

Maximizing Engagement in the Flipped Classroom

Interview with Ronald A. Yaros

The flipped classroom (or “blended learning”) has become a hot topic in education over the past few years. The concept makes perfect sense. Traditional courses are set up to “push” content out to students during the face-to-face meeting, and then have them apply that content to assignments done outside of class.

But the student who is having problems on an assignment does not have the instructor there to ask for help. The flipped classroom solves that problem by moving the content phase to outside of class, and the application phase to inside of class. The advent of easy video production and hosting means that there is no longer a reason for students to be at some place at some time to view a lecture. The lecture can be recorded and put online for them to view on their own. This frees up class time for materials that generate engagement with the content.

But many instructors have had a hard time finding activities that truly engage the students in class. Often they fall into the “lecturing and clicking” mentality of pushing content, but with periodic polls or surveys. While these activities are better than nothing, they are often not

truly engaging. Look at the screens of your students’ laptops during class, and you will most likely learn that much of their attention is devoted to other websites, email, or texting. This has led even faculty as forward-thinking and tech-savvy as Clay Shirky to forbid electronic devices from his courses.

Students no longer have the option to ‘multitask,’ or switch between projected slides and their laptops, which could lead to distraction.

But Ronald Yaros, associate professor of journalism at the University of Maryland-College Park, has found both a technique and a technology to keep students’ attention and maximize engagement in the flipped classroom. He first notes that laptops quickly produce “what Linda Stone calls ‘continuous partial attention’ between a presentation and their laptop. When given the option to either look at slides or view

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Why Use Social Media in Online Courses?

By John Orlando

Social media is one of the hottest topics in education. Look at any teaching conference program, and you will find that a large percentage of the sessions are on how to incorporate social media into your teaching. This can lead instructors who do not use social media to feel like they are missing the boat.

But an online instructor can understandably wonder how social media provides an advantage over the traditional Learning Management System discussion forum. While there undeniably are some benefits to using such a forum, such as permanence of messages and ease of finding messages, there are also a number of advantages that social media systems, such as Twitter, afford over LSM discussion. An understanding of those advantages will allow online instructors to decide whether, and how, to incorporate social media into their online teaching.

Broader range of topics
Discussion forums are

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President: William Haight
(whaight@magnapubs.com)

Publisher: David Burns
(dburns@magnapubs.com)

Managing Editor: John Orlando, PhD
(jorlando2001@gmail.com)

ADVISORY BOARD

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John Orlando, PhD
jorlando2001@gmail.com

Lawrence C. Ragan, PhD
Director- Faculty Development
World Campus
Penn State University
lcr1@psu.edu

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fundamentally designed to channel discussion into preassigned topics, normally those chosen by the instructor. This can help keep students on topic, but can also limit the scope of discussion. Plus, students are often just “giving the instructor what he or she wants to hear” by writing posts that fulfill the preestablished criteria for the forum. Students have little invested in their posting.

By contrast, social media messages are person-centered. The tweets from students are on topics chosen by those students, and thus students take more ownership of them. Whereas while a student who is asked about his or her discussion forum posting might say “that is just what I answered for the grade,” the same student will defend his or her tweet because it comes from them, and thus more represents their personality and belief system. As a result, a social media-based discussion will tend to flow into a wider range of thoughts. An instructor who wants more creative, blue-sky thinking in the discussion would be better off using a social media system.

More serendipity

Creativity often comes at the oddest moments, because it often involves connecting two seemingly unconnected things. Einstein came up with his Theory of Relativity when he looked out the window of his office to watch men working

on the roof of the building next door, and realized that if they fell off they would feel weightless on the way down. We often have our “aha moments” when our minds wonder.

This is important because it means that students may have aha moments outside of class. It could be while reading material from another class, walking to the library, watching television, etc. The student can capture them when they occur with social media, and pass them on to others before they are forgotten. Thus, social media discussions are more likely to elicit moments of creative serendipity.

More outside material

We run across articles, videos, and websites all the time that relate to something we are doing. I was teaching my medical ethics class during the health care reform debate, and basically jettisoned all of my predeveloped content in favor of *New York Times* articles and a fantastic series of NPR podcasts on health care costs.

When we run across something of value from the Internet, we can easily share it via Twitter or other social media systems. Most sources even have a specific button built into their websites to facilitate sharing. This allows students to share resources they run across that are related to class topics. Students could be given credit for sharing resources with the

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Online Teaching 2.0: Easy Podcasting for the Classroom

By John Orlando

Podcasts are an easy way to liven up an online course. Podcasts are nothing more than audio files, and have been found to enhance student learning, satisfaction, and feelings of connectedness in online courses.

One use of podcasts is to deliver course content. Instead of writing out a “lecture,” an instructor can record it for the students to download and listen to through their cell phones and earbuds while walking to class, riding a bus or bike, driving, etc. Beyond portability, podcasts have been shown to improve the ability to convey nuance in the message, as much of our communication comes through the tone and other inflections in our voice. This is also particularly beneficial for instructors using podcasts to provide feedback on student work, and accounts for much of the universal praise that those podcasts receive from students.

Instructors can also have students make podcasts. Marjorie Chan (2014) had her students record interviews with business leaders for a management class. The interviews were in a live radio format, with the host interviewing a guest, and students calling in with questions. This added an exciting, interactive element to the course. The recordings were then put together into a series that could be added to the course content for the benefit of future students. A department can also create a podcasting series on monthly topics, with interviews of students, faculty, or outside experts.

Another use for podcasts is as

a form of assessment. Students can be assigned to make podcasts in an NPR-segment format to explain a topic. The benefit of the radio documentary format over a traditional academic paper is that students are forced to ask what makes the topic interesting, and how to present it in a way that

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will be understandable to a lay audience, rather than just their instructor. The experience helps them develop communication skills that are relevant in today’s digital world.

Recording a podcast

A good entry into podcasting is to simply record your voice for course content, tutorials on course processes, or feedback to a student. One option is to record with the free, open source Audacity program, which is available for download at **Sourceforge**. You can both record and edit your recording directly on **Audacity**, and then export it to be hosted elsewhere.

Recording interviews for a radio show format is not much harder. BlogTalkRadio is a paid service that is designed to create live radio shows. It hosts a live show

with multiple callers, and saves a recording to its Web site. The site provides all of the search, cataloging, and publicity functions that you need to run a radio series.

A free alternative to **BlogTalkRadio** is Google’s **Hangouts on Air**, a feature of Google+. Hangouts on Air will broadcast live video of up to 10 people at once to YouTube, and automatically create a recording of the outcome as well.

If you only want to record interviews that are not broadcast live, you can use **Skype**. Skype allows free group calls for a small number of users at once. However, it does not come with recording capacity, so you will need to download and run a free Skype recording app such as **MP3 Skype Recorder** or **Pamela Skype Recorder** to record the outcome.

Hosting a podcast

Your Learning Management System might come with podcast hosting capability built in, and if you use BlogTalkRadio, or the video version of the Hangouts on Air broadcast, the website itself will host both the live event and the recording. But if your LMS does not have this capability, or you want to make a podcast available to others outside of the course room—such as for a departmental series—then you will need a way to host it. Luckily, there are a number of free and easy options.

A simple hosting method is to load the podcasts to either a Google Drive or Dropbox account, and provide students with the link. Another possibility is to load them

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websites on a laptop, limited digital self-regulation quickly makes the laptop a distraction.”

However, laptops are not the only option for in-class devices. Yaros has his students bring tablets to class. He then uses an app called “Nearpod” to host the class content and interactivity. Nearpod allows instructors to post a variety of different types of content on the app for students to view from their own tablets, from slides to websites, videos, and the like. It also provides a number of means to gather feedback and engage students, including polls, surveys, and discussion.

Here Yaros adds a twist. Instead of projecting his slides on a screen at the front of the room, which allows the class to have some other content on their own devices, he only projects the content to Nearpod. He runs whatever content he wants to use on his own tablet using Nearpod, which the students watch on their tablet. Thus, “students no longer have the *option* to ‘multitask,’ or switch between projected slides and their laptops, which could lead to distraction. Now, if students aren’t engaging and interacting with class content on their mobile device, they’ll miss key concepts, explanations, class discussions, and my questions about the content that they produced.”

Yaros goes on to say, “I use the Nearpod app to share the presentation via WiFi. The Nearpod app is free to students, without the need for creating an online account. I easily convert my slides for display in Nearpod, and conduct real-time polls (good-bye clickers), as well as ask open-ended questions for text responses that I can share anonymously on everyone’s device. We can also view live Twitter feeds and PDF documents that I share with

the class.”

Yaros also sweetens the pot by having students use some of the outside-of-class time to generate inside-of-class content. Instead of just recording and posting traditional lectures for students to watch outside of class, he makes use of Twitter and Blogger to have the students create content that will be discussed in class. As he says, “At the beginning of the semester, I distribute a semester long schedule of five rotating teams for each chapter in the course. From day one, every student knows the team they are on during any given week and the deadline for posting content. After I introduce the chapter and summarize the key concepts, every student is expected to research, produce, and post their own course related content before our next class meeting.”

“The team assignments that detail specific content to post are announced that week. For example, students assigned to the rotating Twitter team research and post course-related tweets, which are displayed for all to read on our course blog at <http://150masscomm.blogspot.com>. A second team posts 150 words on the course blog, explaining their research of the chapter’s topic. To manage my grading time, only students in a third team research, produce, and post comprehensive multimedia content for their own ePortfolio, which is listed on the right-hand column of the course blog. This means that I’m reading and grading the longest postings from only a small portion of the class. Students in a fourth team post summaries of the assigned readings, and the final team must review the postings of their peers to provide constructive feedback. All students use the time between classes to produce and post their content, which will be synthesized and discussed for the second

component in my blended course, our face-to-face meetings.”

“The results and the student feedback have been amazing. My two-week experiment last fall compared the same content, taught by the same teacher (me), in the same room and on the same days, to two sections of 60 undergraduates. One section used the Nearpod app on a tablet or phone. The other section viewed the traditional projected PowerPoint slides with no devices. Quiz results suggested no statistically significant differences between Nearpod and the traditional sections, but students’ ratings of course enjoyment and relevance were significantly higher in the Nearpod section. It is important to note that most of the research to date reported that laptops reduce attention and learning, compared to classes without laptops. My results suggest that it’s not the technology per se, but the type of devices used and *how* that technology is supported. In this case, devices did not reduce learning and increased enjoyment of the class.”

Yaros goes on to say, “Even classes that are totally online could use Nearpod, because students can download interactive presentations as homework, progress through it at their own pace, and even take quizzes. Similar to the synchronous sessions, quiz results are automatically reported back to the professor from the field when the student’s device connects to WiFi. And if you upgrade the app, students have the option to take notes on their device as they view the presentation in or out of class. Their own notes can be emailed back to them after viewing.”

If you have dipped your toes into the flipped classroom waters, consider how Nearpod and the techniques Yaros describe can generate engagement in your course. @

Formative Evaluations for Online Education

By Ann H. Taylor and B. Jean Mandernach

Traditional measures of teaching effectiveness (i.e., student evaluations, peer review, or administrative evaluation) provide summative feedback that may be useful for enhancing future instructional strategies, but fail to help current students. Instructors need to use formative evaluations to gain feedback about the effectiveness of *current* instructional strategies in order to enhance teaching during the *current* course.

While formative evaluations are useful in all teaching environments, they are particularly beneficial in the online classroom, where gauging teaching effectiveness is more difficult due to the lack of physical presence between student and teacher.

To be most effective, formative evaluations should focus on a specific instructional strategy or concern that is amenable to actionable change. For example, rather than ask a general question, such as, “What aspects of my online teaching have been especially helpful in terms of your learning?” one might ask about a specific teaching strategy that was used, such as, “What do I do in the online discussion forums that helps you understand the course material? How can I interact in the discussions in the future in a manner to help your learning and engagement in the course?” This type of targeted question encourages a richer, deeper response that is more likely to provide insight into how specific instructional strategies can be improved.

For your informal formative evaluations to be effective, they must be intentionally structured and implemented to produce the intended feedback. When developing formative teaching evaluations for use in your online course, consider

To be most effective, formative evaluations should focus on a specific instructional strategy or concern that is amenable to actionable change.

the five Ws: Who, What, When, Where, and Why:

Who. Unlike summative reviews of teaching that are conducted for administrative purposes, such as promotion or staffing decisions, formative reviews are typically conducted by and for the instructor (perhaps with the support of a learning design team). Given that, you need to determine the relevance, focus, and timing of your formative evaluations.

What. Formative evaluations typically differ from summative reviews of teaching with regard to the type and amount of feedback that is sought. Instructors seeking formative feedback on their teaching typically focus their efforts on specific aspects of their teaching that they would like to improve. For example, instead of an end-of-course student survey that asks

about a wide variety of aspects of the course—from questions about the structure of the course to those that address instructor-student interactions—you might ask your students only about a new technique that you recently tried, in order to learn how well the technique was implemented.

When. Because formative evaluations are short, direct measures conducted in response to specific pedagogical questions, formative reviews of teaching are typically conducted more frequently than formal reviews. Although instructors must balance the need for feedback with a respect for students’ and peers’ time, formative reviews may be conducted at multiple points throughout an online course, from an always-available online “suggestion box” to weekly surveys to mid-semester feedback instruments.

Where. Although summative end-of-course student surveys or administrative reviews are the most common ways to elicit feedback, those take place only at the end of the course and may not be conducted each time the course is taught. Furthermore, they are often conducted outside the course environment. Many instructors have discovered the value of asking for formative feedback much earlier in their courses from directly within the course environment. For example, one might ask students for feedback via in-course strategies such as quick response polls or surveys, discussion forums dedicated to finding out what students think should “start, stop, or continue,” or

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others in order to encourage them to engage in course topics. This will help them see the relevance of topics to the real world, and develop a repository of material that enriches the course content.

All a faculty member need do is assign a hashtag to the course for easy content collection. Students post a link with that hashtag to Twitter, and all the postings can be gathered together at any time through an aggregator such as TweetDeck. By contrast, students who need to wait until they log in again to share information in a discussion forum will soon forget it.

An instructor can solicit content from students on the fly by posting a tweet asking for resources the day before a class. Students are likely to get it within a few hours and respond. Meanwhile, most students only check email once a day, if at all, and discussion forums even less often.

Making formative assessments

Faculty tend to focus on summative assessment—assessment of learning after the fact. But making formative assessments on progress during learning is critical to gauging student understanding and adjusting for problems. This can more easily be done with social media by asking students simple questions via Twitter. Students will get the questions quickly and can respond immediately. Plus, numerous students can provide the same short responses to indicate whether they have gotten the material. This would not work as well in a discussion forum, since the forum is fundamentally designed for threaded discussion where each posting is unique and builds on another.

Preparing for modern digital citizenship

A fundamental goal of education is to prepare students to be productive members of society. This means teaching how to communi-

cate within society. Unfortunately, faculty tend to restrict assignments to artificial communication such as a research papers. Few students will write research papers after they graduate. Social media is the dominant means of communication today, and incorporating that into your courses will help students learn to effectively use this medium.

Some faculty ban social media from the classroom on grounds that student writing tends to deteriorate. But this is actually a reason to include it in order to teach students how to write effectively to convey their thoughts and contribute to public discourse. There are numerous examples of celebrities in all fields writing embarrassing tweets that they wished they had not written. Since this is the dominant means of communication today, the role of higher education is to teach students how to use it effectively when they enter the real world. @

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the aforementioned “suggestion box.” Likewise, peers might be invited to “visit” the online classroom to review a particular strategy or observe a discussion forum, to help determine how things are going in time to suggest adjustments that will benefit current students.

Why. Instructors should conduct formative evaluations when they are personally interested in improving their teaching and desire feedback in order to do so. Of course, part of

their motivation may still be related to ultimate goals of promotion or ensuring that they will continue to be hired to teach a given class in the future, but the primary motivator should be a focus on teaching improvement. By conducting formative reviews of their teaching, instructors are not waiting for periodic summative reviews to get a sense of how they are doing in the online classroom, but are actively soliciting feedback to improve their teaching skills for the benefit of the students currently in their course.

The material in this article has been adapted from Tobin, T. J.,

Mandernach, B. J., & Taylor, A. H. (2015). Evaluating Online Teaching: Implementing Best Practices (1st edition). Jossey-Bass. Copyright © 2015 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved.



On Tuesday, Sept. 22, at 1:00 pm Central Time, Jean Mandernach will present a 40-minute online seminar entitled “Online Teaching Toolkit: Evaluate & Improve Your Teaching.” For further information, visit the “Events” page at www.magnapubs.com. @

The Impact of Instructor Posts on Student Participation

Interview with Cheryl Murphy

Many of us in online education preach that instructors should be active in discussion, but not monopolize it, but we do not have any real research that says how instructor involvement affects student participation in discussion. Cheryl Murphy, associate professor of educational technology at the University of Arkansas, has done research on this subject, and found that the quantity of instructor involvement did not affect the quality of student postings, but it was negatively correlated to the quantity of student postings. This suggests that instructor involvement can reach a point of diminishing returns.

We have invited her to discuss the findings with us.

Why might more instructor participation in discussion reduce student participation?

Learners may come to rely on the instructor to carry the instruction, leading students to take a more passive role. This would be similar to a face-to-face classroom environment where, as an instructor, we can stymie good student discussion and lull students into passive learning roles simply by inserting ourselves into the conversation. But, as Conrad and Donaldson point out, because many students have been educated in a predominately lecture-based environment, they may actually be more comfortable taking a passive online role.

We also found that when students received no instructor intervention, they posted more frequently. One possible explanation is that the group who received no instructor guidance may have

felt the need to work with peers to clarify understandings and share resources. Students may have been interacting more frequently to provide resources and support to each other in the absence of the instructor.

The quantity of instructor involvement did not affect the quality of student postings, but it was negatively correlated to the quantity of student postings.

You also suggest that less instructor involvement might have led students to package their posts differently. How so?

Even when student participation is minimal, posts can be extremely focused and extensive, and can exhibit deep levels of understanding. Our findings indicated that students posted less often with instructor intervention, yet scored just as well on the quality measure as did students who did not receive instructor intervention. This could lead a reader to infer two things: That instructor intervention helped students create posts that were more focused, so that they were expressing the same quality of ideas in less time, or that the group members who received no instructor guidance may have been posting more frequently to provide clarification, resources, and support to each

other in the absence of the instructor.

These two potential explanations mirror what can occur in an in-class group discussion activity. If the instructor provides a prompting question and follows up by suggesting resources and key points that groups should consider, versus providing a prompting question without additional guidance, we would expect the group discussions in the first scenario to be more focused than those in the second.

Is there agreement within the literature on what amount of instructor participation is ideal in an online course?

There are a wide range of thoughts on this topic, with researchers such as Andresen recommending as little instructor posting as possible, and others such as Bedi and Brookfield and Preskill arguing that instructors must maintain a substantive and ongoing posting presence. Personally, we take the middle ground and advocate for a balanced instructor intervention that offers guidance, but does not lead to overreliance.

Professor Murphy's research leaves open the question of the "sweet spot" of instructor involvement in discussion. But it also raises more fundamental questions about the purpose of discussion that any online instructor should consider to guide their own participation in discussion. Does the instructor want to use it to force student engagement with the course topics? In that case, quantity might be the most important goal. Is it instead used to develop critical

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thinking skills, in which case quality might be more important? Professor Murphy mentions that it can be used as a formative assessment to gauge class understanding and react to widespread misunderstandings. In this case the instructor might be more interested in corraling discussion so that students can show they get the material, rather

than allowing it to run to different topics.

Despite efforts to flatten the hierarchy of an online course, anything that an instructor does is done as an authority, and thus can have chilling effects on student involvement. As online instructors, we think our involvement in discussion can only improve its quality, but that may not be the case. Maybe it just orients discussion toward the topics that interest us. Online instructors need to carefully

consider the purpose of discussion, and the effects their own involvement will have in it, in order to gauge how much involvement is right for their courses.

Murphy, C. & Fortner, R. (2014). Impact of Instructor Intervention on the Quality and Frequency of Student Discussion Posts in a Blended Classroom, *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, v. 10, n. 3., 337-50. @

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to iTunesU, which is designed for higher education. Your students are likely already familiar with it.

Best practices for making podcasts

Remember that the goal of a podcast is to sound natural, as if you are sitting next to the listener. The problem is that most people tense up in front of a microphone, producing monotone recordings that lull the listener to sleep. You can avoid this result by following a few simple rules.

First, don't slow down. We tend to slow our cadence in front of a microphone because we are unsure of ourselves. But keep in mind that the person listening is not hard of hearing, and so you should speak with the cadence you would use with someone sitting next to you.

Also remember to add the voice inflections that produce emphasis. If you are asking a question, do so in a tone that sounds like you are asking a question. In fact, you should probably overdo the expressiveness, as the listener does not get

the facial cues that add emphasis to our speech. Feel free to add the conversational elements that create interest for the listener. Say "wow" or "that's crazy" when appropriate.

As for the recording processes, there is a reason why NPR segments do not last longer than about 15 minutes. Fifteen minutes is the limit of our attention span, and so if your topic is longer than 15 minutes, break it into a sequence of shorter podcasts.

Most important, nothing will drive your listeners away faster than having a hard time hearing the message. Most sound quality problems are the result of a poor microphone. Avoid using the pinhole microphone built into your laptop, which gives a distant tone, usually with static. Instead use a headset microphone. Webcam microphones also generally produce decent sound quality.

If you are not recording a live show, but rather course content, you will want to eliminate errors to make a "clean" recording. Restarting from the beginning every time you make an error will cause your production time to explode. A good trick is to record with an editor such as Audacity, and when you make an error, just pause and start again from the last natural break. Then delete the mistakes using the editor at the end, which will leave the clean runs. The pause creates a flat line on your recording timeline to insert your cursor to make the cut.

Consider how podcasted interviews, radio shows, or course content can liven up your online course.

Chan, M. (2014). The Use of BlogTalkRadio in Online Management Classes. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 504-23. @

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