Flipping the classroom in an academic writing course

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Framework

Mobile learning is a phenomenon that is sweeping the educational world and cannot be ignored. In September 2012, the three federal universities in the United Arab Emirates were tasked with incorporating the use of iPads into teaching and learning (Cavanaugh, Hargis, Munns & Kamali, 2012; Gitsaki, Robby, Priest, Hamdan & Ben-Chabane, 2013). All students and instructors were given an iPad, materials were available in iBook format, and the nature of the classroom and the learning activities changed considerably (Ally, 2013; Gitsaki et al, 2013).

This paper describes how the authors leveraged the interest and enthusiasm the students had for using their mobile technology such as smart phones, iPads and other tablets to create a flipped classroom in an academic writing course by using an iPad application called *Educreations* (www.educreations.com). Recent research has focused on the extent to which learners perceive their motivation, engagement, and learning through the use of iPads and other mobile technology (Diemer, Fernandez & Streepey, 2012; Rossing, Miller, Cecil & Stamper, 2012). Diemer et al. (2012) found that 85.1% of learners reported extensive or moderate use of iPad in their learning. They also found that learners who were initially uncomfortable with using an iPad in their learning became more engaged as the device became more familiar. Similarly, Rossing et al. (2012) report that there was considerable motivation, excitement, and interest in learning with iPads amongst students, despite certain limitations of the device and technical problems. It has also been recognized that learners require these technological skills to function in a 'technological, knowledge-based economy' (Keengwe, Pearson & Smart, 2009). The aim of this pedagogic approach was to exploit this need, interest and enthusiasm, to cater for all the different learning styles and levels of familiarity with technology, and to 'capitalize on the increasing use of mobile technologies, which is placing the technology in the hands of the learner, to design and deliver learning materials for access by learners' (Ally, 2013).

A flipped classroom may be part of a blended learning model in which students have some control over 'time, place, path and/or pace' (Staker & Horn, 2012). The originators of the flipped classroom define the concept as what was formerly done in class is done at home, and what was formerly done at home is now carried out in class (Bergmann & Sams, 2012). There is also a change in attitude towards teaching in which the attention is on the students rather than the teacher (ibid, 2012). There are many reasons why flipping the classroom makes both pragmatic and pedagogic sense. Firstly, flipping the classroom encourages the students to take responsibility for their learning. Secondly, teachers can work with students in a one-on-one tutorial mode (Hamdan et al, 2013) which may support struggling students. Thirdly, since learners these days live in a multi-modal world and have access to unlimited resources on-line, learning does not have to take place only in 'brick -and –mortar location' establishments (Staker & Horn, 2012). Flipping the classroom builds on the already existing mobile technological tools

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which students use outside the classroom. Finally, students can watch and listen to the teacher as many times as they need. This not only helps to reinforce, but also gives struggling students more support.

Making it Work

This study involved two classes of 20 students. They were expected to write a five-paragraph academic essay on the topic of heroes. The class was their Composition II class. The essay should include a thesis statement, concise paragraphs which include topic sentences, quoted/paraphrased researched support with APA citation, and students' response. The writing process lasted about 8 weeks and once the students completed their research and decided on their sources, they had to work on their outline and thesis statement, write an introduction, develop their body paragraphs with topic sentences and supporting points, integrate their evidence from the sources to back up their arguments, and write a conclusion.

For each of the stages of this process, the classroom was flipped using the iPad application *Educreations* which can be accessed from laptops, desktop computers, or any other smart device using a web link that *Educreations* provides once the video lesson is completed. This link can simply be e-mailed to students. *Educreations* is an educational software/tool that 'turns an iPad into a recordable whiteboard'. It allows users to replay voice, handwrite and draw, add photos from iPad camera, photo albums and the Web, animate images by dragging them around, underline or circle text, and pause and resume recording. The teachers created short video lessons where they tapped, wrote on and posted visuals including media, pictures and graphics on the 'whiteboard' and talked over them as they recorded each lesson.

The teachers first had an introduction lesson with the students on how to best use the *Educreations* video lesson, and how to complete the in-video tasks. For the rest of the course, the students followed the video lessons at home and came to class having completed a task or a written outcome that the course objectives required. As a result, the students covered the initial input in their own time and at their own pace, which gained both the students and the teacher more hands-on class time for the actual writing process as well as feedback and interaction. An *Educreations* video lesson was created for each stage of the writing process.

Video 1: Warm-up and brainstorming concepts:
http://www.educreations.com/lesson/view/heroes2/2372191/?s=SwY3Eu&ref=appemail

The video lesson included a variety of tasks interspersed with input. Students had to find a definition of the word 'hero', find some information about Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Theresa, write a list of qualities of a hero, and think of a possible hero they might research. This pre-writing work included tasks such as brainstorming, note taking, questioning, and focusing on topic for research. The final task was to bring a short description of their hero to class.

Video 2: Writing a thesis statement:
http://www.educreations.com/lesson/view/thesisstatements/2548920/?s=LzIFfL&ref=appemail

In this video the teacher gave examples of thesis statements, highlighting the structure and organization of a thesis statement. At the end of the video, students were asked to write a rough thesis statement for their essay based on their chosen hero.

Video 3: Making an outline:
http://www.educreations.com/lesson/view/overview-of-supporting-points-rough-outline/2643701/?s=Gc8Yke&ref=appemail

In this video, the teacher explained the different sections, giving examples in the video. The task at the end of the video was for students to look at their own topic and write a rough outline based on the supporting points identified earlier.

Video 4: Expanding the outline using evidence:
http://www.educreations.com/lesson/view/expanding-your-rough-outline-with-evidence/2813550/?s=EOChLt&ref=appemail

In the video, the teacher explained how to identify the relevant evidence and opposing opinions in their source texts. The task at the end of the video was to incorporate the evidence into their outlines by using appropriate APA citation format.

Video 5: Writing an introduction:
http://www.educreations.com/lesson/view/writing-an-introduction/7125517/?s=89JzkI&ref=appemail

In this video the teacher explained what the introduction should include. The teacher also explained and highlights the structure of an introduction with examples. The video included examples of different 'hooks' as openings and how to include definitions and the thesis statement. The task at the end of the video was to write an outline for their introduction and bring it to class.

Video 6: writing a conclusion:
http://www.educreations.com/lesson/view/145-conclusions/7123315/?s=QMppV6&ref=appemail

In this video, the teacher explained what the conclusion should include, again with examples. The task at the end was to prepare a rough draft of a conclusion for their essay and bring it to class for peer feedback.

At the end of the semester-long course (18 weeks), students were asked to fill in a short questionnaire consisting of 10 open-ended questions on the effectiveness of the videos (see Appendix A). The feedback was very positive, with many students mentioning how the video served as a summary of the main points of the lesson. Many students also said they found the explanations clear. Most students watched the videos at least once; some watched it twice or three times. A few students said they used the videos for review purposes. In terms of catering for different learning styles, many students commented on how the pictures, writing and voice over helped them to understand better. An interesting finding was that although the feedback on the videos was overwhelmingly positive, most preferred to have both the video input *and* an overview from the teacher in the following class. The reason for this preference was that students felt they could ask the teacher questions if they did not understand the input. From the feedback it would seem that rather than completely flipping the classroom, in our context the videos

served as both a clear summary of the main teaching points before the class, and as a revision guide. Students also wanted the opportunity to ask the teacher questions in the following lesson on the video input. Rather than replacing the lesson input completely, it would seem that the videos provide an opportunity for raising students schemata about the lesson topic before the class so that the students can be more active members in class time by asking questions and clarifying the teaching point.

Implications

Through flipping the classroom, the students were able to develop a basic foundation of factual knowledge, relate these facts to a wider context, and organize them 'in ways that facilitate retrieval and application' (Bransford, Brown and Cocking 2000: 16). They were also able to re-visit input in their own time and at their own pace, and come to class having carried out the initial research and completed the required tasks. This enabled the teachers to work more one-on-one in the class. The input the students needed to exploit at home provided more opportunities for learning to take place in class through interaction and question-answer sessions. However, based on the feedback we are currently incorporating several changes. Firstly, the first part of the lesson following video input at home is now dedicated to a question-answer session. Secondly, we are refining our summary skills using key words, pictures, sound, and voice over to exploit the positive feedback on these aspects of the videos. Finally, we are committed to looking at how more videos can be incorporated into our writing courses to give greater opportunities for interactive sessions in class which focus on the students' own concerns, questions, and needs.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire for students at the end of the course

1. Do you watch the videos the teacher sends you?

2. How often do you watch them?

3. Do you find them useful?

4. What do you find useful in the videos?

5. Do you find the videos help you understand the topic?

6. If yes, why?

7. Would you rather watch the video or have the teacher explain in the class?

8. Why?

9. Do you like having the lesson in a video?

10. Why / Why not?