Flipped Learning - A Guide for Higher Education Faculty

Talbert, Robert
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Book Review

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Robert Talbert's Flipped Learning: A Guide for Higher Education Faculty is intended for three separate categories of instructors engaged in the process of flipped learning in higher education. He intends his monograph to appeal to "the curious," "the newbies," and "the veterans," otherwise known as those first investigating flipped learning, those experimenting with flipped learning and looking to fix or expand on their early forays into it, and those who have taught at least one fully flipped class and want to "hone their craft" (xviii-xix). He divides the monograph into three sections. The first, "What Is Flipped Learning?" offers definitions and histories of flipped learning, and models of what flipped learning looks like in the classroom. The second section, "Flipped Learning Design" provides guidelines for designing a syllabus, lessons, and classroom activities using flipped learning. Finally, the third section, "Teaching and Learning in a Flipped Learning Environment" addresses variations on the flipped classroom and common student complaints about the method. While Talbert intends his book for use by all higher education instructors, it is probably most useful for those in STEM, business, or social science classrooms.

Talbert uses his initial chapter, "What Is Flipped Learning, and Why Use It," to work through definitions and misunderstandings of flipped learning. While flipped learning is commonly believed to consist of assigning videos of lectures for students to watch before class time, Talbert explains that flipped learning is a methodology rather than a specific technique. Flipped learning, he asserts, aims to ensure that students first encounter the new material on their own, outside of class, and then work to nuance their understanding and build skills around that material in the classroom. In this way, students develop the ability to access new material independently and then do the more challenging work of integrating and developing that information in the classroom with assistance from both classmates and the professor, or

"expert." The second chapter, "The History and Theory of Flipped Learning," traces the method's history to establish that it is neither new nor a fly by night fad, but rather a sensible pedagogical strategy built on a solid base.

Chapter three, "Models of Flipped Learning," offers a range of examples from math, business, and economics to demonstrate flipped learning approaches. In each example, Talbert draws from largely mathematics-based courses, suggesting that students read and watch videos about concepts before coming to class to work together on problem sets, the opposite of a traditional STEM course in which concepts are introduced in lecture and students then depart to work on problem sets on their own. (It is noteworthy that although Talbert argues in the earlier chapters that flipped learning is more than watching videos before class, this is, in fact, a primary method that he demonstrates.)

As a religious studies professor, it was hard to see how this method would change the basic format of my humanities classes, in which student read material ahead of time, usually guided by discussion questions, and then come to class for a brief lecture that fills in details and group conversations or a class discussion, informed by their reading. While I have no objection to a book providing instruction on pedagogy for the STEM/business classroom, Talbert's apparent inability to acknowledge the different structure of the humanities is significant. In failing to recognize that his methods would not significantly change the traditional structure of humanities classes, he has failed to properly acknowledge his book's disciplinary scope and to correctly identify the audience to whom it would be the most useful. In these fields, flipped learning makes a notable difference from traditional pedagogical methods in which students first encounter new concepts in class. In the humanities, however, students traditionally encounter new material through reading assignments before class. That material is then elaborated upon and explored in classroom lectures, discussions, small groups, and activities. It is difficult, even with one or two humanities-based examples, to see how Flipped Learning dramatically would change my humanities classroom.

Chapters four, five, and six address the nuts and bolts of how to flip a class. Here, Talbert offers both many more specific guidelines and, in a couple of instances, he draws examples from the humanities classroom. For instance, in chapter four, he suggests providing students with a list of reading questions that guide students toward increased complexity of thinking, gradually moving from reading comprehension and synthesis questions to conceptual and analytic questions. Chapter five offers insight into how to construct the activities. Throughout this chapter, Talbert offers cogent summaries of key theories on learning and course design, and while he rarely suggests a technique with which I am unfamiliar, his explanations of how and why they are effective are certainly likely to help me refine my technique.

Chapter seven provides adaptations to the flipped learning model, primarily for low technology educational environments. It also addresses a number of student objections to the flipped classroom, ranging from student complaints about having to teach themselves to gripes that flipped learning takes too much time outside of class. On a practical note, Talbert also addresses the risks of participating in a flipped-learning classroom while untenured or in a contingent position. In each of these situations, he offers concrete advice for mitigating the risk of pedagogical experimentation, particularly reactions from students who are adjusting to a new line of teaching. These chapters were, perhaps, the most useful, as they provided language for addressing student dissatisfaction with new methods and were, perhaps, the most applicable to non-mathematically oriented classrooms.

Throughout the book, I was struck by Talbert's dry tone. Although I am accustomed to academic writing I found this to be a bit of a slog, which is a less than ideal model for a book dedicated to methods of teaching and learning. More importantly, while the author claims the book will be useful for all of the divisions of higher education, it is constrained by the author's primary orientation and expertise, and most (though not all) of his examples are drawn from STEM, business, and mathematically oriented social sciences such as economics. Nonetheless, Talbert provides background research that will allow readers to refine and justify some of their existing techniques, helping them engage student learning both within the classroom and beyond it.

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