

FLIPPING THE CLASSROOM: IS IT A FLIPPING GOOD IDEA, OR A FLOP?

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Abstract

Advocates for the Flipped Model Classroom (FMC) suggest that through the implementation of this reverse teaching model, students will gain a deeper understanding of the concepts being taught and that the learning environment will change from passive to active through interactive pedagogical approaches. In 2014, this approach to teaching was trialled in the Preparation Skills for University course on the Bundaberg Campus of CQUniversity within the Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) program. The goal of the research was to evaluate this model of teaching in order to identify the benefits and pitfalls to the students and the lecturers. Data was collected through four sources: GoSoapbox, student evaluations, class rolls, and lecturer reflections. Peer interaction was identified as possibly the most positive element of the classroom atmosphere and students as well as lecturers found that students felt empowered to step out of their comfort zones and became more engaged with the content. However, from the educators' perspectives, there were obvious gaps from the written explanations to the actual application in the classroom. The implementation of the FMC was not based on a clearly defined framework and the researchers suggest that this may lead to this approach being introduced haphazardly. Therefore, it is recommended that a framework be established that will safeguard this model of teaching to ensure this approach to classroom instruction remains consistent whilst remaining interactive and engaging.

Introduction

Proponents of the Flipped Model Classroom (FMC) suggest that through the implementation of this reverse teaching model, students gain a deeper understanding of the concepts being taught, and further, through interactive pedagogical approaches, students' change from being passive seekers of knowledge to actively constructing knowledge. In the 21st century, the ideology of developing lifelong learners in a knowledge society requires teaching practices that mould and develop contemporary students into independent knowledge seekers. Upon hearing about the benefits of the FMC (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Goodwin & Miller, 2013; Teaching and Educational Development Institute, 2012; University of Queensland, 2015), the authors decided that this teaching approach should be trialled in an enabling program of adult students. This paper reviews and evaluates this model of teaching and postulates that there is value and merit to an approach such as the FMC to engage adult students utilising peer interaction and active learning.

Literature Review

Studies reflect that students value the face-to-face interaction that comes with attending classes and the support of lecturers (Seary, James & Conradie, 2014; James, Conradie & Armstrong, 2014). However, as universities teach diverse student cohorts, many lecturers are seeking pedagogical approaches that engage the overall cohort, help them to become autonomous learners, and develop deeper level study skills alongside cognitive understanding. Some universities are questioning why student attendance rates are decreasing, and research indicates that not only do students have busier lives outside of university, but with the availability of online resources, more students are opting to study in their own environment at times that best suits them (Seary, James & Conradie, 2014). In addition, with universities introducing distance modes of study in tandem with internal modes, students have various options to choose from. Consequently, more courses contain online material and resources to give additional support to distance students.

The FMC approach combines both face-to-face classes and provides online participation to enable a deeper learning experience. FMC proposes that prior to attending the face-to-face class, students watch the lecture or a series of online resources to introduce them to the concepts being taught (Bergman & Sams, 2012). When all students are in the classroom, the pedagogical approach changes from the traditional teacher talk to a guided approach where students become active engaged learners, investigating new concepts to gain a deeper understanding. Peer interaction is integral to this approach. When ensconced in a safe learning environment, students feel more free to open up and share their thoughts and ideas (Lambert, 2012). The FMC approach was introduced in 2007 by American high school teachers, Johnathon Bergman and Aaron Sams (2012). They created online video content, and encouraged their students to view these resources prior to attending class, thereby placing the onus on the students to become more responsible for learning the initial foundation concepts (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Goodwin & Miller, 2013). Actual class time was reserved for collaborative work and concept mastery experiences (Honeycutt & Glova, 2014). The core idea of this approach was to move the 'lecture' style approach outside the classroom via technology and move the homework and concept exercises into the classroom using collaborative learning activities (Clark, 2015; Strayer 2007; Tucker, 2012;). This approach to teaching was implemented by several educational faculties with varying results, though, limited research is available regarding the effect on student performance. Strayer (2007) reported that the overarching goal with the FMC is to create an active learning environment during class. He further argues that the flipped model was 'better suited for certain classrooms and courses than others' (p. 198)

and he found that students from his college classes were less satisfied with how the structure of the classroom changed their orientation to learning the tasks required in the course. Johnson and Renner (2012) hypothesised that high school students in a FMC would benefit more through collaborative group work. In practice, however, the students did not embrace this new style of teaching. Johnson and Renner concluding that the ‘failed attempt at the flipped model of instruction is what caused such varying results, rather than the intervention itself’ (p. 72).

On the flip side, some researchers have documented an increase in students’ academic performance within the FMC (Davies et al., 2013; Talley & Scherer, 2013). Davies et al. (2013) found a direct correlation between students’ increased levels of motivation and improved academic performance. Likewise, Talley and Scherer (2013) flipped an undergraduate psychology course and discovered an increase in retention as well as engagement alongside improved grades. In more recent research, Clark (2015) found that students in a high school setting were more engaged and more involved in the FMC when compared to the traditional delivery approach. He noted that within the FMC, increased class time was utilised for a range of instructional strategies, including hands-on activities and project based learning tasks. However, specific teaching strategies and/or pedagogical frameworks are not clearly outlined through the available literature. Whilst research on the FMC is still in its infancy, the review of the model highlights a need for further research to better evaluate the instructional strategy’s effectiveness in terms of student performance, motivation and engagement together with a better description of the framework that underpins this teaching model.

Background

The FMC was introduced into the course Preparation Skills for University (PSU) located in the program Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS). STEPS is a well-established enabling program at Central Queensland University (CQUniversity) that is offered through internal and distance modes of study and across a number of locations around Australia. The aim of STEPS is to equip students with lifelong learning skills, self-confidence and academic rigour. The STEPS’ mission statement emphasises this aim through the provision of a ‘quality curriculum within a supportive learning environment that fosters in adult learners the personal and academic skills for progression to undergraduate study’ (McConachie, Seary & Simpson, 2008). STEPS offers a holistic program and the fundamental conviction is born from the belief that in order to truly see change, the inner as well as the outer lives of adult learners must be catered for (Doyle, 2006). In addition to core skilling, STEPS provides a student-centred approach within a supportive learning environment to help expand the student’s current worldview and promote personal success (McConachie, Seary & Simpson, 2008). The overall approach aligns with Willans and Seary’s (2007) observation that it is vital for enabling programs to combine core skilling and self-skilling in order to set strong foundations for academic discourse. They acknowledge that once students enter undergraduate study, there is an expectation to engage with a vast body of knowledge and to employ higher order skills such as analysing, synthesising and evaluating information.

PSU is the only core course that all students complete as part of their individual study plan. This course is designed to help students become self-directed, active and confident learners through being introduced to a range of new theories and concepts. The goal is to develop academic rigour alongside personal awareness through the understanding of themselves as learners, and then applying skills in time management, critical thinking, note-taking and assessment writing alongside developing information literacy skills.

Students who enter enabling programs with disparate expectations about their level of ability, can often present with lower levels of self-esteem, possibly as a result of negative experiences at school (Burton, Taylor, Dowling & Lawrence, 2009; Maunder, Gingham & Rogers, 2010). Nelson, Duncan and Clarke (2009) concur and believe that many commencing students enter university with ill-informed preconceptions about what they may encounter, not knowing or appreciating what it means to be an independent autonomous learner (Brownlee et al., 2009). This notion is supported by Best (2002) who argues that students from working class backgrounds are less equipped to handle the academic rigours of an undergraduate degree. Many of the students who enter the STEPS program are not adequately equipped with the appropriate level of academic skilling to easily transition into undergraduate study. In addition, they are diverse in age, come from culturally diverse backgrounds, and have varying life experiences. Many students identify with being first in family to attend university, are from a low socio-economic background and realise that they may not have fully utilised the opportunities afforded them in high school (Henderson, Noble & De George-Walker, 2009; McConachie, Seary & Simpson, 2008).

In enabling programs, the first year is often referred to as the ‘transition year’ as students’ progress through a period of transition and adjust to the challenges that the formal educational environment presents. In tandem with this transition are new social experiences together with acquiring new knowledge. Klinger and Wache (2009) maintain that this can be a formidable experience for any student, let alone those from low socio-economic and diverse backgrounds who have been away from formal learning contexts for prolonged periods. Enabling programs represent an alternative pathway for the broader community to access and prepare for university level programs.

Participants

Subsequent to learning about the success reported by using FMC in a large Engineering class at University of Queensland (2015), the PSU lecturer at CQUniversity’s Bundaberg campus decided to trial this model of instruction. FMC was first trialled in Term 1, 2014 with a group of approximately 90 PSU students at the Bundaberg Campus and again in Term 2, 2014 with approximately 60 students. Previously, the PSU course was taught in smaller classes of 25-30 students requiring the lecturer to teach the same concepts at three separate tutorials. In the first class of the course, students were introduced to the FMC model and the theory and expectations were outlined clearly for their benefit.

The FMC model employed was based on the premise that: 1) students have read the material or viewed the lecture videos prior to attending: 2) lessons were planned to incorporate high level group activities where peer sharing was a predominant feature: 3) that the classroom be set-up to accommodate students sitting in groups of six: and 4) the lecturer ensured that each lesson was organised with all resources easily accessible. The only room available did not have computer access and this limited the type of resources that could be used with most being paper based. In addition, the lecturer had to use a microphone and speaker to ensure audibility due to the number of students and size of the classroom.

Methodology

An action research method was introduced as it best suited the approach to evaluate a teaching model introduced to a classroom. As defined by O’Brien (1998, p.1), action research is ‘learning by doing - a group of people identify a problem, do something to resolve it, see how successful their efforts were, and if not satisfied, try again.’ The evaluation cycle from Kemmis

and McTaggart (1988) was used as a guide throughout the research. This cyclic model of evaluation follows the ‘plan, act, observe, and then reflect’ structure with a continuous cycle of implementation and evaluation. Each lesson in the FMC model was planned following this cyclic process. After each facilitation, the lecturers recorded observations and reflections about the class experience. These were reviewed and the next cycle was planned and executed. This research method enabled the lecturers to adjust the lessons to the demands of the situation together with the needs of the students and to continuously reflect in order to bring about change to enhance the opportunities presented in this learning space.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data collected. This approach involves the search for common threads that extends across the entire set of data and it provides opportunity for a purely qualitative, detailed and nuanced account of the data (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). Viewing the results through themes made it easier for the researchers to understand the underlying messages behind the phenomenon of the FMC and to seek similarities and disparities within the data. For this paper, the focus of thematic analysis is on explicating the data that is collected through the student evaluations and lecturer reflections.

Data Collection

Student response system

The first data source was gathered on a student response system, GoSoapBox, during the weekly lab sessions. There were a number of questions posed in relation to the content being covered in the course, alongside specific questions in relation to the FMC. This was completed during Term 1 and Term 2, in 2014. The answers to the key questions posed around the FMC provided lecturers the opportunity to gain insight into the students’ understanding of the content being covered and helped to identify their perception of the FMC.

Evaluations

The second data source consisted of hardcopy evaluations. At the end of Term 1 and Term 2, 2014, students were invited to evaluate the effectiveness of the FMC. A hardcopy evaluation sheet was given to the students who were in attendance in the final class and who agreed to participate. Students were asked to reflect on their experience within the FMC and to list what they found most beneficial with specific reference to group work and peer interaction.

Class Rolls/Prior Reading

Attendance sheets were employed as a third data source on which students indicated prior reading/viewing of lectures before attending the FMC. Each week, in Term 1 and Term 2, 2014, students were asked to circle whether they had/had not read or viewed the material for that weekly module prior to coming to class. Researchers relied on students’ honesty as the purpose of the research had been explained to them. The sheets assisted to monitor the percentage of students who came to class prepared.

Anecdotal reflections

The final data source comprised of anecdotal reflections from the two lead lecturers in the FMC. Lecturer one (L1) took the lead role in planning and facilitating the lessons on the Bundaberg campus, while Lecturer two (L2) acted mainly in a support role to help students at

points of need. The lecturers reflected on the student's ability to effectively engage with the content, as well as student's ability and quality of interacting with their peers, and the strengths and weaknesses within the FMC. Lecturers also reflected on the quality and effectiveness of facilitation within the classroom environment.

Findings

The results from the four data collection methods are outlined in the following subsections.

Analysis of Student evaluations GoSoapBox

In the first poll students were asked what they perceived to be most beneficial about participating in group work (n=76):

- 45 per cent felt that it helped them to understand the concepts being taught,
- 24 per cent shared that they felt more at ease moving out of their comfort zone
- 17 per cent felt that it gave them opportunities to share their ideas
- 14 per cent stated that they were beginning to develop friendly relationships

In the next poll students were asked to vote on what they felt most beneficial about the FMC after the first week of class (n=89):

- 33 per cent appreciated the group work component
- 26 per cent enjoyed building rapport with students
- 22 per cent appreciated the ability to share their thoughts with peers
- 19 per cent valued getting to know the lecturer.

In another poll at the end of the term, students were asked to evaluate the FMC and what they found most beneficial (n=14):

- 50 per cent stated they were more willing to move out their comfort zone and were open to new ideas
- 29 per cent felt they developed a deeper understanding of the concepts being taught
- 14 per cent benefited from peer learning and peer interaction
- 7 per cent appreciated the establishment of building relationships

Analysis of prior reading

Each week, students recorded on the attendance sheets whether they had read or viewed the resources prior to attending the FMC. This is important to identify as the FMC model hinges on students doing pre-reading prior to attending class so that class time can be allocated to more interactive sessions to assist with deeper understanding and application of the knowledge.

The results indicate that just over half of the class (n=822, yes = 427, no = 395) completed either pre-reading of the module or watching of the lecture in one or more of the weeks they attended. This demonstrates that a high proportion of the class were not equipped with the base knowledge required for scaffolded learning. Consequently, lecturers are faced with great difficulty in starting the lessons because students do not have the required understanding of the content. An increase in pre-reading, from an average of 49 per cent to an average of 57 per cent is evident in the following term of using the FMC. This could be due to lecturers reiterating the

importance of pre-reading for gaining the full benefit of the FMC. The limitation with this data tool was the yes/no response and it does not allow for the students who may have attended the lecture or viewed it online, but not read the weekly module. The spike in pre-reading in Week 6 (see Table 2) is most likely due to the university week break that occurs between Week 5 and Week 6 of Term. It could be assumed that students read ahead during break week and were more prepared than other weeks.

Table 1 Attendance Sheets indicating prior reading

Week	Bundaberg - Term 1 2014			Bundaberg - Term 2 2014		
	Number	Yes	No	Number	Yes	No
Week 1	80	39	41	43	17	28
Week 2	71	34	37	39	29	10
Week 3	61	31	30	34	22	12
Week 4	58	31	27	34	16	16
Week 5	46	22	24	31	18	13
Week 6	34	12	22	21	16	5
Week 7	42	20	22	25	13	12
Week 8	38	18	20	20	12	8
Week 9	35	18	17	23	14	9
Week 10	33	19	14	18	8	10
Week 11	20	10	10	16	8	8
Total Number of Students	518	254	264	304	173	131

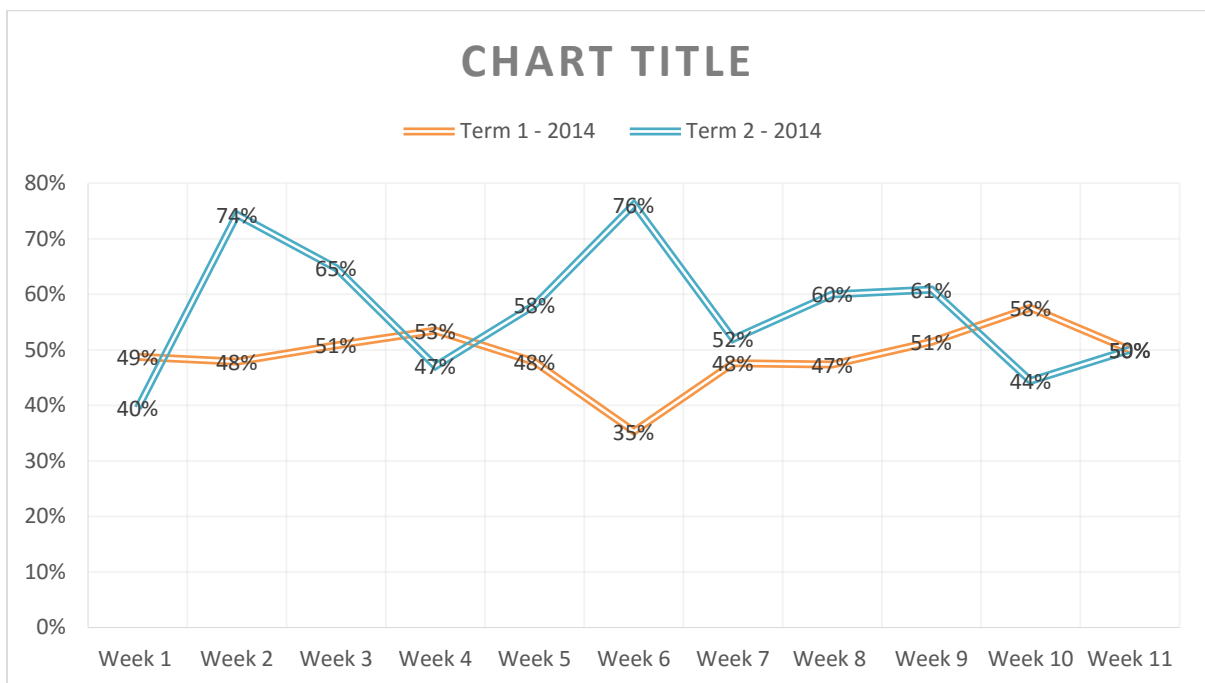


Figure 1 Percentage of students who pre-read material before attending the FMC

Analysis of Student Evaluations

Through the process of thematic analysis, four key themes were identified when analysing student evaluations. These include: peer interaction, classroom environment, course content and group work. Within the analysis of each of these themes, a selection of extracts were chosen to effectively share the voice of the students.

Peer interaction

The most prominent theme evidenced in the student evaluations highlighted the positive nature of peer interaction which confirmed that they enjoyed the social interface required in this setting. Students noted that they could better understand the content by listening to their peers explaining it in terms they were better able to comprehend and to which they could relate. 'I felt because I could sit and listen to other people's understanding, it helped me to understand it myself'. Teaching approaches that encouraged interactivity and movement around the room were noted due to the high levels of participation as well as peer interaction. Students stated, 'I felt engaged and it got my senses going' and 'it got us in teams, interacting, sharing new ideas'. In turn, this built confidence in some students as it motivated them to move out of their comfort zone. [I felt] more engaged by participating in discussion & activities which was sometimes out of my comfort zone'. The opportunity for social interaction was frequently mentioned, for instance: 'I enjoyed meeting different people from other classes and doing activities together'. Students appreciated the group work with comments like 'group interaction being able to work together and brainstorm with new people who share similar and different ideologies'.

Classroom Environment

A large number of positive comments were shared about the class environment including the informal, laid back, and relaxed nature of it. One student shared 'I enjoyed the open positive atmosphere of group learning' with another claiming 'it made me feel comfortable'. One student found that 'you can talk and communicate more. Everyone can give their own opinion instead of listening to one person in a lecture room'. However, this section also received the most negative comments. The area that the students commented negatively on was the overall size of the class with some stating they felt lost in this large environment. Although, when looking at the responses of these same students when asked about group work and the interactive element of the class, they did not have anything negative to state. This may indicate that for some students, the larger class environment may have been overwhelming at first, but as they got used to it and when they were broken into smaller groups, they felt more in control of that situation.

Course Content

Students found that the facilitation approach used, assisted them in gaining a better understanding of the course content. One student stated 'it clarified information and helped me understand better,' whilst another found that it 'made it more interesting to learn what was being taught in the modules.' The pedagogical activities were mentioned a number of times as it assisted the students to make stronger connections to the material. Students commented that 'it made the content fun through the use of the group work and activities' and that 'the content was brought to life by the thoughts and comments from all the other students'.

Group Work

When students were asked about how they found the group work, the comments were overwhelmingly positive and many thoughts and comments were repeated by most of the respondents. They found that listening to other likeminded students explaining the concepts benefited them as they heard it explained in layman's terms and they were able to better apply it to their own lives. One student stated, 'I personally enjoyed the group work because it produced ideas that I would not have thought of on my own,' with another stating, 'I liked that the group work was a team effort. You got to hear other opinions & ideas, which helped with learning new abilities.' Students also highlighted how their confidence grew over time and they felt more confident to speak within a group environment. Two students shared, 'it gave new perspectives to different elements – expanded social circles – increased social interaction and gave me more confidence' and 'these activities built my confidence and encouraged me to engage in public speaking.' There were a couple of responses that were opposing in nature with a comment about staying in the same group and then another on being made to move around. One stated 'I like how we changed groups all the time as we got to interact and meet everyone' with another stating 'people stayed in same groups so maybe need to mix people up each session.' However, overall, the respondents highly valued group work within this classroom environment.

Analysis of Lecturer reflections

The lecturers' reflections were analysed using thematic analysis and five key considerations emerged: 1) the depth of peer learning; 2) the positive nature of peer interaction; 3) the development of rapport, respect and trust; 4) the classroom environment; and 5) the positive impacts on students. Within each of these areas, extracts from the lecturer's reflections were used to support the identified theme.

1) Peer learning

L1 identified that over the term, there was noticeable improvement and broadening of the students' vocabulary in alignment to the concepts being taught. L1 observed that '*group discussions were used constantly and students were developing a deeper language that related to the concepts being taught*'. In addition, L1 noticed that students were starting to ask deeper questions to substantiate their thought processes. For instance '*one student mentioned critical thinking and this expanded into a deeper conversation around the table*.' Another student talked about making links to other classes and this connection was drawn on a number of times. L2 found that some students challenged other student's understanding and interpretation of the concepts being taught. She believes that this led the students into a deeper understanding of the concepts without them feeling judged if she questioned them or corrected them.

Additionally, L2 identified a growing sense of inquiry during the group discussions as the term progressed. She hypothesised that deeper and more critical discussions occurred when students undertook the requisite reading prior to attending. These students reflected a higher level of knowledge and engaged in deeper and more critical conversations compared to those who may not have done the pre-reading. She also found that over the weeks, students were recalling concepts from previous lessons, and she could see that '*repetition in a new context and moving from the known body of knowledge to the unknown newer learning promoted a deeper learning and engagement with the concepts and also greater confidence*.' The general feelings from both lecturers were that students played an integral part in the process of learning.

2) Peer interaction

It became obvious that the interactive classroom environment facilitated higher levels of interactivity and student engagement. L2 observed *'I notice students who have been very quiet and self-contained, even closed, opening up and starting to contribute more often and more confidently'*. L1 noted that *'different students were opening up and sharing their thoughts and this shows that they are feeling more comfortable in this environment.'* Helping the students to develop relationships in a safe class environment was instrumental for student cohesion. L2 noted that *'students are feeling more free to ask for help and I notice a lot of peer interaction and support.'* L1 commented that *'students seem to be more confident to share their ideas and their thoughts. There are some who commonly respond, but over time, some of the quieter ones are speaking up.'*

L2 felt a real sense of energy and enthusiasm as these classes progressed throughout the term: *'There's a sense of 'we'll give this a go' even if we're not totally sure where we are headed. The classroom also had a buzz – people were bright and enthusiastic and moved about easily.'* However, L1 noted that integrating all students was a challenge especially because of the diverse nature of students and the fact that the group included students with social disorders, anxiety or behavioural issues. Nonetheless, after one of the activities, she mentioned that *'every student in the class had to participate but because they had spent time investigating and sharing their thoughts around the topic, they were going into this group discussion prepared'*.

3) Rapport, respect and trust

L1 found that rapport was established very quickly between lecturer and students and between students. *'This is possibly because of the more relaxed and fun nature of the classroom. This rapport and class cohesion seemed to deepen over the weeks as students relaxed into the style of the class.'* L1 also observed that during the class discussions, she ensured that each student felt that their response was worthy and she aimed to *'weave the response into a narrative to show they were on track.'* This in turn helped students to feel that they were in a safe environment and that the lecturer would not embarrass them if their response was not the exact one she was expecting. L2 noted: *'I feel they are trusting me more – they are trusting of me and all the 'strange' things I ask them to do! Learning to expect the unexpected.'*

L1 reported that *'rapport is growing each week and I am noticing how they are more comfortable with breaking up into small groups and discussing their thoughts on the subject.'* L2 noted that during the group sessions *'there is a high level of active listening in group work which demonstrates a level of respect and trust'*. Even during activities, the lecturers noticed that students were showing higher levels of trust with each other through sharing thoughts and ideas that they may not have shared if in a different environment. L2 remarked that *'greater trust was established through the activities – to close ones eyes and be told what to do involves a level of trust.'* One activity, designed to assist students to better understand their temperament type and learning styles, assisted in representing the depth of diversity within the class environment. L2 noted that *'this reinforced the idea of diversity and also that diversity is a strength adding a new level of respect and appreciation to peer relations.'*

4) Class Environment

After the first week of class, L1 observed that *'the class was very informal and relaxed, and the overall intent was just to build a sense of belonging and connectedness to the group. Viewing students' body language, there was a sense of excitement in this first class. Students*

were engaged, smiling, willing to ask questions and willing to participate.’ The classroom setting was designed so that students had to sit in small groups. L2 noted that *‘the workshop format, where the classroom is student-centred and the focus is upon peer interaction and group work, is clearly promoting greater interaction and peer learning in this flipped classroom.’* Activities were designed to ensure students were both interacting and sharing thoughts within group discussions, or focussed on individual tasks utilising self-reflection and applying their knowledge to their personal situation.

5) Impacts on students

Both lecturers had many positive comments in relation to the impact they were witnessing on students. L2 noted that *‘the students came to class today prepared to work in groups and so willingly moved the desks. I think they are beginning to realise to expect the unexpected when they get to the PSU class.’* L1 observed that over the weeks, the students were more settled and there was a sense that they were in control of their own learning, they had a purpose and were directed and focused on the tasks. She noticed that *‘while they are still often out of their comfort zones, they are aware of this and accepting this challenge – ‘feeling the fear and doing it anyway!’* L1 did note that *‘there is a small group of students who sit at the back and each of these present with either heightened introverted tendencies or ASD. However, they all participate in the activities without complaint, but I am cautious not to draw them into the full class’s attention’.*

Discussion and Considerations:

Peer interaction was identified as possibly the most positive element of the classroom atmosphere. Each week students’ interactions became more natural and it was evident that more students were willing to share their own thoughts and perceptions as they felt they were in a safe non-judgemental environment. This style of teaching presents the possibility to engage all learners whether introverted, extroverted, or presenting with learning disorders. Clark (2011) argues that learning by teaching, in this context, peer teaching may possibly be the most powerful way to learn as it involves high-order, deep-processing activity. In addition, he found that this style of teaching encourages critical thinking and the ability to self-evaluate. King (2002) maintains that having students explain concepts to one another is social constructivism at work. She claims that *‘the act of teaching another individual demands that students clarify, elaborate on, and otherwise reconceptualise material’* (p. 33). Furthermore, Clark (2011) claims that in addition to enhanced social and communication skills, group bonding is another positive factor. Initially, within the trial classroom setting, some students were anxious about interacting and communicating as a result of low confidence and some felt uncomfortable opening up and sharing their thoughts at first. Often these students were the deeper thinkers and once they gained confidence, they managed deep and meaningful discussions with their peers.

It would be beneficial for lecturers to identify ASD students prior to commencing the initial classes, as these students are often overwhelmed when placed in large groups. It was found that once the ASD students in the trial were made aware of what the class entailed, as well as the type of environment they would be experiencing, they were more comfortable to settle into the routine of the class. Additionally, students with social anxiety should be identified and positioned near an exit so that they are able to leave the classroom if they are feeling overwhelmed. Overall, students were extremely positive about group work with a majority stating their appreciation for this style of teaching. It was noted in the students’ evaluations that there were minimal negative comments regarding this setting. The key, as noted by Brindley, Blaschke & Walti (2009) is to ensure that students feel that the group work is benefiting them

and peer interaction is used wisely to allow them to find their ‘safe zone’ first. As students gain confidence in themselves and their ability to learn and share this knowledge, it is a good opportunity to start to change the group dynamics by creating different groups. Collaboration through group work improves critical discussion as well as reflection, and benefits the students by constructing personal meaning and mutual understanding (Brindley, Blaschke & Walti, 2009).

The trial FMC was facilitated with enthusiasm and a number of students commented on how much they enjoyed coming to class and that they actually looked forward to attending. Lambert (2012) hypothesised that ‘the live classroom is still the best medium for a student to truly be known as an intellectual being and to engage with other such beings’. Learning occurs in all aspects of life and if learning is a social experience, then the key may be to coax students into each other’s minds. A quirky quote from Lambert (2012) underpins the philosophy behind a fun learning environment: ‘If learning is indeed a social experience, then a ‘party school’—of a certain kind—just might offer the richest learning environment of all.’

As a model for teaching, the lead lecturer highlighted that there were no guidelines nor frameworks to follow to ensure that the FMC was structured correctly. The basic tenet that underpinned the whole planning was interactive group work and peer teaching with the expectation that students were doing their own pre-reading or viewing of lectures outside of the classroom. However, it was found through the class attendance sheets that close to half the cohort had not done any reading prior to attending these classes and therefore the lecturer could not confidently base their planning on the premise that students came prepared. Although some literature discussed sharing this approach within a university environment, the original design of the FMC was for secondary classrooms in a school setting. High school students tend to be more competent and confident with technology; whereas, adult students in an enabling type program often enter with lower skills and confidence in technology (Cowling, Sturgess & Gray, 2015). The original FMC expects students to view podcasts and other online sources to gain the foundation knowledge, but there are adult students who are not competent or comfortable watching online videos and they may shy away from completing the required tasks.

Within a university setting, the student cohort consists of predominately adult learners; therefore, adult learning principles are applicable and need to be considered (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1997; Stoica, 2015). As an approach to teaching, and with some modifications, the FMC approach, as implemented in this trial, was an innovative and engaging model that makes the class environment a place where students feel empowered to step out of their comfort zone and become more engaged with the content. Therefore, there is scope to develop this approach and assign a functional framework that would benefit other lecturers in adult education to ensure consistency in the application of a model of teaching such as the FMC.

Conclusion

As a response to the title question of whether this model of teaching was ‘a flipping good idea or a flop’, the lecturers agree that this model of teaching was successful as students were highly engaged and the class environment was dynamic and interactive. Evidently, there was much positive feedback from students; however, from the lecturers’ perspective, there were obvious gaps in regards to a framework or working definition to guide the planning and implementation of this teaching approach within an adult classroom of students. Limitations were found to be around the planning and organisation of the classes. There was no framework for lecturers to access or follow in order to ensure consistency in using this teaching approach. Nevertheless, as a model, this approach was innovative and ensured that students were highly engaged and

took ownership of their own learning. The class environment reflected a place where students felt empowered to step out of their comfort zone and become more engaged with the content.

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