Summary

This article begins with a brief overview of the flipped classroom approach to pedagogy, which the author defines as a model in which lecture is given as homework and class time is used to directly engage course materials. According to the author, who teaches World History courses at Colorado State University-Pueblo, a state school with a high percentage of first time college students, she first learned about the flipped classroom at a teachers institute in 2011. Initially, she was resistant to the idea because she felt that historians tend to already have some aspect of the flipped classroom in place (assigned readings and study questions) and because she worried that creating video lectures would hinder her ability to continually include new material in her teaching. Despite these reservations, the author decided to try the flipped classroom out due to students’ difficulties in keeping up with lectures and the likelihood that the new approach would provide more time for students to engage foundational knowledge and ponder it. Most importantly, Gaughan saw that through the flipped classroom she could create a learning environment in which her students focused less on learning history, and more on “doing history.”

In discussing her effort to develop flipped classrooms for her courses, Gaughan stresses the importance of the institutional support that she received. Key here was that she had the full cooperation of the IT department at her university, which greatly limited the potential technical difficulties involved in building her video lectures. With this support, she found the creation of her online lectures to be relatively easy and straightforward, especially as they also facilitated the uploading of her videos to a personalized YouTube site. Gaughan also noted the importance preparing full scripts for her lectures and making a good faith effort to credit identifiable sources whenever possible.

In order to develop a flipped classroom that would fit her syllabi, Gaughan organized her lectures along thematic lines tailored to the unit structure of her courses. Ultimately, she created a brief introductory lecture and nine content videos aligned to different units of her courses. The purpose of the content videos was to provide students with sufficient information to effectively engage primary source documents and each other during class sessions. In doing so, Gaughan tried to provide content that was supplementary to, rather than repetition of the textbook. As an example, Gaughan details a video that she created for her unit on government and the articulation of political power; the video offered a brief introduction of the main themes, shared some additional information on the specific primary source that her students would analyze in class, and presented the questions that would guide their discussions about the source.

After discussing the lecture videos used in her flipped classes, Gaughan shifts the focus of the article to a discussion of the active learning techniques employed during class sessions. While this portion of the article was relatively general, as compared to the discussion of the videos, Gaughan highlights the use of mixed format discussions as the means by which she had her students “do history.”
commonly employed was to have the students work in small discussion groups to consider the primary source that she had chosen and formulate conclusion that could be drawn from it. Within the groups, students were assigned specific roles: recorder, reporter, facilitator, etc. After the allotted time period for group discourse, the class would then come together and each group would have to explain to the class both the conclusions that it arrived at and the evidence used to support them. Another technique employed during class sessions was student voting. After displaying the voting results, Gaughan would facilitate a discussion in which students were required to validate their positions. Finally, Gaughan mentioned group assignments in which students would have to try to convince her of their position. For example, acting as the Emperor of China, Gaughan had student groups try to convince her as to the benefits of a variety of religions and philosophical schools.

Having laid out a basic description of both the online and in class elements of her flipped classrooms, Gaughan concluded the article by discussing student responses to the courses and noting potential changes to the model she employed. While she acknowledged the limitations of her evidence due to small sample size, she noted that student reactions, taken through end of the semester surveys focusing on the flipped aspect of the course, elicited highly positive responses. In almost seventy-five percent of the survey responses students self-reported watching all or almost all of the video lectures. Those who did not watch many of the lectures commented that their failure to do so was largely the result of the length of the videos. Perhaps more importantly, seventy-two percent of students reported that the videos helped them come to class prepared “all of the time” or “most of the time.” Finally, eighty percent of the students who responded noted that the learned a “huge amount” or a “great deal” about both world history and how to “do history.”

Reflecting upon the comments mentioned above as well as her own experiences, Gaughan envisioned making several changes in the her next iteration of the flipped classroom. Two of these likely revisions pertained to the videos or out of class elements: shortening the duration of the videos and requiring students to take notes from the online lectures. She also suggested that utilizing start of class quizzes on the video content might be an effective means of increasing student compliance with engaging the online content.

Applications

One of the key potential benefits of this article is that offers guidance in utilizing the flipped classroom in a humanities course. To a large extent, the literature on flipped classrooms, as is much of the S.o.T.L. literature, focuses on the social and natural sciences, and the mathematics field. This can give the impression that the technique is not as well suited for the humanities. To some extent this may also reflect a reality mentioned by the author: many of us in the humanities employ elements of the flipped classroom already. This is particularly true given our penchant for pre-assigning reading selections and, one would hope, study/discussion questions tied to those materials. Yet, as Gaughan’s article illustrates, humanities courses can be flipped further, especially in those classes in which professors are doing a significant amount of lecturing. Ultimately, as this article stresses, the point of a flipped classroom is to shift the locus of foundational knowledge to the out of class environment, and save class time for higher-level thinking, or as Gaughan puts it in her context, “doing history.” I can only assume that most
humanities faculty would rather have their students “doing” their fields and thereby gaining skills that are both content and non-content specific. A second applicable point made by Gaughan is the need for careful planning and support. While many professors may be perfectly tech savvy, a shift towards the flipped classroom may indeed require and perhaps warrants considerable institutional support.

Gaughan’s article also offers potential insights into improvements that could be readily introduced into the humanities flipped classroom. For example, while Gaughan lists a few relatively traditional in-class activities to spur active learning, there is a raft of creative and innovative assignments/techniques that could be used to bolster the “doing” of a field of study. The jigsaw, for one, readily comes to mind. Similarly, through the utilization of Blackboard, one could easily streamline verification of student compliance and the assigning of content-centric quizzes. Finally, Gaughan’s piece demonstrates the potential for research by U.D.C. faculty in the S.o.T.L. field without extensive experience or an additional, excessive workload.

Citations of Interest

None