Flipping the American Literature College Classroom: Enhancement through Creativity and Technology
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Abstract: Have you ever wondered how to make your American Literature classroom more engaging? With the use of technology and a little creativity, a flipped classroom has the potential to capture the curiosity of the college students and prepare them to engage in critical thinking during the class time. Whether it is through the use of videos, developing the students’ journaling, creating PowerPoints with voiceover, or learning the art of blogging, there is potential to develop a pedagogy that begins with the student’s independent inquiry and moves to group examination and revelation. Students will never be bored if the instructors are willing to push the students to see the value in approaching learning from a flipped perspective. This article will investigate four ways to creatively engage students. Once the validity of a flipped classroom in an American Literature college course is solidified then four strategies are presented with the incorporation of specific methods of engagement and the purpose for those methods. It is time we bring more life into the American Literature college classroom.

The American Literature college classroom has great potential to ignite the creative imagination of the college student participants. The literature taught in an American Literature college class is a part of their past, a familiar reflection of the students’ present culture, a window into their hopes and dreams, and an inspiration for their future. Therefore, these students should never be bored, but often we, the instructors, struggle to generate discussion, to build textual relatability, and to promote critical thinking. As the instructor, our desire is to design a pedagogy that will inspire, which often requires us to move beyond the traditional approach to teaching. A flipped American Literature classroom that includes video viewing, journal writing, PowerPoint creation, and blogging becomes a classroom that creatively prepares the students to engage in discussion and critical thinking during the classroom time creating more relatability to the text.

Flipped Class

A flipped classroom flips the order of class work and home work; the student does the work at home in preparation for what is going to happen in the classroom rather than in reaction to the classroom experience (Herreid and Schiller 62). We are traditionally comfortable with assigning reading before a class meets and a homework assignment after
the class time ends. However, in a flipped classroom, the independent student work happens before class, and it is integrally tied to what will be happening when the class meets. So, how does an instructor incorporate creativity and technology into the flipped classroom so that the students are eager to come prepared to the class? The following sections provide insight and suggestions on how to make the flipped classroom an excellent experience in an American Literature college classroom.

Videos

College students have incorporated online video watching into their daily lives. A snap chat sent by a friend, a short video clip posted on Facebook, an entertainment link provided through YouTube – whatever the source of the video, they all recognize the value of the verbal and visual aspects that are part of an online video. Since video viewing is an accepted part of your students’ lives, why not introduce your students to the academic videos that will lend to their understanding of the literature piece being read.

Using videos as a pre-class activity can be entertaining and engaging for our American Literature students. Whether they are creating a video, searching for a video, or watching an assigned video, there is widely accepted buy-in by the students because it is already a common practice in their private life.

Here are some possible ways videos could be part of your flipped class:

Assignment #1

Once you have finished reading the novel, *Moby Dick*, look up and watch the official movie trailer for the 2015 Box Office movie *In the Heart of the Sea*, which is based on the novel *Moby Dick*. Come to class prepared to discuss how Hollywood has shifted the intent of Melville through the re-writing that occurred between text and movie.

Assignment #2

Before you begin reading *The Call of the Wild*, find an informative YouTube video on Jack London that provides insight into the man and his passions. Come to class with five things you have learned about Jack London.
Assignment #3

Henry James' novel *Washington Square* trumpets the independence and identity a woman can find without a man. Keeping this in mind, go to "Washington Square (1997) final scene" on YouTube and view the video. Consider how the creator of the movie demonstrated Catherine's contentedness with her single status. Come ready to share with the class what you discovered in the short four minute video.

Assignment #4

Create a one minute video that provides a summary of Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle*. Present it as a children's story. Upload the video to YouTube (make it unlisted if you don't want it to be viewed by the general public). Post the url for the YouTube within a well written paragraph providing insight into why you took the approach you took. Post the paragraph to the discussion board the day before the class so that you are able to view at least two of your classmates' videos before you come to class.

[Purpose: Videos create interest and provide a different perspective. Whether the students are creating or watching the videos, make sure this activity happens before class so that the videos can be referenced during the class lecture. If you have the ability to view a video in class, then incorporate the viewing into the discussion time.]

Journals

This is the "Dear Diary" option that provides a space where the students can reflect on what they have read while tying it to their personal life. The grade is usually connected to completion rather than content. This option is very useful for novels that address controversial topics that will stir emotions and insight strong reactions. If you, as the American Literature instructor, choose to use this creative element in a flipped classroom, then select or design a space where what the students write can be viewed by you, but it is not available to the other classmates.
Entry #1

Upon completion of Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, write a well-written paragraph addressing your emotional response to the treatment Harriet received from the doctor.

Entry #2

Before you begin reading Fredrick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass*, find an article or website on Fredrick Douglass that summaries his life. Write in your journal entry what you anticipate will make you angry as you read his narrative.

Entry #3

Senator Charles Sumner once said, "Had there been no *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, there would be no Lincoln in the White House" (Kane 1). Why would Sumner say this? Do some research online, and include in your journal what you found. Don't forget to cite your sources.

Purpose: A journal gives an opportunity to vent or reflect without the worry of receiving a low grade. Unpacking this particular pre-class activity can often be saved to the end of the class time. Begin the class with text examination then at the end of the class, give them a chance to share their emotional response to what they have read before class and what they have learned during class.

PowerPoint

A PowerPoint is a familiar tool to many of our students. Therefore, there is a familiarity that will create a certain comfort level when this option is selected as their pre-class activity. Throughout the semester, each student can develop an instructional PowerPoint. The PowerPoint can be posted within the LMS for weekly viewing, or you can have it submitted at the end of the semester through an assignment link or as an attachment to an email. Have the students create a slide for each reading. These slides need to address a specified element clearly stated by the instructor. This particular option
serves multiple objectives: pre-class examination, in-class discussion prompt, end of class review.

If the novel being read is *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, then there can be a number of directives concerning the slide(s) that need to be created before the students come to class.

**Sample Slide #1**

Include a picture of Twain and provide six bullets that provide personal and professional information concerning Twain.

**Sample Slide #2**

Select a famous quote by Twain and demonstrate how the perspective in the quote is seen within the first three chapters of the novel.

**Sample Slide #3**

Who is your favorite main character? Design a slide that profiles that character.

**Sample Slide #4**

Select a comment from the readings that reveals the racial tension present during that era. Include that quote on the slide and make sure you cite it correctly. Entitle that slide "Racial Awareness."

The above four samples provide suggestions that include pictures, quotes, headings, bullets, and more. Another possibility is to add voiceover once the project is completed. Voiceover, where the student assumes the role of instructor, can create an tool for peer-to-peer teaching. If you are not familiar with adding voiceover to a PowerPoint, watch an instructional video on YouTube regarding how to add voiceover to the presentation.

[Purpose: Variety keeps the assignment interesting and results in a better end product. The slides can be brought up on a Smart Board and used as prompts during the class discussion. Also, required viewing of the slides can lead to a quiz at the start of the class. Similarly, viewed slides can inspire small group discussion at the beginning of the class.]
Blogging

Blogging has become a popular form of online writing; however, research demonstrates that blogging is also a "transformational technology for teaching and learning" (Williams and Jacobs 232). Furthermore, blogging is helpful in the development of higher order, authentic thinking that instructors are committed to instill in our students (Farmer, Yue, and Brooks 123). Since blogging is popular and instructionally helpful, it should be part of the flipped classroom repertoire. Most Learning Management Systems (LMS) have a blog option as part of the tools made available for the instructor. If you are not sure how to set up a blog within your LMS, then find an instructional video on YouTube that will walk you through that process. If blogging is one of the creative elements you will be incorporating into the flipped classroom, then here are two samples that provide a prompt and the purpose.

Sample Prompt #1:
Creating a Timeline

In The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Benjamin Franklin begins his reflection on Native Americans with these words, "Savages we call them, because their manners differ from ours, which we think the perfection of civility; they think the same of theirs" (244). Franklin challenges the traditional way of thinking with these introductory words in "Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America." This piece was written in 1784, almost a decade after the Declaration of Independence was signed and just before Equiano published his narrative. These were the years when America was forming its identity, and the literature penned during this time reflects the savage nature of our forefathers.

Equiano’s narrative is an excellent piece of literature that will open your eyes to a world where declarations were made and moral battles were fought; where the voice of the oppressed found an audience and literature incited changed. During your reading, you will see that Equiano vividly communicates the savage behavior of slave owners that fell tragically short of reflecting Enlightenment ideals.
In order to understand the significance of this piece of literature in history, you will be creating a timeline that incorporates 10 significant historical events that were part of the 18th century, one of which is the date of publication of Equiano's narrative.

[Purpose: Begin the class with a discussion of what the students learned when constructing the timeline. This discussion can lead to establishing the value of this slave narrative]

Sample Prompt #2:
Will the Real Savage Please Stand Up!
Consider the gentle poetry of Phillis Wheatley. This writer is the first published African American author, who is also a woman. Consider why Wheatley's poetry seems to portray the slave's condition as a civil rather than a savage one as you examine the lines from Wheatley's poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America":

Some view our sable race with scornful eye  
"Their colour is a diabolic die." (403 l. 5 & 6)

Before you complete your blog, reflect on the power of word choice by beginning your blog post with your own definition of sable, scornful, and diabolic. Then share why you believe Wheatley might have selected those words. Conclude with your perspective regarding how the non-offensive voice of Wheatley helps the white reading audience with their willingness to approach a topic rife with conflict.

[Purpose: This paragraph in their blog post can pave the way for a classroom discussion regarding how Wheatley rallied an audience that was more open to read Equiano's publication that shared the graphic reality of a slave's life. Suggestion: in the class, have the students form groups and create an acrostic for SAVAGE. Beside each letter, have them find a word that provides insight into the savageness experienced by the African American slaves. Beside each word, they should place a quoted phrase and page number from Equiano's narrative that illustrates the meaning of the word. The use of technology and thesaurus.com can help with this classroom activity.]
Conclusion

The traditional approach to a college literature class begins with reading in order to prepare the students for the classroom experience. In the flipped classroom, the students read then they are required to critically engage with one aspect of the reading. This flipped approach prepares the students to discuss on a more critical level. When a grade is attached to the activity that occurs before the class time, then the students not only read the material, but they begin to interact with the material in an engaging way. The American Literature college classroom is a fertile ground waiting for a creative instructor who will tend the ground and grow an interest that will bear fruit for years to come – let creativity and technology be a part of that tending as you develop your own approach to flipping your classroom.
Mary-Lynn Chambers has her Ph.D. in Technical and Professional Communication from East Carolina University. She has taught English in Virginia and North Carolina at community colleges and universities. Her instructional focus is composition, with a research focus in online education at HBCU schools. She enjoys interacting with her students and inspiring them to write better, think more critically, and love literature. This professor views the classroom as an opportunity to make a difference.