

FLIPPING EXPECTATIONS: STUDENT-LED LEARNING IN A FLIPPED CLASSROOM

By Erin Scholes, Somer's School District's Teacher of the Year

I don't like to spend my time standing in front of the students and "telling" them how to do something. Instead, my math classes are more focused on inquiry based learning, where students try things out to figure out why the math works. A "flipped classroom" is one technique I use with my students because it uses technology to change the structure of the classroom and homework activities. It's called a "flipped" classroom because it's the reverse of what people may think of when they think about classroom instruction and homework. Rather than a lesson or concept being taught in the front of the class and then practiced at night, students use technology (video, podcast, article, ext.) to learn the concept on their own; then they use class time the next day with the teacher to practice or use the new concept.

Occasionally, the flipped classroom isn't really a good fit for me as a teacher--when lessons that are already created do "tell" the students exactly how to do the problems. However, I do find flipped classrooms particularly useful for teaching certain skills. For instance, I may use it as a ways to review the foundational skill that my students should already have learned at a previous level, before we proceed forward to the next set of skills. I have also used flipped classroom instruction when I know the students will need a more guided practice in order to understand the multiple steps in a process.

This teaching style really requires students to be independent learners, and to take ownership of their educational experience. Students are not always familiar or comfortable with learning on their own, so I try to get them adjusted gradually. When asking students to learn about a concept on their own, I always provided them with a set of guided notes that they fill out while reading, watching, and/or listening to the material. Then, we do several examples together in class. I teach them how to take notes and learn on their own. I also will use the first few minutes in class to review their notes so that I make sure all students gathered the correct information. This helps the students to learn the content, but, even more importantly, helps to teach them the skill of gathering and interpreting information. There are times that I need to re-teach the lesson to a small group or whole class. But often, the more we practice, the more capable they become.

My classroom activity for the following day varies. I may start the class with a quick entrance slip to see which students need my help and which students really understood the lesson enough to proceed. This allows me to give more one-on-one attention to students who are struggling while their peers move on to practice problems.

Other times, I have small group or individual practice for students to complete. This allows me to move about the room, checking in with groups and individuals and helping where I can.

One difficulty is: what do you do with the student who didn't look at the lesson the night before? The answer isn't really that different from when they don't complete other homework. It depends on the individual situation. There are times I've had the student watch it in class, then complete the practice on his/her own. Other times, I might include this student in a small group that I am working with, so that I can closely monitor his/her progress.

My students are often split; some really like the flipped classroom, and some really don't. I keep an open dialog with my students so that we can figure out ways to make lessons, activities, and practice materials work for everyone. The students who really like flipped classrooms say they like it because I am right there with them if they have a question, and it can be helpful to hear and see the example with a teacher. Those who don't like it as much say they feel like they are missing out by not seeing and hearing me present the information. One strategy we plan to try this year is to create my own video lessons so that, hopefully, the students will get the best of both worlds: students will be able to see and hear me talk about a skill or concept through technology, and then they can do the "homework" with me in person.

As with many teaching strategies, it is always a work in progress, and it is important to me that I find ways for it to work effectively for me, and-more importantly-for my students.