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A CASE STUDY OF BLENDED LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA: FLIPPED, FLOPPED OR FORGOTTEN?

Abstract:

Every day, in Universities across the globe, more and more courses are being created to embrace blended learning approaches. Classes are now being 'flipped' in the pursuit of more effective learning and better student outcomes. However, the concept of blended and flipped learning in Malaysia is relatively new. This paper outlines an exploratory study of blended learning in a higher education institution (HEI) in Malaysia. The focus of this paper is an investigation of the pedagogical processes associated with blended and flipped learning in a Higher Education context. The paper provides a discussion of the implementation challenges associated with delivering a new blended learning programme. The paper concludes that there are significant benefits to students from learning in a learning environment that uses blended and flipped approaches.

Keywords:

Higher Education, blended and flipped learning, Malaysia

JEL Classification: I29

Repositioning higher education

Without question, higher education is increasingly under pressure to respond to powerful, relentless and unstoppable technological change . While new technologies offer significant opportunities for cultural breakthroughs as well as technical ones, there are also limitless possibilities to transform teaching and learning processes (Fullan 2014). The rise of social media means that effective learning is increasingly dependent upon connecting with others virtually.

The digital world looks set to revolutionize pedagogical practice and to re-draw the boundaries around student learning in educational settings. While there are no set answers to exactly what is required to meet the challenges of learning in a technological age, one thing is clear - a greater degree of virtual collaboration between students and their lecturers is one important game-changer and some would argue an urgent necessity. In short, the influence of 24/7 digital knowledge and new technology is radically repositioning what we understand by higher education and learning.

In this brave new technological world, those teaching in higher education will have to respond to greater demands associated with student choice and personalization along with the rapid expansion in the adoption and use of new technologies. With rising connectivity new pathways for learning are being created daily.

The widespread use of on–line platforms and networks is fast becoming the medium of learning in higher education. Every day, in Universities across the globe, more and more courses are being created to embrace blended learning approaches. Classes are now being 'flipped' in the pursuit of more effective learning and better student outcomes. But what exactly is flipped learning?

Flipped Learning

The answer, it seems, is far more straightforward than the actual process of delivering it. In a flipped classroom, the content of the lesson or lecture is placed on line before the sessions and learners are expected to read materials, view presentations and complete tasks. Students may also engage in online peer discussion prior to the session to clarify their understanding of the content with their classmates. During face to face (F2F) class sessions, students come already prepared to discuss the key ideas in depth. There is an expectation that material will already have been read or accessed before the face to face session.

In short, a flipped classroom is where the students, rather than the lecturers, play a critical role in the learning process. It inverts the typical cycle of knowledge acquisition and application so that students access the necessary knowledge before class, and the

lecturers guide students to actively and interactively clarify and apply that knowledge during class.

Within flipped learning and teaching, a shared on–line platform is an essential component. In designing a new 'Masters of Educational Leadership' Programme (MEL) at the Institute of Educational Leadership, University of Malaya, we were fortunate to have an e learning platform, SPeCTRUM[1] at our disposal. This platform affords many on-line features such as chats, forums, wikis, workshops, assessments and other collaborative on-line activities. The platform also allows for networking with other educators across the globe as guest participants. It is designed to support flipped learning because individual courses can be built on line with the benefit of uploading a huge range of multi-media support material that can enrich the learning experience.

SPeCTRUM affords around the clock access so learners can access all of their learning materials any time it suits them. They can learn anywhere, anytime and prepare for class without having to be in any particular location. Flipped learning also affords the opportunity for students to communicate with each other, to share ideas, to collaborate on assignments and to have direct communication with their lecturers. The MEL blended learning course is 50% face to face and 50% on line: students are responsible for a large part of their learning but guided by the on-line materials and activities.

Within the MEL course, learning is 'flipped' because the students are no longer dependent on the lecturer giving them knowledge but instead, are actively engaged in acquiring knowledge themselves on-line and then using the teaching session to extend and deepen that knowledge. The notion of a flipped classroom draws upon such concepts as active learning, student engagement and experiential learning. At the heart of a flipped classroom is in the repurposing of class time into an interactive workshop where students can inquire about lecture content, test their skills in applying knowledge, and collaborate with one another in related activities. During flipped learning sessions, lecturers function as coaches or advisors, encouraging students in individual and collaborative inquiry.

In flipped learning courses there is a much greater reliance on a shared platform that is a critical source of collective and interdependent learning. The selected on-line platform (such as SPeCTRUM) is the medium for the exchange of ideas but also for co-construction and generating of mutual understanding. Flipped learning embodies the separation of the *place* of learning from the *source* of the instruction or learning. However the 'flipped classroom approach' is not failsafe and without the right conditions, this form of learning like any other, will easily flop or simply be forgotten.

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[1] Student Powered e-Collaboration Transforming UM

Flipped, Flopped or Forgotten?

In flipped learning, the traditional lecturer's role has to change. The lecturer has to move from instructor to facilitator from supervision to coaching. In the MEL course, for example, the role of the facilitator is to guide and direct the individual and the collective work so that it stays on track and is ultimately productive. Successful 'flipped learning' facilitators learn how to cross time, distance and space in order to intervene in ways where direct supervision and interaction are impossible.

Flipped learning can also *flop* particularly if lecturers simply try to teach in the way they always have done but by using a new medium. For example, simply putting lecture notes or slides on a Moodle is not flipped learning. If the location of the materials is all that has changed but the mode of instruction remains the same then nothing really has altered for the learner. In authentic, flipped learning the lecturer provides stimulus material, questions and tasks that will help the students engage with the material before they come to class in order that it allow them to go deeper in class. In a flipped classroom, the aim is to encourage the learners to gain expertise and knowledge through their *own* efforts rather than to depend on the lecturer.

Flipped learning can also *fail* and then be *forgotten* if inadequate time is spent by the lecturer preparing activities on line and face to face or if these activities simply do not connect with the learning objectives. Unlike lectures, where the lecturers could repeat the same material time and time again, in the world of flipped learning, more care, consideration and thought has to be taken, not only over what students learn but also exactly *how* they learn. Flipping the classroom requires careful course design and it will be doomed to failure, if lecturers do not take it seriously or just try and retrofit their old teaching methods and assessments into the new learning environment. This simply will not work. Most importantly, any attempt at authentic flipped learning will be lost and subsequently forgotten, as students will quickly see through the fact that nothing really fundamentally has changed.

In a genuine flipped classroom, the lecturer has to take account of pedagogical practice that goes way beyond just reading or uploading his or her power point slides. Such practice only results in dependency as students sit and listen for endless hours, disengaged, bored and not really learning anything. Facts can be memorized but memorization is not learning- this represents superficial rather than deep learning. Within an active flipped classroom, as our MEL results clearly show, learning is much deeper as the learner rather than the lecturer is doing all the hard work.

In our new 'Masters of Educational Leadership' there is continuous, ongoing formative and summative assessment. Students know that in each session they will be assessed and expected to learn collaboratively and in an active way. The assessment strategies themselves signal high expectations, high stakes and an absolute focus on the students'

demonstration of a wide range of knowledge and soft skills. Ultimately, the students are responsible for their own learning and the learning of others in the group. This reciprocal responsibility and accountability is critical if it is to result in collaborative learning not just loose co-operation.

Collaboration and achievement.

At the heart of the MEL is an emphasis upon interdependent learning through focused collaboration. The research evidence concerning effective learning underlines the importance of social interaction, mutual dependence and active collaboration. It demonstrates that professional collaboration can have a positive impact on *student achievement*. Consequently, within flipped learning has to be a clear expectation from the start that students will work collaboratively with each other, at different times and in different ways.

Within effective flipped learning, lecturers team teach and use collaborative strategies to actively develop the collaborative skills that students need to complete collective tasks and to work together productively. The lecturers work as equal members within the team, sharing leadership roles and responsibilities. In this respect, distributed leadership is integral to effective digital and face to face collaboration (Harris, Jones and Baba, 2013)

Challenges of the flipped classroom

From direct experience of running a blended learning programme in higher education and operating a flipped classroom, a number of key lessons have been learned. Firstly, effective flipped learning hinges on a relentless focus on student centred learning rather than lecturer focused teaching. Flipped learning requires lecturers to shift away from traditional teaching and to disband 'talk and chalk' pedagogy. Secondly, lecturers need to be able to develop the skills of facilitation to ensure that the process of flipped learning is a success. Not all lecturers are natural facilitators therefore bespoke professional training and support is needed. Thirdly, students need time to learn the skills of collaboration in order to work in this new way. Therefore lecturers need to scaffold the learning and to model practices that students can replicate. Finally, the flipped classroom approach ensures that all students, of all abilities, can learn effectively at their own pace and to seek extra on line support when they need it.

As the flipped class becomes more popular across higher education, new tools will undoubtedly emerge to support the on-line portion of the curriculum. In particular, the ongoing development of powerful mobile devices will put a wider range of rich, educational resources into the hands of students, at times and places that are most convenient for them. Consequently, those in higher education need to take a long hard look at their current pedagogy and ask whether it really supports the kinds of active and

collaborative work that typifies the flipped classroom. If not, it is undoubtedly time for those working in higher education to embrace advances in digital technology and to adopt new 'flipped' pedagogical practices that are associated with better student engagement and improved learning outcomes.

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