

Chapter 19

“Reverse Engineering” of IB History Exemplars: Applying the i²Flex Methodology to Improve Students’ Analytical Writing

David I. Nelson

American Community Schools (ACS) Athens, Greece

ABSTRACT

The following chapter traces the philosophy and rationale behind one application of the i²Flex blended learning methodology in the context of an International Baccalaureate (IB) History class. The author shares his goals and processes for assisting students to improve their analytical writing in one of the most challenging IB courses through a process he calls, “reverse engineering” of exemplars. The lesson design carefully combines phases of the student engagement, first focusing on the use of technology to provide students with careful guidance as they work independently to examine and assess exemplar papers, with emphasis on deepening their understanding of the official IB History Assessment criteria. The chapter emphasizes the goal of maximizing the collaborative face-to-face classroom design to further students’ understanding. Throughout the chapter the author reflects on how the methodology has shifted students’ thinking and processing; additionally, he shares the challenges that he has faced in implementing the process.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

I remember twenty-five years ago walking into the classroom to prepare for an eight period schedule during my first year of teaching. Simultaneously wheeling in one cart with the latest overhead projector, stacked with copies and transparencies, I maneuvered another cart with a VCR and 32’ TV --- my hands were often smeared with purple ink, remnants of the mimeograph machine I had used in the front office.

You may be smiling as you recount your own experiences, if not as a teacher, perhaps as a student, when you watched in disbelief as the teacher struggled to play the newest video cassette or DVD. At the time, though, we as teachers knew that we were making the most of the latest “technology”.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0267-8.ch019

In all of my years of teaching, I’ve witnessed many changes in education, including, among others, how technology is used and the role that standardized assessment plays. For me as a teacher, however, one priority has never changed: I choose to focus on being the best teacher I can, getting to know my students and their needs, while using the technology as one aspect in the creation of a quality learning environment.

Technology has advanced so rapidly, altering not only how students interact with their world and engage in learning, but also how we as educators leverage that technology to create a more effective learning environment. Despite such a rapid shift in technology, I am confident that “great teaching strategies” are still as successful as they once were. Increasingly though, our best teaching strategies can be augmented by an endless stream of technological innovations that can help us to engage students differently outside of the classroom, while inviting us to develop more opportunities to captivate them or connect them with their peers, in the classroom.

For me, using technology in my teaching is not about flashing the latest gadgets or using the newest widgets, it’s about finding the tools that more effectively engage students and ultimately help to maximize the face-to-face time that is instrumental to learning. How I envision the face-to-face time with my students, in a sense, is the foundation that leads me to reach for technological solutions.

I’m the first to contend that teachers should never be judged by “what” they or the students are doing in the classroom, as that’s no mark of learning; rather, the best teachers begin with **WHAT** they want the students to learn, to master, to engage with and with **HOW** those same students can learn skills that will carry over into their lives. If we don’t inspire students to learn and empower them with the many technological problem solving tools that are before them, then we are not teaching.

It was eleven years ago that I built my first class website, making materials more readily available to my students, and even offering interactive lessons to create independent learning opportunities. The site www.classcoffee.com was a first step towards my realizing the potential of using online resources; it provided students a “no-excuse” way of organizing information, accessing resources, and updating themselves on classroom activities. The online forum, featured for my Theory of Knowledge class, even connected students in online sessions and allowed them to share their work. The website became a valuable addition to the class, but over time it mostly became an organizational tool for students, which was a start, but truly only a start.

I bring up the history of my website to illustrate how quickly things change and how challenging it is to keep up with those changes. Throughout the process, I found that the more I learned about designing a website, the more I realized what was truly possible, while also resigning myself to the fact that it would be difficult to keep up with the learning curve while also maintaining all the other work that was on my plate.

Today, given a similar context and an ever increasing torrent of possibilities, I search simply for those tools that will help me to maximize the face-to-face learning, while engaging students to learn independently outside of the classroom. I choose not to use as my measure, what the students are doing, but rather how they are learning from what they are doing. With this central theme of i²Flex in my mind, I seek to first connect students with their classroom community of learners, using the content and techniques to motivate and hopefully inspire; while simultaneously, I choose effective and flexible online and independent strategies to maximize learning. By applying a few best strategies at a time, we, and the students, are not simply doing more, but rather doing more, in the classroom setting, better!

It is within this same spirit of focus that I would like to share one of my i²Flex strategies that strikes such a balance. i²Flex is a “non-traditional learning methodology, organically developed by the ACS

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