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Extra: Students in Pekin's 'flipped' classrooms do homework in class, lectured at home

PEKIN — A few years ago, [Pekin Community High School](#) teacher Mike Bone was having a problem with homework. The science teacher would give out an assignment, and a large chunk of his students wouldn't do it. He had to do something drastic to make sure his students were learning, so he flipped his classroom.

"Before I flipped my class, I had up to 70 percent homework completion rate, on a good day," Bone said in his classroom. Now, that is no longer a problem, thanks to a relatively new twist to teaching: the flipped classroom.

Instead of doing homework at home and listening to lectures in school, students do learning activities, or homework, in the classroom and listen to lectures provided by their teachers at home.

"You've turned the classroom upside down. It's a pendulum swing, a paradigm shift," Dean Cantu, chairman of the [Department of Teacher Education at Bradley University](#), said.

"I think some people hear the buzzword 'flipped' and are put off," Jeremy Crouch, another Pekin teacher who has flipped his classroom, said. "They'd be pleasantly surprised if they knew what happens in these classrooms now."

The advent of the flipped classroom format coincided with the dawn of the Internet and the digital age in the late 1990s.

"The most basic explanation for the beginning of flipped classrooms was the idea of teachers asking, 'How can we integrate technology best with the teaching and education process?'" Cantu said.

Since then, the prevalence of flipped classrooms in America has grown. According to a survey of more than 400,000 teachers, students and administrators done by the [Flipped Learning Network](#), 25 percent of administrators reported flipped classrooms in their districts, while an additional 15 percent of teachers and 40 percent of administrators said they were interested in trying flipped classrooms in 2014.

"All indicators are that we are only going to see continued use. I don't see anything that will create a reversal," Cantu said.

Crouch, who teaches history along with economics in Pekin, has not flipped his history class, just economics.

"Economics and any type of science — economics is a social science, of course — are really well suited for a flipped classroom," Crouch said.

"It lends itself to certain classes and not others," Bone said.

Sherry Spurlock, another teacher at Pekin who has a flipped classroom, also teaches science in a flipped class.

According to Cantu, science, math, English and social sciences, in that order, are the most common flipped subjects. "Is it a coincidence? I don't think so. Science and math really lend themselves to in-person guidance," Cantu said, but he's confident that all classes could be flipped, to some degree, thanks to the technology easily accessible to modern students.

In 2014, passing around videos and computer files outside of the classroom has become as easy as handing out a piece of paper to students. "Those students who were born in the late 1990s or the early 2000s, these are the students that are digital natives," Cantu said.

"Digital natives" are students who have grown up in the digital age, those who have never known a world without a cellphone and the Internet and, according to Cantu, will expect to see such technology applied in their classrooms.

"If a student has no Internet, I can ask them if they have an [Xbox 360](#) video game system, and I can burn a DVD of the lectures for them," Bone said. "I can put videos on their cellphones. I can put videos on a thumb drive, which they can plug into their Xbox or TV at home. If worse comes to worst, they can watch the videos after school on a school computer."

While the technology certainly helped Crouch choose a flipped classroom, the reason he chose to flip was a much more immediate concern.

"The real reason I decided to flip the class is because you don't take economics till senior year here in Pekin. So these kids are so foreign to these concepts," Crouch said.

Whether it was teaching the economic principles of John Maynard Keynes or how a country establishes a monetary policy, Crouch was fighting an uphill battle with his economics class. Having more free time in the classroom meant that his students could "actually get their hands dirty with economics."

"Take supply and demand. We did a simulation of the seller and buyer relationship with pearls," Crouch said.



PHOTO/ DAVID ZALAZNIK/JOURNAL STAR

Pekin Community High School teacher Sherry Spurlock offers suggestions to juniors Ashley King, left, and Megan Hanley in Advanced Placement Chemistry, one of several "flipped" classrooms. The students listen at home in the evening to a podcast of Spurlock's lecture, then work on the homework the next day in the classroom.

As the class progresses, Crouch took away some pearls, making a supply shortage, and the students had to react to their in-class simulation.

Both Crouch and Bone report a more engaged classroom that keeps them as teachers on their toes.

"My classrooms are more of a discussion now between me and my students," Bone said. "I never get asked the same question in a day."

If there's any resistance to the idea of flipped classrooms, the notion of responsibility shifting to the student is what Bone and Crouch said would be the source of the most ire. The bulk of information the students must take in will be introduced to them on their own time, at home or wherever they will be able to watch the videos.

"One of the big things I've learned is that it's important that the educator put the learning in the hands of the student," Bone said. "The weight of accountability in the classroom has shifted to the students. They have to strive to want to learn."

The weight of responsibility may have shifted to the students, but studies have shown payoffs for them. A 2012 survey conducted by the Flipped Learning Network and Sophia Learning featured 2,358 educators. The survey showed an 85 percent increase in student engagement, and 71 percent reported better grades. Along with the improved grades Crouch and Bone have reported came a deeper connection with their students.

"The best part in general is that it gives me the ability to have more of a personal relationship with my students. Last year, I spent so much time lecturing and not actually talking to my students as much," Crouch said. "Now I can put them in groups, I can tailor my questions and lessons to their needs. It's a lot more personal of an experience."

"I get to know them a lot better. I get to have one-on-one conversations, and their personality comes out more often," Bone said.

No longer are they the sage on the stage, lecturing for an hour. Now, they are the guide on the side, able to personalize their lessons for what an individual student needs more often. Because of that success, both Bone and Crouch will be taking steps to further their and others' flipped classrooms.

Crouch will be spending his summer making his own lesson videos for his economics class. "I'll be able to tailor the lessons exclusively for my students in my school."

Bone will be tailoring technology for teachers' needs throughout the school next year. After accepting a new position that will put him in charge of computers and technology throughout the school, he will try to get teachers to use technology more.

Bone hopes this will allow more teachers to try to flip their classrooms. Bone believes it's the right thing to do.

"This technology will be able to cater to students' specific needs more often. I don't want to restrict anyone, I want to let them all flourish."

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