

FLIP YOUR LEADE



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FLIPPED COMMUNICATION ISN'T JUST FOR CLASSROOMS;
TEACHERS AND PARENTS CAN ALSO BENEFIT.

By Peter DeWitt

It happened on a whim. Inspired by high school teachers Jon Bergmann and Aaron Sams' flipped classroom model, I thought the teachers I worked with at Poestenkill Elementary School in Upstate New York should at least consider using it with our students. Sure, elementary students are young, but they deserve to be engaged in the innovative ways that their high school peers are benefiting from in some of their classes.

The goal of flipped communications is to maximize face-to-face class and meeting time. When leaders flip communication—whether it is with students, faculty, district representatives, or parents—they send out information ahead of time. Participants review the information on their own, and then time together is used for interactive activities and discussion. Everyone benefits because participants have time to digest the information and come to class—or a meeting—with questions and ready to engage.

A few teachers took me up on the opportunity to flip communication and began to discuss ways they could flip lessons to pave the way for more engaging class discussions. For example, our school always had a love-hate relationship with homework, and we wanted to find the best ways to focus on learning, and not on compliance-based work that students had to do at home on a nightly basis.

And I, too, started using the flipped model. Faculty meetings became more effective after I implemented the model, and parent engagement also improved as a result of flipped communication.

The Challenge

In his *Tempered Radical* blog, North Carolina teacher Bill Ferriter challenged leaders to flip their faculty meetings. His point was that if the flipped model was so good for teachers to use with their students, why weren't school leaders using it with their teachers? He was right.



TECH TOOLS

Want to implement the ideas in this article? Try these innovative tools.

- **Diigo**
Social bookmarking site that allows you to share articles.
- **TouchCast**
Helps you create professional-quality videos.
- **Movenote**
Allows you to video yourself next to slides.

So I began flipping my faculty meetings. Actually, I should say that I attempted to flip my faculty meetings. At first, it did not go well at all. After spending about 30 minutes preparing a five-minute video, I noticed that few teachers watched it.

Why would they? I sent it out before the new school year, and focused on flipping *my* faculty meetings when I should have been focusing on working with teachers to flip *our* faculty meetings. So, in my second attempt at flipping our faculty meetings, I thoroughly explained why I was doing it, and tried to be as proactive in the process as possible by giving them all the information they needed to understand why we were flipping.

We then attempted to flip a faculty meeting about evidence-based teacher observations, which was a state requirement for principals to conduct. At the time, I had a good rapport with staff, and went into each classroom every day. But I wasn't sure that we were all on the same page when it came to evidence-based observations. To flip the faculty meeting, I sent out articles about evidence-based teacher observations in advance. Then, during the meeting, together we watched a teaching video, taking individual notes on an observation form and comparing notes when it was over.

As we discussed the teaching and learning we observed, I realized that we were all very much on the same page when it came to evidence-based observations. Flipped communications reassured teachers in their observer roles by giving them the opportunity to review the observation form and view the video in advance.

What About Parents?

I have found that many educators complain that parents aren't involved, but then they don't find engaging ways to involve them. At the school I led, we wanted parents' involvement for our own purposes, but we weren't as interested in addressing their difficult questions or concerns. With that perspective in mind, I went out on a limb and flipped parent communication.

In the year I began flipping parent communication, New York State had adopted the Common Core State Standards and the Dignity for All

Students Act (DASA), which is an anti-bullying statute. Parents knew little about either. So I created a short, five-minute video that explained the Common Core and DASA, closed my eyes, and sent it out to parents via email hoping that a few would watch it before our scheduled open house a few days later. My goal was to have parents attend my session at the open house with questions about Common Core and bullying.

I was surprised how well it went. Although not every parent watched the video, I knew by the number of clicks on the link that many did. What was even better was that our open house was standing room only, and parents came with questions. It was the best open house I had ever participated in, and many parents sent email messages before and after the meeting to say how much they loved the idea of flipping communication.

After some time, and feedback from parents, I decided to start flipping communication about the daily lives of our students.

Parents were busy and could not always get to school. One area of weakness we always had was in our school newsletter, which was developed to bridge that gap.

My secretary, Donna Nikles, and I had always created beautiful, five-page, print newsletters that never made it out of our students' backpacks. And even if the newsletter did make it home, most parents didn't read it. By creating engaging videos

using pictures of students (with parental permission), we were able to highlight our partnerships with the Albany Symphony Orchestra or the fact that we were a professional development school for the Sage College of Troy Physical Education Program. On some days, when I had time, I created videos that focused on the day in the life of an individual Poestenkill student.

Nikles and I decided that the videos gave us the freedom to shorten our newsletter to one page. We even branded it as the one-page "refrigerator page." We found that more parents read it, and there was even an increase in the number of parents who said they loved the one-page format.

Flipping videos to parents even increased our parent participation on Edline, our parent portal. When I sent out an email message to all parents

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asking how school staff could communicate better, for two consecutive years, an overwhelming number of parents replied by saying they could not imagine better communication.

Obstacles and Considerations

There are many obstacles to flipping faculty meetings and parent communication. First is that many school infrastructures do not support technology use. In my school, we did not have wireless Internet, and my desktop did not have a camera or microphone. In the early stages I had to use my home laptop to create the videos.

Second, the app you use has to be a platform you are comfortable with. I began recording videos using Screenr, which is a paid service that creates a box around the Power Point or Prezi that you use to communicate the information. Screenr, however, is expensive and it does not have a pause button. So when I began to record I had to get it right the first time or start over.

Next, I discovered Touchcast: a user-friendly, free app that has a green screen where you can easily include pictures, as well as a script display so you can write a narrative and read from it while you are recording. There is even a pause feature, so you can take breaks while recording if you feel as though you may stumble on words.

The last obstacle is getting parents and teachers to watch the videos. The videos have to be engaging and focus on topics that stakeholders want to know about. Otherwise they will not view them.

I was fortunate because the Poestenkill parents were highly supportive. I could not have flipped without this support.

Five Reasons to Flip

1 Maximizes faculty/staff meetings. In these days of political noise and state education distractions set by mandates and accountability measures, teachers need time together during faculty meetings so they can focus on the issues that matter to them. If done correctly with staff input, flipping communication will help focus the precious time staff have together. The flipped method is about maximizing time, not wasting it.

2 Sets the mindset before a district meeting. Often, district meetings involve people who do not know each other well and who work at different levels in the school system. The first meeting should focus on setting goals and intentions for the subsequent meetings. After that, the principal can use the flipped model to

send out information before meetings so participants can maximize their time together.


3 Improves parent engagement. We can say what we want about parents not having computers at home, but several resources tell us that most have smartphones. If they have smartphones, they can view a video.

Parents send their children to school every day, and they deserve to know what is happening. The flipped classroom model helps parents see what their children are learning, and the flipped leadership model helps them see the whole school community.

4 Fits into our schedules. Life is busy for principals, staff, teachers, students, and parents. One of the benefits of flipped communication is that it has provided us with the time to engage on our own timelines.

Parents are going in many different directions on a daily basis, but this fact should not prevent them from knowing what is going on in their child's school. Just because people are busy doesn't mean they don't care. School leaders have to find different ways to engage with stakeholders.

5 Puts the focus on learning. Often we put our focus on teaching, but as John Hattie suggests in *Visible Learning for Teachers* (2011), we need to put the focus on learning. Flipping communication enables leaders to focus on school-to-school (i.e., other elementary, middle or high schools, colleges, and universities) partnerships as well as home-school partnerships. It can show all the ways that schools are engaging students in learning.

The hard part about flipping communication is that it sounds like a gimmick. We see gimmicks on television all the time. "Buy a car before 11 a.m. and get \$100 back!" "Call us in the next 20 minutes and get \$10 off!" Without a proper foundation, flipping communication will just fall into the category of another gimmick—or worse—a mandate. Flipping communication is just really instructional leadership 3.0, and it requires a positive school climate, a leader that fosters risk-taking rather than rule-following, and the collaboration of all stakeholders. Done right, flipping can help enhance learning and communication in a school. 

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