

***The Convergence of Last and First-mile:
Practicum Curriculum Redesign for Language Majors***

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Abstract

This on-going research intends to explore how Flipped Learning (FL) can be applied to a practicum course design for tertiary-level language programs in Taiwan. Foreign language/literature programs in colleges and their students' employability are under severe scrutiny and face social criticism. This study incorporates FL framework in an innovative practicum course titled Workshops of Bilingual Digital Publications, with the intention to increase language majors career choices and employability. The instructional design is composed of Guided Exploration (for market research), Flip, and Apply three stages, and features the collaboration with field practitioners in learning modules for quality publication products. The FL task design and its induced learning effects in the practicum are investigated from students', the instructors, and field practitioners' views. Sub-inquiries reveal students' likes and dislikes, instructors' reflection, field practitioners' involvement and outlook, students' progress in professional discourse, FL, career decisions and self-efficacy, as well as their understanding of product marketability. The data collection instruments include 1) students' needs assessment results; 2) students' exit survey responses; 3) video-taped classroom meetings and observation notes; 4) students' online discussion archives; 5) students' and the experts' product rubrics and work evaluations; and 6) individual and focus-group interviews with the participants. Mixed-method data analysis techniques are used. The findings of this research contribute to the field in two ways. The FL approach prescribed to practicum facilitates curricular re-design. Moreover, the FL design and execution in a scholar-practitioner co-teaching model elevates the informational openness and professionalism in the quest for interdisciplinary knowledge and skills.

Keywords: Digital Publication, Language Major, Practicum, Flipped Learning

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Introduction

The connection between graduates' employability and higher education is unquestionable: "The higher education system is subject to governmental steer, one form of which is to give an emphasis to the enhancement of the employability of new graduates" (Yorke, 2004, p. 3). Unfortunately, foreign language majors and their employability are under severe scrutiny and face social criticism. The shrinking job market and cloudy career development path for these majors challenge the long-existing curricula of foreign language departments. Institutional curriculum is meant to facilitate and maximize graduates' ability to gain proper employment—bridging between the last mile at school and the first mile at work, a new educational policy in Taiwan. To actualize this ideal, multiple competencies should be cultivated, including problem-solving skills, research skills, communication skills, presentation skills, peer/self-assessment skills, and teamwork (Chang, 2012). This skill cultivation and knowledge integration in the last mile require delicate an up-to-date curricular design which can reflect the demand of job market, and bold pedagogical restructuring which might be unprecedented to the field. For the labor market and higher education to seamlessly satisfy each other, they need to be mutually inclusive and participatory (Yorke, 2004), but what are the possible ways to achieve this goal? Are there any alternatives to full-fledged internship placement, especially for geographically challenged schools? This research intended to explore if and how flipped learning (FL) can be applied to improve a practicum course designed for tertiary-level language programs in Taiwan. In this research, FL serves as the theoretical framework of the study as well as the cornerstones of instructional design. FL, a burgeoning trend, is not only becoming an educational fad many schools promoted inside of outside of Taiwan, but the growing popularity also affects curricular evolution in Taiwan's higher education system, especially for disciplines in vocational distress, such as language and/or literature.

In response to the growing negativity against the value of language departments and majors, the report of the island-wide curricular evaluation on higher education between 2008-2010 provides a high-stakes curricular evaluation that sheds some light on national and international perspectives on this issue. The section on foreign language disciplines in Taiwan (K. J. Chen, 2010), based on a massive survey and multiple roundtable discussions with faculty members, students, and chairmen of language departments, reveals the relative scarcity of two course components across language departments at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in Taiwan (see Figure 1): creation and presentation (of only 2.54% to 3.37%) and Internet and computer technology applications (of only 7.79% to 14.58%).

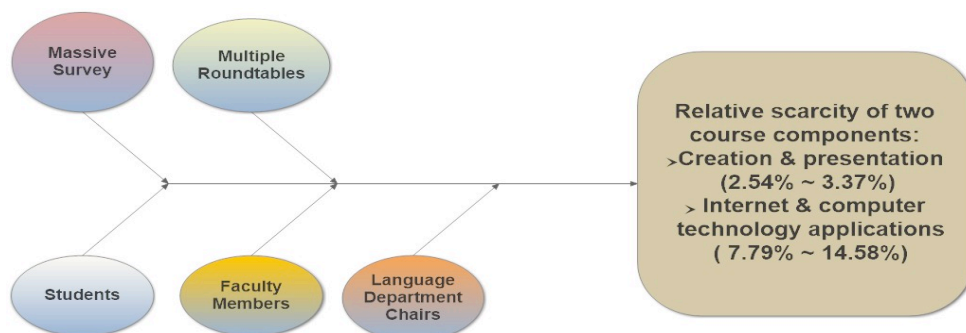


Figure 1: The result of the island-wide survey

The course components targeting students' hands-on skills (especially technology) and skill applications/demonstrations are evidently insufficient. In short, courses emphasizing marketable and marketing skills are urgently needed. The result of a recent evaluation of the author's humble department also pinpointed the same curricular flaws, as a result of the institution's remote geographical location. Furthermore, even when a practicum is offered in a language program, the only type that exists is predominately associated with student teaching (W. C. Chen, 2012). The monochromic practicum is problematic for obvious reasons. The result of a recent survey tracking down all alumni of my department, including undergraduate (the Foreign Languages and Literature program) and graduate students (the TEFL/English Literature program), found that fewer than 20% became teachers. More than half went into the publishing industry (e.g., copyediting or translation) or marketing (sales and advertisement planning/designing).

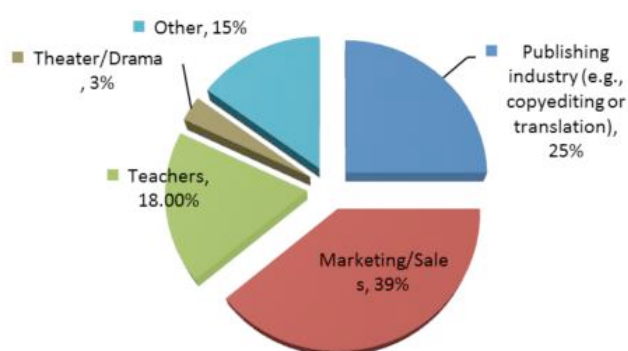


Figure 2. Career tracks for students and alumni

Clearly, practicum courses should be diversified. Hence, in this research, an innovative practicum course entitled English for Multimedia Publications incorporated an FL approach, with the hope of cultivating students' hands-on skills and problem-solving abilities through work-based learning to yield marketable products. This approach aimed to directly boost their employability (Chang, 2012). Technology was the key medium for market exploration, field practitioners' intervention, and work production.

Flipped Learning and Practicum Course

In order to reverse this chronic egg-and-chicken causality between the development of higher education and increase of employment rate, all educators should take a moment to scrutinize how closely their curricular design reflects the current job market, and hopefully will redesign their instruction and rethink how they invest their in-class time. In other words, the challenge now becomes figuring out how to prepare students for the class so that one can effectively teach what's desired and needed by the job market—an ultimate wash-back effect. This study has adopted FL to design an unprecedented practicum to demonstrate a new approach for interdisciplinary learning. A flipped classroom refers to a teaching practice in which students watch or listen to lessons before class and do their assignments in class (Fulton, 2012)—the opposite of the conventional practice. This practice frees up class time for deep learning. Although many successful stories of flipped classrooms are documented, few are reported in a rigorous manner, especially due to the concept's current infancy in Taiwan. Since more and more classroom practitioners have been experimenting with

flipped classrooms in U.S.-based contexts over the past decade, a mature FL framework has been established (FLN, 2014). A diverse class hence is more of a desired than a problematic situation for FL. The result of this, the authors believe, is an interactive teaching environment rather than lecture-based teaching. This interactive assignment-based model encourages students to be responsible for their first exposure learning outside of the classroom. Because this way of structuring the classroom inverts the more traditional pattern (of introducing students to content/materials in class), and assigning homework to engage content at a deeper level outside/prior to the class, a FL is also referred to as an inverted classroom. Judging from above features, several existing teaching methods seem to support FL designs, e.g., UbD (Understanding by Design), PBL (Problem-Based Learning), and GBS (Goal-Based Scenarios). FL has been made some appearance in territory-level Language Education research in Taiwan (e.g., Hung, 2014; Lee, 2013), as well as in overseas (e.g., Doman & Webb, 2014; Snart, 2010; Strayer, 2012), but never done for an integrated skill course. The author of the present proposal would like to push the FL approach further to examine if it will still “shine” in a tech-based practicum course? If so, how should it evolve?

The Study

This case study explores if and how FL model can contribute to a tech-based practicum course in a language department. Practicum, by Daresh’s (1990) definition, is an environment or opportunity for the learners to:

1. apply knowledge and skills in a practical setting.
2. progressively develop competencies through participation in a range of practical experiences.
3. test their commitment to a career.
4. gain insight into professional practice.
5. evaluate progress and identify areas where further personal and professional development is needed.

Meanwhile, Flipped Learning Network also advocates the following four pillars to facilitate students’ engagement in FL:

1. Flexible Environment:

FL allows for a variety of learning modes; educators often physically rearrange their learning spaces to accommodate a lesson or unit, to support either group work or independent study. They create flexible spaces in which students choose when and where they learn. Furthermore, educators who flip their classes are flexible in their expectations of student timelines for learning and in their assessments of student learning.

2. Learning Culture:

The FL model deliberately shifts instruction to a learner-centered approach, where in-class time is dedicated to exploring topics in greater depth and creating rich learning opportunities. As a result, students are actively involved in knowledge construction as they participate in and evaluate their learning in a manner that is personally meaningful.

3. Intentional Content:

Teachers should still determine, despite of FL's nature of openness/flexibility, what they need to teach and what materials students should explore on their own. Educators use intentional content to maximize classroom time in order to adopt methods of student-centered, active learning strategies.

4. Professional Educator:

During class time, professional educators continually observe their students, providing them with feedback relevant in the moment, and assessing their work. They are reflective in their practice, connect with each other to improve their instruction, accept constructive criticism, and tolerate controlled chaos in their classrooms. While Professional Educators take on less visibly prominent roles in a flipped classroom, they remain the essential ingredient that enables FL to occur.

Theoretically, FL and Practicum both emphasize on active learning with professional guidance on the side. Based on this common ground, the learning-by-doing process shall be geared toward an open and exploratory work-based learning (Boud & Soloman, 2001) in which personal- and peer-learning, formal and informal learning mutually scaffold and support. An innovative practicum course titled **Workshop of Bilingual Digital Publication** was designed in an FL approach, with the hope to cultivate students' hands-on skills and simulate on-job training to yield marketable products. Technology was the key medium for exploration, expert-intervention, and work-production.

Twenty-six junior/senior students, foreign languages and literature majors, were enrolled to this first-time offered elective practicum. All the participants were nonnative English speakers who also had learned at least one other foreign language (Japanese, German, French, and Spanish) at the same time. These participants were identified as higher intermediate English learners based on their previous admission requirement and—most of them in average would pass GEPT higher-intermediate level preliminary stage (or equivalent in TOEIC/TOEFL), based on the past history. Before taking this practicum course, they should have completed 70% of the core course requirements (English language trainings and western literature). Those who signed up for the course should be interested in or would like to explore the field works of multimedia-based sales advertisements/commercials, e-books, digital teaching/learning material productions, hence English for specific purposes (ESP) were included. The instructor-researcher also had field work experiences and personal connections with publishing companies. In addition a TA with related experience or background were recruited to assist the course for a semester.

The data collection instruments included 1) students' needs assessment results, 2) students' entry- and exit-questionnaires, 2) interviews with the students and the participating field practitioners, and finally 3) students' work products. Data analysis approaches involved qualitative analyses and descriptive statistics.

Findings

In general, the preliminary results showed that students' comfortable level with FL increased with the extent of flip, especially the proportion of expected autonomous learning compared to the conventional teaching. Abundant flexibility, crafted proposals, detailed execution, timely feedback, and competition were all the lessons

from this pilot study and later became the requirements in the formal study. Furthermore, before the prior-class study (the priming stage), a guidance proceeded in the form of brief classroom discussions could satisfy students' "what's in it for me" mentality and induce their drive to learn the upcoming learning tasks. Not only a one-time orientation in the beginning of the course, but also a suggestive road map before every task to unveil possible directions for the students to achieve the destination of their choice. Moreover, in the beginning of each class meeting, reflection on how work problems were resolved at an individual or group level was also important to better their higher level thinking and abilities. Despite of the minor bumps, students showed the unprecedented exhilaration and creativity during their work proposals and in the final products. The classroom climate was drastically different and filled with excitement and laughers, which was also a highlighted advantage. Most importantly, the depth of the questions/comments and answers among students during class discussions became solid collective knowledge.

By the end of the semester, the whole class completed amazing work products shown in Figures 3 to 6 with brief introductions respectively.



Figure 3: e-books (Travel books on Chiayi City official site)



Figure 4. Creative digital picture books the students authored and illustrated in Chinese, English, and Russian. One of them was awarded in an island-wide competition.



Figure 5. Microfilm about a local kumquat farm students created and shot.



Figure 6. Photo exhibit of the professional photos students took with their phones.

In the process of creating these astonishing products, the students, and the collaborating field practitioners all had their doubts but later replaced with affirmations. The following four sections are interview and questionnaire summaries respectively from field practitioners and students.

- **Field practitioners' doubts:**

1. *How much can students learn within 3 months? So much to do within a very short time!*
2. *What do the students want to learn from us?*
3. *"Do I have to teach in English?"*
4. *Where to start? Foreign to the existing curriculum and equipment.*
5. *How much do students know about the basics ?*
6. *Hard to foresee difficulties...*
7. *Will students resist?*
8. *Students will need to learn much more about art before developing their artistic sense.*

- **Field practitioners' affirmations:**

1. *Great to combine language specialty with digital publication/media creation. "Your students are particularly sensitive to words and thought-expressions."*
2. *Invitation from a language department is unprecedented—the interdisciplinary collaboration is necessary and practical. International market in the publication field really can use language majors.*
3. *"Students know much more than we expected."*
4. *Online tutorials before and after class are very helpful.*
5. *Students should be able to create their unique value (employability) in the job market.*

6. *Students have shown great potential to enter this field, especially for senior students.*

● **Students' doubts:**

1. *This looks like something I can do, but.....*
2. *Low confidence to master the computer programs.*
3. *Uncertainty about their potential to become professional in the publication/media creation field.*
4. *Uncertainty about their ability to succeed in job-hunting in the field.*
5. *Unclear about where to start their career-planning.*
6. *"I don't **draw**, can I still be artistic?"*
7. *"I don't have any specific goals/special interests. "*
8. *"Is this field a good option? \$\$\$ and qualifications."*

● **Students' affirmations:**

1. *"I am surprised at what we have achieved. We are better than we thought."*
2. *"The computer programs we learned are very useful for my future and my personal hobby."*
3. *"Speaking to field experts gave me a reality check.....I understand the highs and lows of the industry now. Salary could be an issue in the future."*
4. *"I know how to continue developing these skills, though I am still a rookie now."*
5. *Teamwork is tough. Group members showed different sides during the work production.*
6. *"The candid feedback from peers, instructor, and field experts pushed me to learn more and try harder."*
7. *"During the work production, I had a chance to deeply explore and openly express myself."*
8. *"I wish we had more time to perfect our works. "*
9. *"I am seriously considering this field for my career choice."*
10. *"Our major is not as weak as we thought."*

Conclusion

The results of this innovative practicum were apparently rewarding; the outcomes were also empowering to the language/literature majors as well as to the department. Nonetheless, the hardware, software, and preparation time required to deliver this course had exceeded what an individual faculty member can normally afford. This time, the project completion much relied on multiple funding sources—or else it would not be possible. Therefore, this kind of practicum should be planned from a long-term perspective and in a top-down approach among the faculty. With this pioneering demonstration, the quality, quantity, and the diversity of practicum can be achieved if decision-makers can set it as a new path for the existing faculty to work collaboratively and form various teams, based on different specialties/personal interests, to share workloads, while seeking interdisciplinary input/assistance. This way the society will acknowledge that language/literature departments still have the ability to provide exciting practicum courses which the market desires.

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