficulties cause interruptions; not to mention student reluctance to participate or unmute/turn on the camera. It also takes more time to build rapport online, especially in the context of learning development sessions, which lack continuity across a semester or academic year. As a result, I found myself not being able to deliver the same amount of instruction and interaction as I was used to. The most logical solution to this problem was to draw on my experience of subject teaching and introduce the flipped classroom (Mazur, 1997; Talbert, 2017).

### ***The response***

Creating asynchronous materials to be followed by synchronous sessions seemed like a perfect response to the new reality of online delivery. Being a hybrid practitioner, both a lecturer and a learning developer, I had already adopted this approach in my subject specialism, both in person and online. I pre-recorded my lectures and collated them into [Xerte](#) learning objects, with the help of the University of Nottingham resources. The materials I created consisted of short PowerPoint presentations, combined with visual plates overlaid with voiceovers, short tasks, and activities. In my subject specialism, the approach worked very well, as the Xertes naturally replaced traditional lectures. I therefore decided to adopt this pedagogy to the context of my learning development workshops.

The advantages seemed manifold. Students could not only engage with my Xerte resources in their own time but could also keep returning to them as needed. Investing the time to create them promised to free my precious synchronous session time to custom deliver according to specific student needs and offer more opportunities for questions, clarification, and in-depth explorations of particular aspects of writing, making the sessions more relevant to the participants. It motivated me to create a range of short videos on different aspects of writing, which I then combined into particular configurations to serve specific cohort needs. For example, if a session was to address the issues involved in critical analytical writing, I would include videos on the general principles of academic writing, critical thinking, and building an argument, interspersed with activities testing students' understanding, as well as links to further support and an opportunity to provide feedback. Overall, I created 24 such learning objects.

My plan sounded perfect. If you have seen the meme created by Renea Frey on pandemic pedagogy as a [horse](#) (Ball, 2020), I was ready to saddle it from behind. The urgently created resources may not have been perfect, but they followed all the available advice on creating online teaching materials: the videos were short and simple, they were linked together with meta-instruction, and included exercises. The Xertes were shared with students via their lecturers who disseminated the link in advance of the session. Students were asked to engage with them and note any questions or themes for further elaboration. And then real teaching happened. The live sessions were meant to target specific issues but most students came unprepared – they either did not watch the resources or had engaged with them only superficially. Their individual needs had often not been defined before the session even though it was timed around their deadlines. Most cameras were

off and active participation was limited, with the success of a workshop highly dependent on the cohort dynamic. I was aware that distance learning had been shown to increase student passivity (Rakes and Dunn, 2010) and requires much higher levels of intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan, 2000). I was not prepared, however, for the extent to which I would have to become the sole engine in the effort to engage participants.

The initial failures and disappointments were perhaps inescapable, but served as a good reminder of our vulnerability as teachers. As Freire put it, 'making mistakes is . . . part of the discovery process. . . . Error is precisely what makes us learn' (2007, p.31). Over time, I developed a range of different strategies, with the most successful one guided by the principle 'give them what they want', as I capitulated and delivered more content synchronously.

In the age of numbers and metrics, the approach may seem like a success. The 24 learning objects were accessed 1,423 times, although it is not possible to determine the level of engagement with them. 61 students provided feedback, rating the Xertes with a mean of 4.5 out of 5 stars, with the great majority finding the materials useful, informative, and easy to apply. When it came to feedback for the synchronous sessions, the most enthusiastically received were either those where cohort dynamic ensured participation or those where, in the absence of student preparation, I (re)delivered the content of the Xertes. It made little difference whether I used online tools, such as whiteboard, Zoom polls, and quizzes or Miro boards – it was the student preparation aspect that seemed decisive. My dependence on the flipped classroom was my mistake.

## ***Recommendations***

Adapting the principle of the flipped classroom to online learning development teaching left me with mixed feelings. The initial overarching personal reaction was one of disappointment. A lot of work went into the creation of these resources, a lot of dedication and excitement even, and this enthusiasm was quickly snuffed out and led to much soul-searching. Ultimately, I embraced this disappointment and let it bring me 'to ground' (Whyte, 2019, p.50) so I could experience a productive transformation.

The fact is that although the flipped classroom did not work in these workshops, students did use the resources after the sessions, with the majority of the aforementioned 1,423 clicks registered afterwards. So ultimately, the Xertes fulfilled their role as a form of asynchronous learning, if not as the 'pre-work' element of the flipped classroom. While this aligns with some pre-pandemic findings about the use of videos for flipped teaching in learning development sessions (Taylor, 2015; Hancock, 2019), what I did not appreciate at the time was the extent of online fatigue, the alienation experienced by many students, and the reluctance to engage with anything extra on top of the basic requirements of a module.

The experience exposed my inadequate understanding of flipped learning in the emergency online learning development context. As Talbert (2021) warns us, the usual assumptions do not apply, especially when it comes to the concept of 'class time'. What we need to be prepared for is disengagement (and resist interpreting it as a sign of non-learning), while keeping in mind the aims of the session, because it is accomplishing them that ensures success.

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