


Flipped Classrooms and the Pitfalls of Digital Learning

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In the recent rise of digital learning, “flipped classrooms” have become a controversial subject. This new form of learning inverts the traditional conception of the classroom: instruction is transferred from the classroom to out-of-class (online) tasks such as pre-recorded lectures on the Internet, while class time is devoted to activities that put the knowledge into practice. These classrooms have been touted as learner-based and student-centered models of education. Yet there is still little evidence supporting the effectiveness of the flipped classroom at higher levels of education, especially in the humanities. Taking American studies as an example, I will examine some of the arguments in favor of this model, but also and most importantly some of the challenges facing the application of this new educational model in the humanities. In general, the main concern is that flipped classrooms may undermine student-teacher dialogue, viewing teachers as “moderators” who design learning environments geared to the students. At the same time, home-learning environments may compromise learner autonomy and limit learners’ opportunities for self-organized work and interaction with peers outside class. Ultimately, a critique of the concept of flipped classrooms is also a critique of the egalitarian aspirations of digital pedagogy in general.

- 1 Critical debates surrounding digitization have come to define educational discourse in recent years. At their center is the question whether e-learning and models of blended learning such as flipped classrooms should be adapted to the specific demands of teaching in the humanities, and, if so, how. Flipped classrooms, which are seen as part of “an instructional technology trend” (Mattis), are a type of blended learning that combines out-of-class (online) interaction with place-based classroom methods, providing learners greater control over the time, place, path, and pace of their education.
- 2 There are many different models of flipped classrooms. In the debate-oriented model, pre-assigned learning materials form the foundation for face-to-face discussion and debates in class. In the demonstration-based model, learners replicate in class a procedure executed in a pre-assigned demonstration (for example, an instructional video). Group-based flipping refers to cases where learners tackle prepared material in class in teams. In virtual flipping, face-to-face interaction is limited to personalized coaching sessions, and all other elements of teaching are moved online. In the double-flipped classroom, learners also act as instructors (Sagenmüller).

Not only are the models of the flipped classroom varied, but so are the forms in which online and digital learning take place. Online and out-of-class activities may consist in online readings, podcasts, screencasts (recordings that capture audio narration along with computer-screen images) or a mixture of these and embedded videos (cf. McKeachie and Svinicki). While flipped learning has its origins in management theory, it was furthered by the reformed understanding of the teacher's role since the 1990s, sparked by Alison King's "From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side." In the 2000s, it took hold in economic and media studies teaching (such as J. Wesley Baker's "classroom flip" and Maureen J. Lage and Glenn Platt's "inverted classroom") before establishing itself in the natural sciences and finally in the humanities (see Keengwe 164; Lage, Platt, Treglia).

- 4 In the US, projects aimed at digitization are a central part of managerialism, an ideologically motivated belief in the importance of tightly-managed organizations, which is currently the dominating model of education (cf. MacBeath et al.). But new trends of digitization and flipped classrooms are affecting not merely the English-speaking world. Current discussion of the *Digitalpakt* in Germany ("DigitalPakt Schule"; Kaube) shows that the trend has reached continental Europe. With this initiative in 2018, the German government invested 5 billion Euros in the digitization of the general school system.
- 5 The aim of the present article is to evaluate the applicability of this teaching model in the humanities, for single courses and also whole programs, focusing specifically on the field of American studies. This field seems especially ill-suited to the implementation of flipped classrooms on a large scale. Its multidisciplinary approach does not lend itself to fixed teaching models, and its content is not suitable for blended learning strategies. Many of the arguments in favor of this model overlook the complexity of existing teaching structures in the humanities; some even present a caricature of traditional forms of teaching. Simplistic depictions of traditional forms of teacher-led instruction such as the lecture blues and unproductive student presentations have been mirrored by similar critiques directed at high-school teaching (Gudjons). The following evaluation will therefore take into account the opportunities and limits of using flipped classrooms in the humanities, the socio-political dimensions of this model, the role of electronic accessibility, and the transition from secondary to tertiary education.

Flipped Classrooms in the Humanities

- 6 One reason the implementation of flipped classrooms in the humanities has encountered difficulties is that the model was originally conceived for STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). University teachers in the humanities have thus been left largely to their own devices in redesigning courses (cf. Moses). STEM subjects were also the point of entrance of the model in high schools, specifically in teaching mathematics (and economics), before leading to teaching English as a Foreign Language (Schmidt). It is noteworthy that the most important German textbook publisher on flipped classrooms in the humanities does not even mention foreign languages when speaking about the

humanities (cf. Klett). Likewise, in the tertiary sector, some practitioners of flipped classrooms have lost track of the origins of this teaching model (Brame).

Proponents of this model now make a point of balancing STEM and humanities subjects in their discussion of flipped classrooms in order to support its spread in the educational system as a whole, including fields of literary studies, didactics, and Christian archeology (itself a blend of natural sciences and the humanities, see Zeaiter and Handke).

- 7 Ultimately, the choice to flip parts of the classroom depends on the specific learning theory one subscribes to, which cannot be the same for all disciplines. Proponents of flipped classrooms often describe the first stage of flipped learning, the out-of-class instructional phase, as moving most “information-transmission” out of class (Abeysekera and Dawson 3). Yet in the humanities, the central aspects of the education process can hardly be described as the transmission of information. This word choice is evidence that the competence-oriented learning theory that motivates the call for flipped classrooms was not originally conceived for the humanities.
- 8 Flipped classrooms in the humanities have been used in connection with Just-in-Time-Teaching, a pedagogical strategy that uses feedback between classroom activities and work that students do at home in preparation for the classroom meeting (Simkins and Maier). Students may be expected to answer content-related or analytical questions regarding a literary text and send in the answers to their instructor before class (who can then respond to the answers in class). Whereas proponents of this strategy claim that flipped classrooms of this nature require students “to take responsibility for their own learning outside of class,” the downside is that it results in a school-like style of teaching (*Verschulung*) that is not conducive to students taking responsibility for their own education: students are given questions instead of being encouraged to generate questions themselves.
- 9 Flipped classrooms have been recommended for language acquisition in cases where the second language is very different from the respective native language, for example, as a tool for learning Chinese in Australia (Tso 113). Applying the model of flipped classrooms in this context is supported by the increasing need for language proficiency to meet the demands of an international (job) market and the scientific community, and to accommodate recent pressure on schools and universities to expand online. Such arguments are brought forth not only with regard to language education, but also with regard to doctoral programs in the humanities (Smith 108).
- 10 Sidonie Smith, an outspoken proponent of this transformation of the humanities, speaks of the inadequacy of “a late 20th-century training.” She is even in favor of introducing flipped classrooms to doctoral studies:

Given these rapidly unfolding macronarratives of everyday life in the academy [. . .] it is beyond time to transform doctoral education. Doctoral programs cannot launch students into this knowledge ecology and political economy with a late 20th-century training. That training is one that too narrowly scaffolds the degree around the traditional triad of coursework, exams, and the singular form of the monograph dissertation as the testament of readiness to enter the professoriate. Preparing for a career as an academic humanist will involve recognizing what is enduring in the work and world of the humanities carried over from the last century and what is enabling in the environment of higher education that is becoming. (111)

While Smith admits that her “rigorous vision of a 21st-century doctoral education” is connected to the “casualization of academic labor force in the academy,” she does not reflect on how the propagation of such radical innovations may cost academic jobs, reduce the number of academic positions and hence contribute to the “casualization of academic labor force.”

- 11 But aside from studies on foreign language acquisition, there is still little to no research on the efficacy of flipped learning in other disciplines within the humanities, and still limited qualitative research in support of the implementation of flipped classrooms. Another obvious weakness of the arguments in favor is that they presuppose a simple lecture-based conception of education. Yet in many courses in the humanities, lectures are not the primary means of instruction (Roehling 27). And even in those courses where lectures assume a central role, classroom instruction does not necessarily consist in a single teacher lecturing to the students in a classroom setting. There are many other conceivable and also widely practiced constellations. For example, students may take over the instructor’s role in class by learning through teaching, and the instructor may choose to combine classroom discussion with instructional and practical elements within a teacher-centered classroom. In addition, flexible classroom settings allow the teacher to shift seamlessly between teacher-centered and student-centered learning arrangements, depending on the actual needs of the learners.
- 12 At the university level, teachers and students have responded ambivalently to the introduction of the model in certain subjects, for instance, in the field of history. In general, more motivated and successful students preferred the traditional lecture format, suggesting that the model is not sufficiently geared towards their needs. Flipping the classroom did not improve lecture attendance and also polarized the class by accommodating the interests of some students much better than the interests of others. Developing lecture activities that appeal to all students in a varied cohort is difficult, and partial flipping may be more suitable than the fully flipped model (a critique voiced frequently is the fear of a new mono-methodic bias). In order to implement this model in the humanities at the university level, it is necessary to respond to students’ immediate needs and preferences and also to their future needs (Moses; Schmidt).
- 13 Focus has been on practical problems of implementation rather than on theoretical questions and concerns. Especially striking is the self-confidence with which such

models are proposed and reported upon (cf. Gardner). One guidebook on the implementation of flipped classrooms at the university level devotes an entire chapter to explaining how it should be carried out. Students need to be informed and prepared “especially when . . . required to read the textbook as out-of-class preparation and to engage in collaborative activities in class” (Cresap). The text overlooks the fact that this has been the established method of the seminar-based higher education at universities for centuries (Frietsch and Rogge 378). Such oversights may be an indication of the bias motivating such models of digital learning. They are also a reminder of the importance of critically examining not only the potential benefits but also the flipside of this new trend.

Socio-Economic Benefits of Flipped Classrooms

- 14 Some of the arguments brought forth in favor of flipped classrooms appeal to the notion of economic utility in education rather than didactic necessity. Following this line of argument, flipped classrooms develop learners’ skills in team work and their competence in self-guided learning; by using flipped classrooms, learners can better regulate their learning speed and are forced to do their own research (Onchwari and Keengwe 67). Instructors withdraw from directly participating in classroom instruction and implement instead a constructive didactics that guides classroom activities at a distance. Students come to results by way of mutual exchange based on their home learning experience rather than by way of direct instruction. Dressler and Rachfall claim that flipped classrooms ensure that students receive the necessary tools to adapt to new challenges presented by society and the future job market (184–85).
- 15 Some proponents argue that flipped classrooms better accommodate learners with disabilities and are better equipped to establish inclusive education. Further, they permit instructors to observe their students from a distance as the students are engaged in self-directed activities, for example, by checking how often students watched a particular segment of the prerecorded lectures or accessed online material. Instructors can then focus their attention on these sections and determine whether the student requires further input or practice. This allows teachers to better address and diagnose deeper problems in the learning processes and identify solutions that might otherwise escape their attention (Fulton).
- 16 Proponents have also emphasized how flipped classrooms help learners who lack a “social lifeline” by supporting their learning and practice phases, which is traditionally given as homework in the older model of teaching. Buehl explains:

Most of us prefer to have the assistance of others when we are doing something that we do not yet do well, especially when we might fumble around at times, fail perhaps regularly, and experience frustration and confusion. During this supported phase of learning, students need to be frequently granted what television quiz shows sometimes call a lifeline, someone students can work with as they try to resolve a challenging situation.

Again, teachers will recognize this practice phase and note, "This is what homework is for." However, homework is predicated on independent behavior; when students are asked to independently do a task when they are not yet accomplished, they will likely fail. Of course, some students do have lifelines at home: parents, siblings, or friends who can help with homework that the students have not yet developed the ability to complete successfully by themselves. Yet many of our students do not have access to such homework lifelines in their out-of-school lives. (25)

- 17 Here the argument for flipping classrooms is to compensate for shortcomings of the educational environment in a learner's home. Flipped classrooms may be seen as part of a more general trend of transferring tasks, which were traditionally attributed to family upbringing, to that of the schools and universities. Flipped classrooms may be an attempt to include pupils with disabilities in the classroom in a way that is beneficial for all. An obvious drawback is that flipped classrooms do not take into consideration the immediate instructional needs of fast learners, and disregard entirely their capacity for autonomous learning and independent study. Of course, there are other ways to solve the problems of inclusion, for example, by ensuring that each class is adequately staffed with social pedagogues, special-needs teachers and teachers for the learners without disabilities. Proponents of inclusion seem to erroneously believe that complete inclusion is possible under the right external conditions (Ahrbeck 305).
- 18 Substantial financial cuts in the education system are the flipside of digitization projects. Some scholars have argued that flipped classrooms follow the hidden agenda of cutting staff costs (see Traxler; Kukulka-Hulme 215). For example, in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008-09, there were budget cuts to schools, and without money to replace outdated math textbooks or to invest in special teaching programs, Byron High School in Minnesota responded to the decreasing proficiency in mathematics by introducing flipped classrooms. Student results in mathematics subsequently improved drastically (Nimmerfroh). Similarly, in Germany the model was introduced for teaching mathematics at the course level in Baden-Württemberg in partnership with the prestigious educational publisher Klett (Fährnich and Thein).

Limits of Electronic Accessibility

- 19 The importance of electronic accessibility is usually put forward in the context of disability studies and educational justice. It is seen to be on the cutting edge of

educational progress. A closer look reveals, however, that electronic accessibility—while facilitating access to information for people with disabilities—poses numerous challenges rather than easy solutions. One of the more obvious challenges concerns how to manage various physical and mental limitations that are commonplace in the classroom environment. Whereas teachers in the traditional model are able to assess such problems on an individual basis and respond immediately and appropriately, technology-based learning environments face inherent difficulties in responding to adverse situations. The problems concerning how to accommodate learning difficulties are far from being solved, as the supplementation of the e-learning platform Moodle with the e-learning prototype Moodle^{acc+} demonstrates (Jemni, Laabidi, and Jemni Ben Ayed 54–56; 72).

- 20 The claim that flipped classrooms may—by way of an increase in digital interaction with students—facilitate access for students with disabilities turns out to be based more on the image of digital media and the unquestioned assumption that it opens up new possibilities of assistive technologies, than on actual experience with their implementation. The failure to adequately address contextual issues related to technology use for students with disabilities is a main reason technology is not a universal panacea for their needs (Bouck, “Technology and Students with Disabilities” 95–98). This is evident with online courses and tasks, which are frequently included in flipped classrooms. Despite opportunities to engage with learners through different online tools and unlimited access to online material, online learning cannot be differentiated to the extent necessary in order to address the needs of all learners (Bouck, *Assistive Technology*).
- 21 Some critics go so far as to deplore the lack of democratic control of the implementation of digital education. Anderson and Cohen, for example, believe there is a risk that these new techniques of education serve the financial interests of a small minority of society: “Big data and digital education require that democratic professionals take control of these governing technologies and insist that they serve the interests of citizens and professionals, not those of the profit-seeking corporations that produce them” (Anderson and Cohen 1; 119–21). Since educational policy lags behind technical and digital innovation, skepticism in this regard is in order whenever new strategies of digital pedagogy are proposed.

Social Learning

- 22 This brings us to the communicative and social aspects of learning. Some scholars emphasize that learning among peers fosters capacities for teamwork and collaborative problem-solving. From the perspective of higher education in the humanities, and with a view to American studies in particular, an example from a literary course may illustrate the claims frequently brought forward concerning the social learning benefits of flipped classrooms:

The best result of a flipped class in literature is when the classroom becomes a place where students practice “these essential moves of literary studies”: original textual analysis, historical context, and meta-discussions of the nature of literary study. For example, in Aeron Haynie’s Survey of English Literature course (a sophomore-level course) students read sections of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* outside of class and then contribute to a class wiki, making them responsible for doing the reading before class and giving them opportunities to formulate their own original analyses before class discussion. Additional information about Virginia Woolf, the Bloomsbury group, and modernism is posted on the class learning management system page. In class, students work in groups to examine specific passages from the novel, identifying aspects of Woolf’s writing style that fit the definition of modernism and making claims about the tone, use of stream of consciousness, and development of character. As each group reports to the whole class, students hear differing interpretations of the same textual evidence, allowing them to see the ambiguity and complexity within a literary text. (Bauer and Haynie 39)

In contrast to a more traditional seminar format with student (group) presentations, as is commonplace in American studies courses in Germany, this example integrates the preparatory work for group presentations into the classroom. Peer interaction and self-organization are thus transferred to the monitored space of the classroom under the eyes of the instructor.

- 23 In American studies and higher education more generally, students often have difficulty understanding the material in the new self-learning phases, which leads to greater use of task-based modules for the online out-of-class phase (Weidlich and Spannagel). This has become common practice in introductory courses to American studies (Skelcher). Greater use of task-based modules is seen to have a positive testing effect by encouraging memorization through students’ self-regulated answering of questions (DeLozier and Rohdes). Such task-based models combine the benefits of self-regulated learning (Gerholz), the deep-level approach (Craik and Lockhart), and meta-cognition (Hasselhorn). Examples for the realization of this task-based concept are manifold.
- 24 Social learning has traditionally played a crucial role in another field connected to American studies, namely, in teacher education and training. Future instructors often rehearse models of education before applying them in practice. Natalie Enders describes a case of how the model of flipped classrooms was adapted to a teacher-training seminar for a degree in Education (*Lehramt an Gymnasien* und *Lehramt Sonderpädagogik* at the University of Hannover). Divided into a phase of four weeks of e-learning and two in-class blocks, students had to develop and evaluate an interdisciplinary teaching model. The class contained a flipped element in so far as teaching methods introduced in the e-learning phase were dealt with in a fishbowl discussion prior to planning the teaching module. Students responded positively to the seminar, but neutrally towards the video aspect of the opening module. According to Enders, this neutral response may be an indication

that the multi-media aspect of digital learning is not as effective as often believed (Enders 5–16).

- 25 Flipped classrooms are also an attempt to deal with increasing learner diversity. At the same time, they mask, however, the lower standards and differences in the levels of achievement: they reinforce an understanding of education that is, to a large extent, defined by social class. They mask the way learning occurs increasingly at different levels within similar institutions, a phenomenon that has come to be known as the attainment gap and educational divide (Marcus). Flipped classrooms reflect the current societal paradigm of social constructivism, and the state-led educational intervention into the social dimensions of learning. Similar to the myth of digital accessibility, the concept of flipped classrooms profits from the assumption that digitization (and related methodological innovation) fosters social learning. However, this disregards the fact that the classroom situation is already an artificial setting that transforms and channels, if not actually hinders and restricts, social learning among peers (Hasenbichler 28).
- 26 Flipped classrooms have also come under attack for not taking into account the digital divide. They lack provisions to ensure that disadvantaged children receive adequate attention (Nielsen). Their emphasis on peer learning presupposes a common level of education (skills) and a relatively homogeneous group of learners. This is not the case, however, neither in secondary nor in tertiary learning environments. On the contrary, in both environments learner diversity is on the increase (De Lisle ix).

Assessing the Teacher's Role in Digital Learning

- 27 It is often assumed that the teacher is not required as a role model in the central phase of instruction; instead, this role is taken on by students who successfully perform the out-of-class instruction phase. Learners who have successfully mastered the pre-recorded content may (volunteer to) serve as role models and instruct their peers. While instructors select the theme and material by preparing the respective lesson, learners who show a sound understanding of the material may be assigned the task of directing class exercises and discussions (Wright, Greenfield, and Hilbert cf. 303).
- 28 According to Ronald Harden and Pat Lilley, being a (medical) teacher involves numerous functions. They identify eight in total: role model as teacher and practitioner, manager and leader, scholar and researcher, professional, information provider, facilitator and mentor, curriculum developer and implementer, assessor and diagnostician (Harden and Lilley 198). Since most of these functions can be fulfilled by other means in flipped classrooms, one may suspect that the teacher as role model will be replaced by the teacher's function as designer and administrator of digital learning environments. This raises the question whether this new function can really make up for the lost or diminished dimension of the teacher as role model. To be sure, these eight functions are not evenly balanced, for they have recently undergone a shift in emphasis toward valuing the managerial roles of teachers over all others (Harden and Lilley 198–99).

- ²⁹ While some argue that dialogical learning is also part of the online learning phase (Baena-Graciá, Jiménez-Bernal, and Marina-Stranz 137), it is still unclear how changes to the role-model functions of the teacher may affect the learning process. Generally speaking, one may assume that this move presupposes an understanding of instruction based on a problem-solving approach. While this may be useful and common in the natural sciences (including engineering, technological and life sciences as well as mathematics), this approach may be of limited relevance to the humanities. In the humanities, the focus is on the capacity to raise questions and engage in critical thinking, and to appreciate diverse perspectives and critical methods. Teaching such capacities may depend—especially in cultural and literary (American) studies—on role models that can assist the student group in developing critical acumen while exchanging ideas. As peer instruction becomes increasingly important for flipped-classroom strategies (Faulkner and Green), the dialogical relationship between teachers and pupils is downplayed or even dismissed entirely.
- ³⁰ Taking into account Marshall McLuhan’s “the medium is the message,” an online class on the novel may consist in watching a film rendering of the novel rather than in formulating an original research question relating the novel to other literary texts (Simkins and Maier). While this model may help reduce student workload (Roberts), it directs teachers’ energy away from interacting with the students on the basis of the course material. For example, the discursive development of a research proposal in face-to-face interaction in office hours does not figure in the model of flipped classrooms. From the teacher’s perspective, it is unclear where one finds the time to implement and re-design courses. Does this happen at the cost of student–teacher interaction, shorter texts to correct, modified exam formats (e.g. oral instead of written exams), or independent research?

Assessing the Student’s Role in Digital Learning

- ³¹ The model of flipped classrooms seeks to innovate teaching by drawing attention to diverse methodologies and methods such as Just-in-Time-Teaching, and by introducing new forms of student feedback at different levels of higher education. Many proponents argue that students in flipped classrooms spend class time as active learners instead of passive receivers. The aim is to revolutionize lecture-based instruction by allowing more out-of-class student-centered instruction. Often overlooked in these arguments is that the framework of flipped classrooms makes the individual student voice less visible. For example, in group work or debate-oriented in-class phases, the individual voice is heard only in smaller groups or as a speaker within a debate. In this way, the flipped classroom makes a case for education equality at the cost of active participation. While it encourages self-organization, it undermines the involvement of the individual in a public context.
- ³² The claim that students are more involved and active in flipped classrooms presupposes a narrow view of the traditional classroom. In a traditional classroom setting, the teacher can employ diverse learning strategies (group work, Fishbowl, role play, learning circles) to ensure student participation. In the flipped-classroom

model it is not clear how to monitor and improve the quality of practice phases, especially when these phases take place in groups. Repetitive exercises and pointless memorization are among the risks of these phases. Too much time is spent on preparing students for standardized tests. The need to redefine learning environments, both at home and in schools and universities, is often overlooked. In order for flipped classrooms to be successful, learners must be capable of self-directed learning. Yet the model offers few strategies for assisting learners that cannot fulfill the demands of self-directed learning outside the classroom (cf. Nielsen). Flipped classrooms tend to offer, in comparison to traditional classrooms, a more rigidly organized learning experience and to divide instruction into smaller sections (especially with regard to reading and writing skills and tasks). At the school level in foreign language education, it has been demonstrated that flipped learning does not increase the extensive and intensive reading capacities of learners (Neisi et al.).

- 33 Many proponents of flipped classrooms lose sight of the flexibility of teacher-centered instruction. Even within the traditional lecture format, and even more so in seminars, students are encouraged to ask questions. In secondary and tertiary education, less regimented and structured student interaction is crucial. The courage and capacity to articulate a coherent opinion or judgment and argue in a public setting such as the lecture hall or the plenum of a seminar, that is, to contribute to seminar discussions and to raise questions, should not be dismissed as dispensable elements of education. While emphasizing the communicative and social aspects of learning, flipped classrooms assume that the dialogical relationship between teachers and pupils is not essential to education. Traditionally, this relationship has been crucial, however, in imparting critical acumen and motivation, and is—if correctly understood—marked less by hierarchical structures than by critical distance.

Conclusion

- 34 It is often overlooked that seminar-based instruction—at least for the humanities—offers exactly what flipped classrooms tout as an innovation: students read assigned texts at home and present and discuss their findings together with their peers and the instructor in class. In this light, flipped classrooms appear to be more a buzzword and catchphrase than a well-founded teaching concept. Publications on flipped classrooms have seen a marked increase since the 2010s, with more than a thousand per year since 2015 (WorldCat). While this model is applied to numerous subjects in specialist volumes such as physics, biochemistry, business economics, law, academic writing, and language learning, its greatest following is still in the natural and economic sciences, particularly in the field of (bio-)chemistry (see Reidsema et al.; Ojennus; Wolff and Chan).
- 35 More recently, James E. Dobson has shown the importance of shedding a much more cautious light on the uncritical adoption of new digital-based methods. He argues that ideas of scientific validity cannot easily be adapted for the humanities because the humanities, in contrast to the natural sciences, lack a clear standard

for defining leading-edge research. Instead, humanities demand ever new readings and interpretations, which generate a multiplication and differentiation of questions on a given subject rather than a single definitive position.

- 36 This critical distance and reflective engagement with the possibilities of digital technologies, which has been a guiding force for critical digital humanities, has not reached many of the proponents of digital pedagogical innovation. Contributing to this tendency is the fact that the innovative image of digital technologies helps camouflage the changes in the design of teaching and learning environments on all levels, while digital technology is seen uncritically to possess an (obscure and often unexplained) inherent value. This derives from the emphasis on student-centeredness brought about by the educational reforms of the past decades, which may have mistaken digitization for student orientation. From this perspective, flipped classrooms interfere in the social and educational functions of traditional learning paths.
- 37 Flipped classrooms have the advantage of encouraging instructors to develop new forms of e-learning and to rethink class design in terms of educational equality. The reduced and portioned student workload as well as the methodologically varied course layout can be useful for many students, especially when flipped classrooms are used in combination with other models. Flipped classrooms encourage teachers to experiment and force students to concentrate on methodology rather than content. This restructuring of the classroom may be a useful tool in addressing learner diversity at more basic levels of education. By contrast, it may be of limited use at the highest levels of learning in the humanities. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that the model lends itself to learning “at the literal, factual level of understanding” (Gau 91), whereas higher learning depends on face-to-face interaction (Bauer and Haynie 37). This point is important for American studies and must be taken into account when designing, for example, undergraduate versus graduate courses. Graduate and postgraduate instruction must weigh the benefits of more classical seminar formats against the risks of flipping parts of their classes.
- 38 Perhaps the strongest and most trenchant critique of the competence-based approach to learning of the flipped-classroom model is articulated by Ladenthin, who argues that remote control (*Fremdststeuerung*) has come to replace self-determination (*Selbststeuerung*). His critique also applies to the in-class focus on group activities in the flipped classroom, and the discourse on educational justice. Ladenthin and others have deplored the terminological vagueness of “competence” and the inadequate distinction between its psychological and pedagogical definitions (Ladenthin 5–6; Reinmann; Tenberg). According to Ladenthin’s critique, educational justice (allegedly improved by new forms of social learning) is invoked only to gain acceptance for new mechanisms of (social) control.
- 39 Flipped learning seeks to supplant, modify or complement teaching models such as traditional text-based seminars at universities, which have long been the backbone of higher education in the humanities. Yet it has become clear in theory

(instructional design, learning and developmental psychology, educational sciences) and in practice (implementation in secondary and tertiary learning environments), that flipped classrooms cannot relieve instructors and educators of the responsibility of addressing larger questions relating to the ethics and purpose of education. Flipped classrooms are not a neutral model or tool to improve teaching quality. Rather this model of learning implies a host of deeper presuppositions that have significant consequences when applied to the field of American studies.

- 40 One must not forget that in the more distant past, methods first developed for teaching theology and law were later applied to STEM subjects, for which they now, following the turn to the natural sciences in modernity, seem inadequate. The fact that they may be inadequate for the natural sciences today does not mean, however, that they are now inadequate in the humanities for which they were originally conceived. By the same token, strategies that have been developed to improve STEM teaching are not necessarily suitable for the humanities.

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