Ready to Flip: Three Ways to Hold Students Accountable for Pre-Class Work

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Barbi Honeycutt, PhD

One of the most frequent questions faculty ask about the flipped classroom model is: “How do you encourage students to actually do the pre-class work and come to class prepared?”

This is not really a new question for educators. We’ve always assigned some type of homework, and there have always been students who do not come to class ready to learn. However, the flipped classroom conversation has launched this question straight to the top of the list of challenges faculty face when implementing this model in their classrooms. By design, the flipped model places more emphasis on the importance of homework or pre-class work to ensure that in-person class time is effective, allowing the instructor and the students to explore higher levels of application and analysis together. If students are unprepared, it leads to frustration, stress, and anxiety for everyone.

First, let’s clarify what we mean by a “flipped” classroom. Findings from the recently published *Faculty Focus* survey clearly show there are many variations and interpretations of what flipped means in higher education. For many educators, the definition of a flipped classroom moves beyond one that uses videos as the only instructional tool. In my work, FLIP means to “Focus on your Learners by Involving them in the Process.” In this model, the pre-class work focuses on the lower levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy and the in-class work focuses on the higher levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy. I encourage faculty to integrate active learning strategies to involve learners in the process of applying, analyzing, and creating knowledge during class time. Students work through foundational material prior to class so the time spent in class with their peers and the instructor becomes more valuable as they explore higher levels of critical thinking and analysis.

Make your expectations clear

The flipped classroom—or any active learning environment—often asks students to come to class “prepared.” What do you mean when you say you want students to be prepared? How do you know if they are prepared? In the flipped classroom, it’s critical for the instructor to clarify exactly what being prepared means and what the expectations are.

For example, if you assign a chapter for your students to “read before class” or tell them to “come to class prepared to discuss the chapter,” what exactly are you expecting students to be able to do? Can you be more specific? What information will be used during class time? How will it be used? What details are important? Do students need to know how to define all the terminology in the chapter so they can use it to analyze a case study during class? Do you want them to be able to answer review questions at the end of the chapter to prepare for a class discussion? Do you want them to be able to compare two points of view from the chapter as part of an in-class debate?

Many instructors use video in their flipped classrooms. The same questions apply. It’s not enough to say “watch the video” and expect students to magically know what to look for, identify what’s important, and understand why it matters. What do you want students to do while watching, or after watching, the video? Do they need to answer questions before, during, and after the video? As they watch the video, should they pause it at key points and complete a task before proceeding? Do they need to fill in a worksheet, draw a process, or solve a problem shown in the video? Is it clear how the information in the video will help them succeed when they are in class?

Hold students accountable

Once you clarify what you want students to actually DO prior to class, then what? How will you hold them accountable? How will they hold themselves and each other accountable? To address this challenge, here are a few

strategies you can integrate into your flipped class to help clarify what you want students to be able to do, connect the pre-class assignment to the beginning of in-class time, and make visible who is prepared to help you (and the students themselves) hold them accountable for completing the pre-class work:

1. **Ticket to enter:** If you asked students to complete a task as part of their pre-class work, make sure it's something they can bring with them and use as a "ticket" to enter class that day. For example, ask students to write three questions they have from the video or reading, including the time stamps or page numbers that correspond with their questions. As they enter the classroom, ask them to hand in their ticket to enter class. *Bonus:* After you collect all the tickets, you can use them as part of a small group activity, to review for a test, or to start a class discussion.
2. **Choose a side:** This strategy works best if your pre-class work involves two points of view, an argument, or opposing interpretations of a topic related to the course material. In the pre-class work, send them a question or comment they need to be prepared to take a stance on. For example, suppose your pre-class reading or video showcases two researchers presenting different sides of a case involving stem cell research. On one wall of your classroom, post a sign with the name of one of the researchers. Then post the name of the other researcher on the other wall. As students enter class, ask them to write their name on a sticky note and post their note on the wall with the name of the researcher they believe had the best argument. *Bonus:* This is can be a strategy for taking attendance too.
3. **Pass-the-problem cheat sheet:** If you have several problems, cases, or scenarios you want students to solve or analyze, try the Pass the Problem flipped strategy in class. To prepare for this activity, ask students to come to class with a one-page "cheat sheet," which will be the only resource they can use to solve the problem. I've seen this strategy used during final exams, often in courses requiring high levels of memorization. Using the cheat sheet in this way, however, allows students to collaborate and develop sheets as a group rather than as individuals. They will be held accountable both as a team member and as an individual. This activity could be combined with the "ticket to enter" strategy as well.

These teaching strategies combine assessment, accountability, and active learning into one learning experience for students. Preparing for these questions and activities challenges you to take your directions about pre-class work one step further to specify what you want the students to DO with the pre-class work and why their preparation will matter in class. Students need to see the value of pre-class work or they will quickly realize they can get by without doing it.

Do you have more teaching strategies to encourage students to come prepared for class? Let's keep the conversation going!

Barbi Honeycutt is the owner of FLIP It Consulting in Raleigh, NC. Dr. Honeycutt is also an adjunct assistant professor at NC State University. Connect on Twitter @BarbiHoneycutt or the FLIP It blog.