

Five Ways to Motivate Unprepared Students in the Flipped Classroom

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In the previous article “[Ready to Flip: Three Ways to Hold Students Accountable for Pre-Class Work](#),” I mentioned that one of the most frequently asked questions about the flipped classroom model is, “How do you encourage students to actually do the pre-class work and come to class prepared?”

A few days after the article was published, a reader emailed me to ask a follow up question. It’s actually the second most popular question I hear from educators. She asked, “What do you do when students *still* aren’t coming to class prepared?”

The flipped classroom model—or any active, student-centered learning model—relies heavily on students being prepared and ready to engage in the learning activities. If students are unprepared, then it limits what they can do, how deeply they can engage with the material, and how meaningfully they can connect with other students. It also challenges you to determine how to proceed. Do you give a quick lecture to recap the pre-class content so everyone is on the same page? Do you give the unprepared students an alternative assignment? Do you kick them out of class? Do they earn an F in the course?

Your response to this question is based on your teaching philosophy and the type of classroom environment you want to create. For many *Faculty Focus* readers, I would guess the answer to all of these questions is probably “no.” Many of us would prefer to pro-actively design the learning environment using strategies to promote learning and personal development instead of relying on punitive measures to change behavior.

So, what can we do to address the challenge of unprepared students? Here are five recommendations to start the discussion:

1. **Have a conversation.** Before you react too quickly, take a few days to identify exactly who is not prepared. Is it the same two or three students each time? Is it the same group or team of students? Do you see a trend? Are they only unprepared on Mondays, for example? Are the [students resistant](#)? Are they genuinely worried about not completing the assignment? Keep a record, and then have a conversation with the students. Ask them to make arrangements to stay after the next class. (Don’t ask them to stay after today’s class because they are most likely not prepared to do so and that will just create more friction between you and the students). Sometimes all it takes is a conversation with a student to find out what’s going on and why they are falling behind. Then make a plan together to move forward. Once they realize they’re on your radar, you may not need to do anything else
1. **Review your pre-class assignment.** The flipped classroom is a partnership. You and your students are working together. Your role is to design the learning experience. Their role is to come to class ready to participate in the learning experience. You plan the activities. They engage in the activities. You teach by guiding from the side. They learn by doing. One of your responsibilities is to design the pre-class assignment. Is it clear what the students are supposed to do? Is it too demanding? Does it take too much time? Is it confusing? Could it be organized more effectively? Sometimes a simple adjustment in the pre-class assignment is all you need to do to improve student preparedness.
1. **Proceed as planned.** If you give a quick lecture to recap the pre-class work, you will be giving a quick lecture in every class from now on. Try not to fall back to that approach. Proceed with your activities just as you

planned. This will show students who are unprepared that class time will not be derailed by their lack of preparation. Be sure to show students the value of the pre-class work. How are they using the pre-class work during class time? How does the pre-class work help them finish the in-class work more efficiently and effectively? What parts of the pre-class work are being applied during class time? How are you recognizing students for their preparation? The unprepared students will see the value of the pre-class work and hopefully this will motivate them to be prepared next time. And, if your activities rely on group work, use the power of peer pressure. Most group members will not tolerate someone being chronically unprepared.

1. **Re-think participation grades.** If you build in participation grades as part of your grading policy, then make “completing pre-class work” a significant part of the participation and final grade. This will give you more flexibility in determining what counts as “participation” and how you choose to respond. This approach also permits students to have more control over their choice in whether to come prepared. They know the consequences in terms of how their lack of preparation affects their grade. You may consider other policies such as a “free pass” on one pre-class assignment. After all, life happens. Even your best, brightest, and most well-prepared students can have an off day.
1. **Set up a corner.** A couple of years ago, I led a faculty development workshop at a university, and one of the faculty members shared this strategy for managing unprepared students. She said she had success setting up a corner in the front of the room where students who did not complete the pre-class work would go to finish their assignment during class time. This approach allowed students to catch up, but if the pre-class assignment took longer to complete than class time, then they had to figure out a way to complete the in-class work on their own time.

When students are unprepared for the learning activities, it can cause stress for both you and the other students in the room. With these five recommendations, hopefully you can address why students aren't prepared and help support them in recognizing their role and their responsibilities in this type of learning environment. I always say, “Just as you are learning how to teach in this way, your students are learning how to learn in this way.”

These recommendations are designed to start the conversation. What other approaches do you use when working with unprepared students in the classroom?

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