A Half-Flipped Classroom or an Alternative Approach?: Primary Sources and Blended Learning

Edward B. Westermann

Texas A&M University-San Antonio

This paper examines an alternate approach to the "flipped" classroom paradigm for an upper level history class using a blended on-line and in-class format. The concept of the flipped classroom has received increasing emphasis based on its potential to create a student-centered learning environment that incorporates practical instruction along with collaborative techniques. The use of flipping has largely been tied to the incorporation of video technology either in the form of a student practicum or an instructor lecture via on-line delivery combined with a classroom meeting involving collaboration and/or application exercises in the face-to-face session. With respect to flipping the history classroom, this paper offers the results from an upper division history course in which historical primary sources were introduced in the on-line portion of a hybrid class. The use of the primary sources also included a bi-modal collaborative mechanism, since students collaborated by sharing their thoughts prior to class and the start of the class incorporated a student-centered collaborative exercise based on the primary sources. This collaborative discussion on the primary sources served as the gateway into the broader topic discussion. This paper describes this process and uses student feedback to evaluate the effectiveness of this methodological approach.

Since 2007, the concept of the "flipped classroom" has received increasing attention within the educational community based on its promise according to one convert to literally turn the "traditional information-transfer model of education upside-down" (Mazur, 2009, p. 51). From a pedagogical standpoint, "flipping" as an instructional technique focuses on the creation of a student-centered learning environment that leverages technology and emphasizes application and collaboration (Fitzpatrick, 2012). One recent study argues that the flipped learning allows

educators to "break the lecture-centered instructional model by shifting the focus from the curriculum pacing guide to student learning needs." (Hamdan, McKnight, McKnight, & Arfstrom, 2013, p. 3).

According to its adherents, the flipped instructional paradigm allows "students [to] gain first exposure to new material outside of class, usually via reading or lecture videos, and then use class time to do the harder work of assimilating that knowledge, perhaps through problem-solving, discussion, or debates. In terms of Bloom's revised taxonomy (2001), this means that students are doing the lower levels of cognitive work (gaining knowledge and comprehension) outside of class, and focusing on the higher forms of cognitive work (application, analysis, synthesis, and/or evaluation) in class, where they have the support of their peers and instructor" (Brame, 2014). The flipped approach differentiates itself from traditional instructional techniques that focus on the introduction of new materials in the classroom by the instructor in a lecture format. In essence, the "flipped" paradigm introduces information to the student prior to his/her attendance in the classroom, but perhaps more importantly initiates collaboration between the students themselves and the instructor prior to the presentation of the material with a corresponding expectation that the information presented will focus on higher level cognitive processes such as analysis, evaluation, and comparison. In truth, the incorporation of active learning strategies including collaboration and cooperation within the flipped classroom paradigm are all hallmarks of existing "learner-centered" teaching methodologies (Bosch et al, 2008).

Normally, the use of flipping as a pedagogical tool has almost exclusively been tied to the incorporation of video or digital technology introduced prior to the in-class session. This on-line component is normally in the form of a student

practicum or an instructor lecture and establishes the basis for collaboration and/or application exercises during the face-to-face class. For example, an economics professor at Brown University posted videos of class lectures prior to the in-class meeting. In this case, the students viewed the lectures prior to attending class while the in-class meetings were primarily devoted to direct application; specifically "problem-solving sessions" consisting of both group and individual work supervised by undergraduate teaching assistants (An economics experiment: Flipping the lecture class, 2014). In another example, a biology instructor from Athens Technical College posted videos concerning the nomenclature and instructions associated with microscopes prior to meeting in lab to prepare students for the actual use of equipment during the class meeting (DiaGiacomo & Barreto, 2013). In both of these cases, videos or digital technologies provided the primary tool for introducing information to the student as the foundation for subsequent application exercises.

With respect to the history classroom, the traditional flipped approach would involve the presentation of an on-line lecture and a subsequent use of the face-to-face session to discuss or debate the key issues or themes related to the lecture. For example, an on-line lecture on the topic of slavery prior to the Civil War might be followed with an in-class session focused on an analysis of the economic importance of slavery within southern society and the specific social and political manifestations of the "peculiar institution" on the development of industry or the creation of social class in the American South. In this case, however, the learner essentially is provided with the instructor's interpretation of the subject matter in the video and is then expected to demonstrate an ability to analyze and evaluate specific elements in an interactive or collaborative in-class meeting. This paper offers an alternative approach to the traditional

flipped paradigm for the history classroom, an approach that focuses on providing students with primary sources while providing multiple opportunities for peer-to-peer and student-to-instructor collaboration prior to the in-class meeting via a hybrid or blended learning instructional format. In this approach, the primary sources were directly related to the course content being presented in the face-to-face meeting. As such, they served as "raw data" for allowing student engagement with the subject prior to class attendance in the on-line forum thus requiring students to begin the process of inquiry and collaboration.

Course Description and Objectives

This paper focuses on the use of this alternative "flipped" instructional paradigm for an upper level history offering on Nazi Germany. The course was an elective offering at Texas A&M University-San Antonio, a two-year upper division university serving a majority Hispanic and first generation college population on the south side of San Antonio. Of the twenty-six students enrolled in the course, eighteen were male and eight were female, and slightly more than half of the students were history majors. The overarching student learning outcomes for the course focused on the students' ability to evaluate the rise of fascism in Europe during the interwar period (1919-1939). Additionally, students were expected to identify and analyze specific political, social, cultural, and economic factors that led to the end of Weimar democracy and the radicalization of German politics with special emphasis on the role played by Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP or Nazi Party) in the development of the Third Reich. Furthermore, the course analyzed the formulation and evolution of Nazi policies in the period from 1933 through 1945 by focusing on the regime's use of legislation,

propaganda, and terror as means to target putative racial and political enemies.

Instructional Format and Approach

The course employed a "hybrid" or "blended" learning format consisting of one weekly in-class meeting of one hour and fifteen minutes supplemented by an on-line component. As in the case of the traditional flipped approach, the on-line component of the course provided the platform for providing introductory materials to the students related to the subject in advance of the face-to-face meeting. In this case, however, the prefatory material did not consist of a video of a class lecture, but rather the introduction to the student of a primary source. Historians define primary sources as "the firsthand remnants of an event that come directly from a historical actor" (Benjamin, 2010, p. 25). In the discipline of history, primary sources include a wide range of materials ranging from eyewitness testimony such as letters, diaries, and journals, to newspaper accounts, government studies and reports, court transcripts as well as artifacts and photographs. Primary sources provide direct evidence related to a specific event and they are the crucial means by which historians to piece together the past. Providing students with access to these sources prior to the in-class meeting initiates a process of inquiry that requires the student to begin to question and evaluate the source from a number of perspectives. In this sense, students were not merely introduced to primary sources, but they also were challenged to analyze these sources and to place them into context with respect to the weekly lesson. Likewise, the use of the on-line forum initiated the collaborative process, an essential element of both flipped learning and learner-centered paradigms (Bosch et al, 2008; Hamdan et al., 2013).

The primary source was posted to the course content page of the Blackboard course management system one week

prior to the in-class meeting along with specific questions provided by the instructor related to the historical document or artifact. The students had a six day window prior to the in-class meeting to post their responses. In addition to authoring their own posts, students were expected to read and comment on the posts of their classmates thus initiating peer-to-peer collaboration. An additional step in the on-line collaborative process occurred when the instructor posted *individual* responses to each student's discussion board post prior to class. In the first case, the opportunity for peer-to-peer collaboration stimulated dialogue between the students. In the second case, instructor feedback on student posts allowed for clarification of specific points or facts, the addition of historical context, and the posting of comments or additional questions related to the students' responses.

The collaborative process extended beyond the on-line forum since the students also composed a 'micro-essay' (150-200 words) in answer to a separate question posted to the weekly discussion board. The essay question was either directly related to the further analysis of the primary source or was framed as a question that required higher level cognitive analysis (e.g., compare and contrast). These micro-essays served primarily two purposes. First, they required the student to compose a formal written response in order to exercise composition and rhetoric skills. Second, the 'micro-essay' provided the students with a memory jogger and type of "position paper" for sharing their thoughts with a student peer during the in-class meeting. In fact, at the start of the face-to-face class students were asked to pair with a classmate in order to discuss their individual written responses thus reviving the collaborative process begun during the on-line forum. Finally, after a five minute discussion period, the instructor called on specific groups to share their insights and evaluations of each other's thoughts with the entire class. This step not only promoted additional discussion, but also

allowed the instructor to assess individual student learning. Likewise, instructor participation in this dialogue provided the opportunity to expand upon specific student comments, provide missing historical context, or to correct items related to factual inaccuracies or historical error. After the initial class discussion, the students turned in their "micro essays" which were graded and returned by the instructor at the next class providing an additional opportunity for assessing student learning as well as individual composition and rhetoric skills.

Examples of the Half-flipped Learning Process

The following discussion provides specific examples taken from the course concerning the types of primary sources used, the questions posed to the students in the on-line forum, and the instructor's evaluation of the process.

For a lesson entitled "Racialism and the Rise of Fascism," the on-line discussion board introduced the students to of the Nazi Party program authored by Adolf Hitler and Anton Drexler in 1920 (Snyder, 1958). The party program consists of twenty-five points that highlight the racial, social, political, and economic views of the party. The students were asked to respond to the following questions on-line:

> (1) What are the major themes of the Nazi Party Program?
> (2) Do some of these themes reflect on issues related to the Treaty of Versailles and the German loss of WWI? If so, how so?

The first question was designed to assess the individual student's ability to identify the key themes and issues found in the Nazi Party Program. In contrast, the second question asked students to relate these themes to

previous course material and to provide an analysis of the methods by which the Nazi Party attempted to gain popular support by taking advantage of existing German resentment to the restrictions imposed by the Treaty of Versailles (a primary source evaluated by the students earlier in the course). Additionally, the "micro essay" for this lesson asked students to identify and evaluate the implications of the Party Program specifically with respect to German Jews. In this way, this document served not only to highlight the centrality of anti-Semitism in Nazi ideology from the moment of the party's founding, but the use of this document also helped to foreshadow subsequent course material and to frame later actions taken by Hitler and the Nazi Party with respect to German Jews after the so called seizure of power in January 1933.

In another example, the on-line forum was used to evaluate propaganda images used during the Nazi dictatorship. For a lesson entitled, "The Role of Propaganda," two propaganda images were posted to Blackboard. One of the images (Figure 1) was a drawing taken from *Der Stürmer* (*The Stormer*), a notorious weekly newspaper devoted to propagating anti-Semitic imagery of the crudest and most salacious variety (Levy, 2005). The second image (Figure 2) was a propaganda poster, with the slogan "A People Helps Themselves," created for the National Socialist People's Welfare organization in support of the annual charity drive. With respect to Figure 1, labeled the "Dangerous Other," students were asked to answer the following questions in the on-line forum:

> (1) Who is the character in the image supposed to represent? What symbols are used in the drawing and what are they intended to convey?
> (2) Is this an effective propaganda image? If so, why? If not, why not?

Figure 1 .The "Dangerous Other"
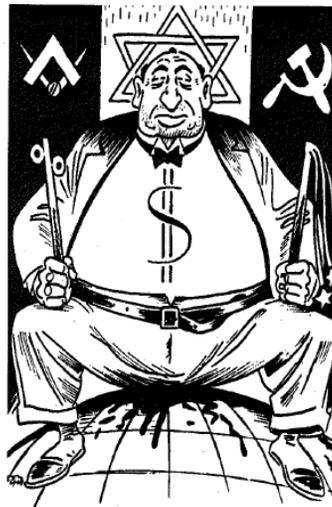
A Stürmer caricature.

Figure 2. "A People Helps Themselves"

The analysis of the first image required the students not only to identify the ways by which caricature was used to dehumanize and demonize Jews, but also the ways in which Nazi propaganda images incorporated symbols designed to equate Jews with Communism, Free Masons, and global oppression. The second question in particular was designed to address higher level cognitive function by asking the student to evaluate the effectiveness of the image among the German populace based upon the knowledge they had gained by the tenth week of a fifteen week course. At this point in the course, students were being asked to use their existing knowledge, including information from a previous assignment related to an extended critical essay (700-900 words) of an autobiography of a former Hitler Youth (Heck, 1985). The "micro-essay" for this discussion board involved the examination of a second image (Figure 2) intended to portray the "ideal Aryan family." The essay question required the student to identify the "key themes" presented in the imagery related to Nazi social and gender norms as well as to define the intended audience. Additionally, students were asked to identify the primary objective of the image from a propagandistic perspective. One of the pedagogical purposes in juxtaposing these two images in the assignment was to demonstrate the way in which propaganda, specifically imagery, was used by the Nazi Party to demonize and ostracize its putative racial "enemies," but also to portray the regime's ideal family type and gender norms.

Student Response

The preceding two examples illustrate the method by which primary sources were incorporated into an upper level history offering using the flipped instructional paradigm. In order to assess the effectiveness of this approach an end of course survey was used to gauge student response to the use of primary sources in the on-line portion of the course. The

survey was voluntary and anonymous and incorporated a five point Likert scale with the following response options: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree. The survey also included an optional section for written student comments. From a total course enrollment of 26 students, there were a total of 21 individual responses to the survey questions for an eighty-one percent response rate. Additionally, 8 students or thirty-one percent also provided written comments. Using a numeric scale where Strongly Disagree equals 1 and Strongly Agree equals 5, student responses were as follows:

Question 1: The analysis of primary sources in the discussion board helped me to better understand the classroom lecture. (Overall score 4.81 on a 5.0 scale)

Question 2: The use of primary sources prior to class provided better context for the lesson. (Overall score 4.71 on a 5.0 scale)

Question 3: I found the primary sources interesting as documents independent of the classroom lecture. (Overall score 4.57 on a 5.0 scale)

Question 4: I would recommend using primary sources for the on-line portion of this hybrid class in the future. (Overall score 4.67 on a 5.0 scale)

Question 5: I would prefer the use of more in-depth readings or journal articles for the on-line portion of this hybrid class. (Overall score 3.48 on a 5.0 scale)

Analysis of Student Responses

The students' responses with respect to question 1 (4.81) and question 2 (4.71) indicated a strong agreement on the value of using primary sources as a mechanism for introducing specific course content as well as the value of these sources for creating context for the content presented during the in-class session. Student written comments reinforced this point

with three responses specifically noting that the primary sources "increased understanding" or provided greater "context" for the lesson material. With respect to question 3 concerning the interest or 'stand-alone' value of the primary sources themselves, two individual written responses described the primary sources as "fascinating" or a "fantastic source of knowledge." In another written response, a student stated that he/she "would like to discuss the PS [primary source] more in class." In this respect, the student responses to question 4 indicated strong support for the use of primary sources in future offerings of the course using the hybrid format. Finally, with respect to the question of whether secondary sources such as journal articles should be substituted for the primary sources, student responses approached the neutral value of 3.48.

        In addition to the above course specific survey, all students had the opportunity to respond anonymously to the university-administered Student Rating of Instruction (SRI) and to provide written comments on the course. With reference to the SRI results, nine students provided feedback on the multiple choice portion of the survey and four students included written comments on the course. In particular, two students chose to provide written comments related to the use of the primary sources. One student noted, "…the analysis of the primary sources greatly increased the quality of the knowledge gain[ed]." Another student noted, "The instruction was very clear and included outside primary sources to further the insight of the time period." In answer to the question "Whenever possible, my instructor utilized a student centered approach in teaching the course," eight students chose "strongly agree" and one "agree" for a score of 4.89 on a 5.0 scale, indicating a high level of identification among the students with a learner-focused approach. Of additional note, in response to the question "Whenever possible my instructor taught the course in a way that

stimulated critical thinking," all nine respondents chose "strongly agree" for a score of 5.0. Although the responses to this question cannot be solely tied to the use of the primary sources, one of the key reasons for including these sources was to stimulate critical thinking skills.

Conclusion

Based on the instructor's assessment and the students' responses, there appears to be clear evidence that the incorporation of primary sources into the on-line portion of the course provided a useful introduction and an effective bridge into the weekly in-class session. In this respect a key finding from this methodological approach relates to the value of using primary sources as mechanism for promoting student interest, discussion, and learning. As such, it points to the potential value of incorporating primary source readers as auxiliary texts in the history classroom. Additionally, this approach incorporated multiple collaborative steps, including peer-to-peer and instructor-student, both in the on-line forum and in the classroom. The use of written responses in both the discussion board as well as the use of 'micro-essays' not only allowed for the assessment of student learning, but also provided a forum for students to practice and demonstrate composition and rhetoric skills on a weekly basis, in addition to three assigned monograph-based extended critical essays of 700-900 words.

Finally, this 'half-flipped' approach addresses in part one of the major concerns voiced by educators in using the flipped paradigm, the loss of "engaging face-to-face Socratic teaching" (Hamdan et al., 2013). One of the benefits of this alternate approach to flipped learning with respect to the history classroom is that it not only relies on a great deal of collaboration, but it still allows for the use of significant in-class time for lecture and Socratic discussion, a critical element in the classic humanities canon of instruction.

Despite the current interest in the flipped learning paradigm, there has been a mixed response and some criticism of this approach among students and the jury is still out on its ultimate value (Johnson, 2013; Paul, 2013). To paraphrase Shakespeare, the question is not "Whether to flip, or not to flip," but rather to devise strategies that engage students and promote a learned-centered classroom environment.

References

An economics experiment: Flipping the lecture class. (2014, January 27). *The Brown Daily Herald*, p. 1.

Benjamin, J. (2010). *A student's guide to history.* Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's.

Bosch, W., Hester, J., MacEntee, V., MacKenzie, J., Morey, T., Nichols, J., Pacitti, P., Shaffer, B., Tomascak, P., Weber, S. & Young, R. (2008). Beyond lip-service: An operational definition of "learning centered college". *Innovative Higher Education, 33*(2), 83-98.

Brame, C. (2014). *Flipping the classroom.* Retrieved from http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub- pages/flipping-the-classroom/

DiaGiacomo, M. C., & Barreto, N. (2013, December). Navigating the flipped classroom paradigm. Paper presented at Atlanta, GA: SACS-COC Conference Presentation.

Fitzpatrick, M. (2012, June 24). Classroom lecture goes digital. *The New York Times.* Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com

Hamdan, N., McKnight, P., McKnight, C., & Arfstrom, K. (2013). *A review of flipped learning.* Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson.

Heck, A. (1985). *A child of Hitler: Germany in the days when God wore a swastika.* Frederick, CO: Renaissance House.

Johnson, G. (2013, November 3). Flipped classrooms not beneficial to all. *The Daily Vidette* (Illinois State

University).   Retrieved   from   http://   www. videtteonline.com

Levy, R. (2005). *Antisemitism: A historical encyclopedia of prejudice and persecution.* Santa Barbara, CA: ABC Clio.

Mazur, E. (2009, January 2). Farewell, lecture? *Science* , pp. 50-51.

Paul, E. (2013, November 14). After mixed responses, COS 226 modifies 'flipped lecture' format. *Daily Princetonian.* Retrieved from http:// dailyprincetonian. com

Snyder, L. (1958). *Documents of German History.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.