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Flipped Classroom Grant: Final Report

Funding

I received funding in the summer of 2015 to work on video mini-lectures to be used in “flipping” one of the English Department’s large-lecture courses for non-majors: ENGL 282, “Fiction.” I have now taught different versions of the class four times, twice as an Honors College seminar and twice in a large auditorium to a sea of faces.

In addition to the CTE grant, I also received support from the Provost’s office on two different occasions: \$1,000 in the summer of 2015 let me hire a media arts student with good graphics skills to redesign the slide sets used to create the videos, and \$5,770 in the summer of 2016 to build a portable unit that connects five handheld microphones to the sound system in Gambrell 153.

Both of these supplementary investments have paid good dividends. The design features that the media arts student introduced into my slide sets—for example, a sidebar with an outline that tracks the mini-lecture’s progress from slide to slide—improved their pedagogical value, and I am now able to copy these features myself in creating new slide sets. The handheld mics are indispensable to teaching the town-hall meeting format in an auditorium, which I assume is why the Provost uses them when meeting with faculty in the Russell House Auditorium, and the unit built at my petition will be available for anyone to use in Gambrell 150.

Lessons Learned: Me

Repeating the flipped classroom experiment on a large scale was critical because it let me learn from mistakes I made in the first go-around. For the fall of 2016 I came in armed with additional handheld mics, a different strategy for giving weekly quizzes, a new set of activities for what has become known as the “anti-lecture,” and a heavily revised syllabus.¹ There are still a few tweaks that would improve the student experience of this class, but I believe this fall semester to have been quite successful, and I will continue to use the flipped classroom format in my teaching.

One change that proved critical was simple: I reduced the amount of reading on the syllabus by replacing the Phillip Pullman trilogy *His Dark Materials* (1100 pages) with Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me* (150 pages). This change was qualitative as well, of course, because it sharpened the focus on race (together with class and gender) in the final weeks of the semester, and it was clear that this was a topic the students *wanted* to talk about, especially African-American students who were not always the most vocal participants earlier in the semester.

An equally important change resulted from my consultations with Janet Hudson at the Center for Teaching Excellence. The meetings with my cohort during the first year were valuable, but it was the one-on-one help I got from Janet over the past summer that really enabled me to turn a corner and boost participation in the anti-lecture sessions. She

¹http://www.sc.edu/uofsc/posts/2015/09_flipped_classroom_david_miller.php#.WEQixBlrK4m

suggested a couple of simple activities that could be done with file cards, and linking these to the discussion prompts I'd already written provided a perfect catalyst for the town-hall format.

Lessons Learned: USC

Based on my experience, I have some advice about steps the University needs to take if it wants this kind of teaching to happen on a wider scale.

Mostly it comes down to support. Creating video mini-lectures is more labor-intensive than any teaching task I have ever performed. Each one is 10-15 minutes long, and I have accumulated between 50 and 60 of them, but each video represents dozens of hours of hard work. Let me take a moment to describe the process.

First you have to convert your classroom lectures. Even if they are already written (mine were), you've got to revise and repackage to transform a 45-minute powerpoint presentation into three 15-minute video presentations. Then you have to build the slide sets; most of us know how much work it is to create a set of slides that incorporate visual images, video clips, dynamic transitions, and other design features that hold student attention.

Once that's done, you have to record the videos, and that means you have to learn how to use an editing platform like Camtasia (my preference). The platform is complicated to learn, and requires extensive practice to become skilled in editing audio and visual components on separate tracks. It's less work if you're not (like me) a perfectionist, but even so most faculty will never invest the time required to master these skills.

This means a much more robust program of technical support will be needed for this kind of teaching approach to catch on. Support for the creation of instructional materials will need to be backed up by investment in classroom equipment, like the handheld mics I was fortunate enough to secure.

Looking Ahead

Once you've put in the (extensive) work to create video mini-lectures, you've got a resource that keeps on giving, so naturally you want to keep using them. I will be recycling two sets of mini-lectures (and creating a third set) in my ENGL 406 class this spring on Shakespearean Comedy. The class will be half-flipped, which should provide an interesting perspective on this approach since students will be able to evaluate both the flipped classroom format and the more traditional discussion format side by side in the same course.

Acknowledgments

I mentioned Janet Hudson, whose patience, encouragement, and experience were critical to the success I believe I've had. Also in the CTE, Lydia Frass has been unfailingly helpful with technical and design challenges that confronted me. Mike Brown at UTS has helped me solve one problem after another with managing a multi-section class on Blackboard. Steve Adams and the staff at Distributed Learning Support Services hosted my videos on a Vimeo account that greatly improved the quality and reliability of access, once it turned out that Blackboard's video hosting capacity is a bit dodgy. And I am grateful to the university

administrators—Lacy Ford and Allen Miller, both in the Provost’s Office—who found the funds I mentioned at the beginning of this report.

Without all this help and all these resources, I couldn’t have made this experiment work. That’s the reason I put the sentence about robust technical support, above, in boldface. Faculty working with no more than the usual access to classroom support won’t be able to flip large-lecture style classes without the kind of support I’ve been fortunate enough to receive.