

100 Ideas for Active Learning

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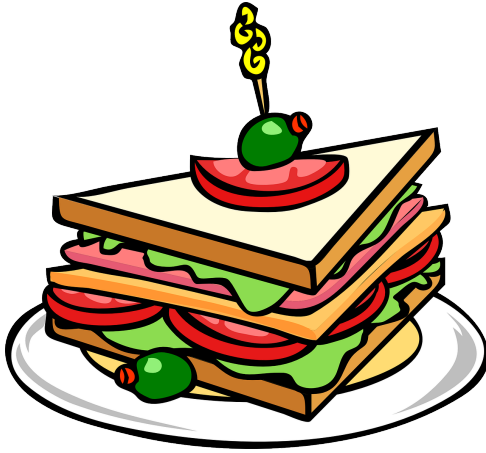


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The sandwich model: a supportive framework for blended learning

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What is the idea?

This chapter introduces a supportive framework for blended learning titled 'the sandwich model', developed during the delivery of a module for a counselling course. In this approach lecture topics were delivered over two week periods. In week one there was a synchronous lecture where the topic was introduced. Students did not need to prepare anything in advance of this. After this initial introductory session students had one week to engage with the self-directed asynchronous materials and activities that had been

provided, which included readings and recorded videos with further information. In week two there were synchronous small group discussions facilitated by staff to consolidate the learning. The 'sandwich' in the name therefore comes from the sandwiching of self-directed learning between two variations of staff-directed sessions. Students reported increased confidence and satisfaction with their learning during application of this model.

Why this idea?

When teaching was driven online due to the COVID-19 pandemic many higher education classrooms were 'flipped' and 'blended' by necessity rather than design. Emerging research indicates the student experience of this was mixed (Boronyak, 2021), with perceptions of a higher workload and feelings of boredom, anxiety, and frustration (Aristovnik et al., 2020). Lai (2021) therefore recommends further thought and discussion on best practice for online learning to improve student interaction and collaboration.

Bates et al. (2017) highlight there is no single model for 'flipping' a classroom, only that instruction involves pre-recorded elements over which the learner has control of pace, while synchronous class time is utilised for engaging in collaborative learning and advancing concepts. The self-pacing is what can be of concern to educators due to assumptions that less motivated students will struggle, however it is exactly such an attitude which may be "perpetuating an anti-autonomous attitude for the student" (Bates et al. 2017, p. 7).

Mahalli et al. (2019) suggest the strengths of the flipped classroom model are making students ready to learn in class, and building curiosity for learning. I propose that starting the learning cycle with face-to-face engagement, with no requirement for preparation, urges the same curiosity and sets students ready to learn in a self-directed way online. Shifting from an expectation of 'pre-class' to 'mid-class' engagement also appears to diminish students

perception of an increased workload as it transitions into the realm of homework rather than pre-work.

Jung et al. (2021) propose the key to a successful flipped classroom is engaging student agency to actively participate in learning, which requires self-regulation. Creating a structure which supports development of self-regulation can aid students in successful engagement. The expectation of students to engage with self-directed materials between two face-to-face staff supported points appears to offer a 'scaffold' for self-regulation. I take the term 'scaffold' from narrative therapy, which attempts to create opportunity for discovery rather than lead clients to specific understandings or ideas. Ramey et al. (2010) explain that the narrative scaffolding approach draws on Vygotsky's theory of learning, specifically the 'zone of proximal development' in which the gap between what is known, and what is possible to know, is bridged through social collaboration. To achieve this requires a breakdown of manageable tasks, "which are structured at first but allow for the gradual progression from collaborative to independent performance" (Ramey et al, 2010, p. 77). The sandwich model permits such progression.

An example in action:

1. Week one synchronous lecture (the foundation bread): Students are introduced broadly to the concept of discourse by the lecturer.
2. Self-directed engagement (the sandwich filling): Students are provided with 'core' materials to review independently before the next weeks lecture, including a reading about discourse and mental health, and a TED talk on mental health conversations in the media. There are signposts to further optional materials for those who choose to deepen their learning.
3. Week two synchronous tutorial (the consolidation bread): With support from the lecturer in the form of discussion prompts, students explore scenes from film and TV together, applying their knowledge from the self-directed learning to examine

potential social impact and develop understanding of the concept in action.

How could others implement this idea?

This approach may best be considered as a rotation model, of which Staker and Horn (2012) suggest the flipped classroom is a subset. The rotation model sees the student move through a three stage cycle of teacher led instruction, independent work/collaborative activity, and online learning, while the flipped classroom has two steps, an independent preparatory activity (e.g. reading or watching a lecture video), followed by face-to-face instruction in which students can put learning into action or explore topics in-depth. The sandwich model also borrows from elements of Just-in-Time-Teaching, where the ‘feedback loop’ created by lecturers dynamically responding to students completion of pre-set tasks allows the delivery of learning to be responsive to the level of class understanding (Marrs & Novak, 2004). The initial exploratory face-to-face lecture in the sandwich model allows the lecturer to gauge initial knowledge and understanding, and direct the subsequent small group discussions accordingly. Setting the ‘lead’ or dominant mode of engagement (Neumeier, 2005) in this model as face-to-face and synchronous replicates the familiar, ‘traditional’ learning students are used to, while the mode of self-directed online learning being paced over two weeks maintains the “opportunity for the student to build confidence in their education based on their ability to be responsible and autonomous for the information/learning they are seeking” (Bates et al. 2017, p. 7). ‘Sandwiching’ is also a familiar concept to students in itself, in line with the traditional lecture – reading – seminar structure of engagement.

The core principle is simply to provide two points of synchronous engagement between which self-directed learning is sandwiched,

a framework which a variety of disciplines can utilise in their own way.

Transferability to different contexts

As highlighted initially, there is no single way to 'flip' learning, and many interpretations are likely to have emerged through accelerated experimentations since 2020. This brief outline of the sandwich model will hopefully allow educators in other disciplines to take it forward for application with their own learners, either with the same pattern, or adapting it to suit their own needs. For example, according to the topic or discipline the length assigned between synchronous staff-led delivery points could be extended beyond two weeks to allow additional time for self-directed learning, or perhaps the second synchronous point of engagement could be peer led. As stated, the core principle is simply to provide two points of synchronous engagement between which self-directed learning is sandwiched.

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