

10 Strategies

to Encourage Students to Actually DO the
Pre-Class Work in Flipped & Active Learning
Classrooms



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Introduction

“How do you encourage students to actually DO the pre-class work and come to class prepared ready to participate?”

I have been traveling across the U.S. since 2011 leading workshops for educators from every type of higher education institution. From small private liberal arts colleges to large research universities, this is, by far, the most frequently asked question I hear from faculty who are teaching using flipped and active learning models.

It's not a new question, really. We've always struggled with how to encourage our students to do homework, read, and prepare for class. However, recent conversations about the flipped classroom and inverted instruction have launched this question straight to the top of the list of challenges we all face when implementing these learning-centered models.

In my work, the FLIP means to “**F**ocus on your **L**earners by **I**nvolving them in the **P**rocess.” When you FLIP, you move the lower level learning outcomes outside of class and focus on the application and synthesis of higher level learning outcomes *during* class. But there are many other interpretations of this approach. Blended learning, inverted instruction, flipped classroom, flipped mastery, problem-based learning, inquiry-guided learning, case-based learning, team based learning, SCALE-UP...different names for the same philosophy. And they all share one similar challenge: They all depend on students coming to class prepared and ready to engage in application of content.

If you teach courses based on any of these active learning models, you will face the challenge of how to address the issue of unprepared students. Unlike courses where content is primarily delivered through lecturing during class time, courses based on active learning rely heavily on student involvement and application of content *during* class time. It's nearly impossible for students to “get by” without doing the work to prepare for an active learning experience.

You can have the most effective lesson plan, the most creative learning activity, and the most innovative technology to illustrate your points. **But, if your students aren't prepared, then it defeats the whole purpose of the learner-centered environment.**

Reflection Questions

Take a moment to reflect before you review the strategies.

Before you review the 10 strategies and decide which ones you want to implement, take a moment to consider these reflection questions. Your responses to these questions may help you choose which strategies work best for you and your students and decide what type of learning environment you want to create.

- What are some of the fears my students face in my classroom? Are they intimidated by the topic? What experiences are they bringing with them? Am I allowing space for these feelings and experiences in the lessons I design?
- How can I be proactive rather than reactive when students aren't prepared? How do I react when students aren't prepared?
- What can I do to create learning environments where students feel motivated to complete the pre-class work?
- How can I support students through the transition from being a recipient of knowledge versus becoming a learner who actively seeks to construct new knowledge?
- What can I do to design learning experiences where students see the value in doing the pre-class work?
- What challenges do I know my students face when completing their pre-class work and preparing for the next lesson? Can I help reduce or eliminate some of these challenges?
- What are some strategies I already use to set students up for success in the active learning environment? Which of these strategies work well? Which ones do I need to change?



Strategies

Here are 10 strategies you can use to encourage students to come to class prepared and ready to participate:



Strategy #1: Re-define the roles.

Just as you are learning to *teach* this way, your students are learning how to *learn* this way. The idea of student-led instruction may be confusing and they may not understand their role and responsibility in this type of learning environment.

Have a conversation early in the semester with your students to discuss the design of the course, their role in the space, and why this type of teaching and learning matters. Do an activity on the first day of class to give students an idea of how class time looks and feels. Then, debrief the experience with them, answer questions, address concerns, and encourage them to trust the process.

I actually use my syllabus as the active learning experience on the first day of class. I embed “big questions” in the same font as the rest of the syllabus so students have to read it as they hunt for the next question. The questions might relate to the course material, students’ fears or concerns, and/or what areas of the course students are looking forward to the most. For more about this strategy, see the *Faculty Focus* article, [“A Syllabus Tip: Embed Big Questions.”](#)

Based on your answers to the reflection questions on page 5, you may need to make this conversation more formal with your students. You may decide to draft a “contract” or agreement specifically outlining their responsibilities and defining the partnership between you and your students. This could be an extension of your syllabus or a completely separate document.

If this type of formality makes you uncomfortable, but you still need to provide students with more structure, try to co-create a document or agreement *with* your students so they have a voice in outlining expectations and clarifying their role.



Strategy #2: Dig deeper.

When students arrive to class unprepared, it can be easy to assume they are lazy, apathetic, or uninterested in the course. While that may be true in some cases, many of the college students I meet are smart, hardworking, and motivated to succeed. Surely something else must be happening if they are continuing to come to class unprepared.

One possible answer can be found in the work of Drs. Richard Felder and Rebecca Brent. In their work on active learning, they found, **“Students forced to take major responsibility for their own learning go through some or all of the steps psychologists associate with trauma and grief: Shock, Denial, Strong emotion, Resistance and withdrawal, Struggle and exploration, Return of confidence, and Integration and success”** (Felder & Brent, 1996, p. 43.)

I wrote about this phenomenon in a [blog post about how to address student resistance](#) in the flipped classroom. The range of emotions may explain why some students resist active and student-centered learning approaches. Resistance may show up as anger (“I pay you to teach me!”) or isolation (“I’d rather just do this assignment on my own instead of with a group”).

I recently spoke with groups of faculty from several large research universities across the country who were involved in re-building new classroom spaces to fit with the [SCALE-UP model](#). In this model, the physical classroom space is designed to accommodate active learning, technology integration, and group work. Instead of desks, there are roundtables. Each table has laptops. Multiple screens are positioned around the room on each wall. As soon as students walk into the room, they know they’re in a different type of classroom. When I spoke to faculty teaching in these spaces, several of them said some students walk in on the first day and turn around and walk right back out the door. They didn’t even give it a chance.

Reactions like these may be coming from somewhere else besides laziness or lack of interest. Dig a little deeper. Do you see where your students might be on the steps associated with grieving? Did they have a negative experience in previous flipped classroom and they are now bringing those negative feelings into your class? Are their behaviors coming from a place of fear (see Strategy 3)?



Strategy #3: Address the fear.

One thing will destroy active student participation in the classroom: fear. If students are afraid, they may come to class prepared, but they fear actually participating in class activities. Maybe they are afraid of being called on and giving the wrong answer. Maybe they are afraid they will be ridiculed or attacked by their peers for sharing their opinion. Maybe they are afraid of speaking in front of a large group. Maybe they are afraid of or intimidated by the course material and how well they'll do in the class.

To help address the fear, share stories of successful leaders, scholars, athletes, scientists, actors, musicians, entrepreneurs, and other influential people who have healthy perspectives about fear. Bring in inspirational quotes, case studies, or statistics to show students how to overcome this fear, or at least channel it into positive action. Share data about trends in previous active learning classes and highlight how students' grade or performance improved over time.

For some students, being actively engaged in a classroom is risky and scary. Try to address these fears and create a learning environment that is “safe” for sharing ideas, collaborating with others, and taking risks. Help students become comfortable with ambiguity. They don't have to know all of the right answers all of the time, and that's okay. Learning is messy, dynamic, and requires active involvement. The flipped classroom magnifies all of these characteristics. And that's why it can be such a scary place for some students.



Strategy #4: Clarify and make it visible.

We cannot measure what we cannot see, touch, taste, feel, or hear. How do you know if students actually did the pre-class work if you don't have a way to measure it? How do students know if they finished the pre-class work correctly if they don't have a way to measure it themselves? How are you going to hold students accountable for doing (or not doing) the pre-class work if students can't show it to you?

Sometimes your instructions about a pre-class assignment may be clear to you, but not to your students. Thanks to the [Curse of Knowledge](#), when we know something, it's hard to remember what it's like NOT to know it anymore. This “curse” interferes with our ability to communicate clearly because we can't put ourselves back into the position of our students who don't have the same level of knowledge we do. **It may be clear to you, the expert with knowledge, but not to a novice without the same level of knowledge and experience.**

To overcome this challenge, pay attention to both the learning outcomes and the pre-class assignment. Are the learning outcomes specific and measurable? Can your students show them to you? Can students complete them within the time frame given? How can you clarify the task and the expectations? Do students need an example, an outline, or a template?

Another way to think about this challenge is to ask yourself, “What is the result of the pre-class work?”

Let’s take, for example, a typical pre-class assignment, “Read Chapter 5 before class.” How will you know if students read it? Are you assigning a quiz or reflection activity? What should they do when they read? Should they outline the chapter, draw a mind map of the concepts, or answer the questions at the end of the chapter? What should students be able to do once they finish reading chapter 5? What can they bring in as visible evidence they completed the pre-class work? What is the result of reading chapter 5?

The answer to these questions should connect to the in-class activities you have planned. The time during class is when students will demonstrate that they have, indeed, completed the pre-class work and are prepared to participate.

Sometimes students don’t know exactly what they are supposed to do in the pre-class assignment. The more you can clarify the task, specify the expectations, and make visible what it is students need to be able to do with their pre-class work, the more likely your students will actually do it because now it can be measured.



Strategy #5: Create value

As a follow up to strategy 4, when you design the pre-class assignment, make sure it will be used to support the in-class activities. **When students see how their pre-class work is valued and how it is used in class, they will be more likely to come to class prepared and ready to participate.**

To create value, make sure you design the in-class activities so the result of the pre-class work is put to use. You could ask students to take notes on the chapter which they can bring in and use as “open notes” on a test or quiz during class.

You could ask students to draw a mind map of one concept from the reading. When they get to class, they can work in their groups to integrate everyone’s individual maps to create one cohesive map of the chapter.

You could ask students to choose a stance from a controversial case study and use class time to present their side and support their stance with evidence they gathered from the readings.

And students do value grades. You may need to formally grade pre-class work for students to see the value beyond the in-class activities. You can collect pre-class work randomly and at unannounced times to keep students on task and to prevent grading from becoming too overwhelming.

There are many ways to create value from the pre-class work. The key is to connect it to the in-class activities so students see how their work will be used and why it matters.



Strategy #6: Give one free pass.

Life happens. Sometimes you just need someone to give you a break. Do this for students by giving them one “free pass” on any pre-class assignment. Students will be relieved they have a free pass as an option, and they will respect you for respecting their situation. **Whether it’s out of their control or a poor choice they made, give them the chance to skip the pre-class work one time without penalty.**

This strategy does require a little more recordkeeping on your part. During class, if you notice a student is unprepared, tell him or her “that’s your one free pass” and make note of it in your grade book or within your learning management system. You could also prepare actual printed “free passes” of your own using laminated cards or some other physical representation of a “pass” or ticket to hand to a student who is unprepared.

Make sure students know when they have used their free pass. And, make sure they know you’re keeping track of it. Sometimes if they know you’re paying attention and they’re not just another face in the crowd, it’s enough to motivate them to do the work and come to class prepared.



Strategy #7: Use focusing activities.

A focusing activity is a way to focus students’ attention the minute they walk in (or log in) to class. Focusing activities are designed to get students’ attention, prompt their thinking about the course material, and encourage engagement immediately.

When used in conjunction with flipped and active learning classroom models, focusing activities allow you to minimize distractions, maintain momentum between pre-class and in-

class activities, and maximize the amount of class time you have to engage students in learning. **Focusing activities encourage students to come to class prepared and ready to apply the information from their pre-class work.**

Focusing activities also help you establish “routines of engagement” in your class. By routines, I mean students will learn that each class opens with some type of activity where they will need to be able to recall or use their pre-class work. Over time, they will learn what to expect, how to participate, and what they need to do to prepare for class each time.

A focusing activity is often used in the first five minutes of class time. For example, you can post a quote on the board and give students two minutes to reflect on it before they discuss it with a peer. You can post a quiz question to assess students’ comprehension of the pre-class video. You could present a graph of data points and ask students to interpret it before you move to the next part of the lesson. All of these are quick ways to focus students’ attention, and they can also be used as assessment techniques.

If you’re looking for more ideas for focusing activities you can add to your class, grab a copy of my book [FLIP the First 5 Minutes of Class: 50 Proven Strategies to Engage Your Students.](#)



Strategy #8: Add timelines.

This is a simple, yet effective strategy to help students organize their time and make realistic plans for completing their pre-class work. It can be particularly helpful early in the semester as your students are learning how the flipped classroom works. It can also be helpful for students who are new to the active learning approach as they try to figure out how to balance their time outside of class to prepare to participate in activities during class.

In your pre-class instructions, provide a timeline for how much time the pre-class assignment should take. For example, suppose your assignment states that students will watch a video, answer five quiz questions, and submit their responses through the learning management system. Break it down and tell them how much time (on average) they should expect to spend completing the tasks. You might explain the video is 15 minutes and that the quiz questions should take approximately 15 minutes.

You could also provide a document with a timeline and specific time stamps from the video where the most important information is presented. This helps students focus on what’s most important from the video so they don’t waste time with information that is not as important for the particular assignment. One tip: double or triple the amount of time it takes you to complete the assignment (There’s the Curse of Knowledge interfering again!).

And if you think “everything is important!” in the videos and the readings, think again. No, everything is not important. There are specific topics, quotes, sections, or pieces of a reading or video that more important than others. Your students probably don’t have the knowledge or experience to filter this information, so you need to do it for them early in the process.

Giving students this type of structure and support will increase the likelihood that they will set aside a realistic amount of time and energy to complete the pre-class work and come to class ready to be involved.



Strategy #9: Make connections.

Another reason some students may not do the pre-class work is because they feel isolated or disconnected. They feel like they are on their own doing the pre-class work and they can’t find any help or support from the instructor or from their peers. Students may feel alone as they work through the pre-class material, and they may lack confidence in their level of understanding. They may not know where to turn for help if they get stuck, and then they just decide not to do the assignment at all.

To help combat this isolation, build in support. You may decide to offer live chat “office” hours in the evenings to answer questions or provide more information. You may want to set up online forums for both you and other students to provide support and answer questions. And, as a bonus, if you are providing chat sessions or office hours during particular times in the day or evening, then this will encourage students to get the work done earlier and not procrastinate if they want the additional help. They will not be able to get direct help from you if they wait to complete their pre-class assignment an hour before class begins.

You can also set up support structures for students to connect to other students so they don’t rely solely on you. Set up online study groups and provide private discussion forums for students in those groups to share information and support each other. Develop a “frequently asked questions” resource guide based on questions students have asked in previous semesters. Assign advanced upper-level students or graduate students as peer mentors or teaching assistants to answer questions and provide additional information.

All of these structures provide connections between you and the students and among the students themselves. **By providing a supportive environment beyond the in-person class time, you will increase students’ motivation to complete their pre-class work, especially if they know they’re not the only one struggling with a particular section of the material.**



Strategy #10: Assess early and often.

Sometimes students overprepare, overanalyze, or just spend too much time focusing on the wrong things when they are completing their pre-class work. Then they get frustrated when they say they completed the pre-class work but realize they spent their time on the parts of the assignment that were not as important. This whole situation leads them to avoid completing the pre-class work because they view it as a waste of time since they misunderstood the assignment or focused on the wrong information.

To address this, build in low stakes assessments early in often. **Assess the result of the pre-class work to identify where students are struggling, what topics are most confusing, and which types of resources you need to create or add to the course to help students succeed.** These assessments can also be used to improve clarity, directions, and expectations about pre-class work.

Low stakes assessment techniques, or classroom assessment techniques (CATs), aren't usually graded although you might want to include them in an overall class participation grade. These types of assessments give students the chance to practice before they are tested more formally on the concepts.

For example, you can ask students to vote on how confident they are in their answers to the pre-class assignment. Or, give them writing prompt to respond to and post to a discussion board so you can browse the posts for common themes and questions. You can design a practice quiz and give students time to work in groups to formulate their responses before you begin a class discussion. There are [hundreds of classroom assessment techniques](#) you can integrate into your course to assess students' learning and confidence.

Think about providing checklists, rubrics, and self-guided tutorials based on what you already know about where students struggle the most with the course material. These types of assessments will give students the chance to identify gaps in their own knowledge so they can come to class ready to ask questions or begin working on the next task.

Conclusion

I hope these strategies help you generate ideas to add to your classes to enhance student motivation and address the challenges of students who come to class unprepared. It's challenging to stay committed to the goal of active learning when you face so many hurdles along the way. But, with these strategies and your energy and enthusiasm, I know you and your students will be successful!

References & Resources

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