10 Transmedia teaching framework: from group projects to curriculum development

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Abstract

This paper describes an innovative project-based learning framework theoretically based on the ideas of Transmedia Storytelling, Participatory Cultures and Multiple intelligences that can be integrated into the flipped classroom method, and practically addressed using Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and Project-Based Learning (PBL) approaches. It shows how this framework has been developed and integrated into the Academic Reading curriculum at Akita International University (AIU) in Japan by giving examples of the high quality work students can produce and outlining specific techniques and assessment criteria.

Keywords: transmedia, content-based instruction, project-based learning, flipped classroom, EAP.

1. Introduction

This paper outlines how the Transmedia teaching method has been implemented in the Academic Reading curriculum at AIU in Japan. Here, the Transmedia method combines the original theoretical framework – Transmedia Storytelling, Participatory Culture and Multiple Intelligences (Reid, Hirata, & Gilardi, 2011) – with elements of flipped classroom, PBL and CBI.

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2. Teaching context

AIU's Academic Reading Course requires a TOEFL-ITP score of 500 or higher, and a 12 hour per week, 15 week commitment. The course develops the reading skills and vocabulary needed to complete university-level assignments. It focuses on reading strategies, critical engagement with academic texts, and acquisition of the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000).

Formerly, students completed exercises on academic texts to learn lexis and content. However, it was felt that a Confucian-heritage culture of passivity prevailed with too many students adopting a rote-memorization approach to lexis, and a strategic-surface approach to content. In 2013, the Transmedia Teaching method was introduced to challenge this paradigm, with at least five group projects being assigned for each student to work on. From 2014, the method was situated in a flipped learning context, which involved hosting previous semester projects on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) for current semester students to learn from. The result was students became more inspired, learned content and lexis more deeply, and became familiar with assessment criteria before producing their own projects.

3. Transmedia teaching in the context of CBI, PBL and flipped classrooms

Inspired by Transmedia Storytelling (the creation of coherent fictional universes in the entertainment industry), the Transmedia teaching method was developed to promote active participation by empowering students to create learning projects. Just as the various media products of a Hollywood franchise, such as *The Marvel Cinematic Universe*, are accessed to learn more about the fictional world, student-created media projects allow participants and observers to engage in multiple modalities that analyse, synthesize and critically evaluate texts.

The method evolved from a consideration of Gardner's (2011) theory of Multiple Intelligences, that posits people have different learning strengths that

can be incorporated into study, and Internet-based participatory cultures in which people, particularly Millennials, feel empowered to create and comment on content. We realized that students who were passive in the classroom were often active in cyberspace, and thus sought to bring this engagement into the classroom (Gilardi & Reid, 2011).

At AIU, the focus is on target language and content, therefore the projects that students created fit the definitions of both CBI and PBL. CBI encourages active, experiential learning that incorporates peer to peer interaction and student-led research. PBL is a "natural extension of CBI" (Stoller, 2002, p. 109) in that it focuses on the learning of contextualised content rather than isolated lexical or grammatical items, is cooperative rather than competitive, integrates skills and information processing, and results in the creation of projects that can stimulate learning (Stoller, 2002).

Since the projects are digitized it seemed useful to host them on the VLE for future cohorts to access, which led to the flipped learning (Bergmann & Sams, 2012) component of the curriculum. Prior to beginning their own projects, students were directed to use the assessment criteria (see Table 1 and Table 2 to critically evaluate the projects created by previous cohorts. This inspired them when creating their own projects as well as helping them learn more deeply.

After three weeks of viewing and evaluating previous projects, each current student was assigned to 5 different randomized groups to create content and vocabulary projects for 5 different academic texts. This resulted in 4 projects a week over the remainder of the semester.

Both Content and Vocabulary groups were required to meet specific requirements (see Table 1 and Table 2). Content projects ranged from PowerPoint or Prezi presentations with embedded media clips, to poster presentations and self-contained videos (e.g. https://goo.gl/okUyWn and https://goo.gl/b5IIxJ). Vocabulary groups often integrated digital presentations with videos and handouts (e.g. https://goo.gl/bN7WlN and https://goo.gl/Khkvyl).

4. Marking criteria and social loafing

Table 1 and Table 2 show the marking criteria used to evaluate the Transmedia projects. Over the three week initial evaluation period, current students used these marking criteria to critically evaluate projects from previous semesters. The instructor would share his/her evaluation of each project to help students understand the criteria in more depth.

Table 1. Content presentation marking criteria

CONTENT Presentation	F		D		C		B		A		
	0-5		12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
REQUIREMENTS •8 highlighted target words used correctly •Chapter Summary •Critical Conclusion •4 Comprehension Questions •3 Critical thinking Questions	Most requirements missing or inadequate.		Some requirements missing or inadequate; unsatisfactory level of understanding and critical thought displayed.		Satisfactory attention to most requirements; average amount of critical thought and understanding demonstrated.		Good attention to all requirements; content solidified and expanded well; good amount of critical thought and understanding demonstrated.		All requirements exceeded; current state of issue, application to outside contexts; and exceptional understanding and critical thought displayed.		
•1 Outside Source	0-5		6	6.5	7	7.5	8	8.5	9	10	
CREATIVITY & ENGAGEMENT	Little creative effort made; unengaging result.		Only mildly interesting; minimal originality displayed. Many students not able to participate.		Average amount of creativity and engagement. Most students given chance to participate.		Creative content presented in an interesting and engaging manner. Everyone given the chance to participate.		Extraordinary amount of creativity applied; presentation continually active and captivating.		
	0-5		6	6.5	7	7.5	8	8.5	9	10	
ENGLISH	Serious errors render the presentation incomprehensible.		Substantial number of errors impede meaning.		Some errors impede meaning, but presentation is delivered satisfactorily.		A few errors that do not impede meaning; presentation delivered well.		Very few minor errors that do not impede meaning; very professional delivery.		

Since each group member received the same grade they were told to contact their instructor if a group member was under-performing. Although this did not entirely eliminate "Social Loafing" (Lee & Lim, 2012, p. 214), it did reduce

its incidence. Additionally, since the instructor consulted with the students as they created their projects, it was possible to monitor the extent to which each group member contributed. Other ways to ensure fairness might include self-evaluation forms, the inclusion of an individual grade, or the capacity for groups to assign percentages to individual members.

Table 2. Vocabulary activity marking criteria

VOCABULARY Presentation	F	D	C	B	A
	0-5	12 13	14 15	16 17	18 19 20
REQUIREMENTS •18 target words used correctly in original sentences •Clear instructions given for activities •Solidification of target word knowledge	Most requirements missing or inadequate.	Some requirements missing or inadequate.	Satisfactory attention to most requirements.	Good attention to all requirements; well-constructed activity that solidifies target word knowledge.	All requirements exceeded; Very well-constructed activity that solidifies target word knowledge.
	0-5	6 6.5	7 7.5	8 8.5	9 10
CREATIVITY & ENGAGEMENT	Presenters did not help students with activity; badly-designed activity lacking creativity.	Activity only mildly interesting; minimal originality displayed. Many students not able to participate.	Activity is quite creative and interesting; most students given chance to participate.	Good level of creativity and engagement achieved. Everyone able to participate.	Extraordinary amount of creativity; original or improved activity resulted in high levels of engagement.
	0-5	6 6.5	7 7.5	8 8.5	9 10
ENGLISH	English is incomprehensible. Presentation style almost non-existent.	Many errors impede meaning. Unsatisfactory presentation style.	Some errors impede meaning. Satisfactory presentation style.	Errors do not impede meaning; activity delivered well. Good presentation style.	Only a few minor errors; Professional presentation style.

5. Conclusion

Flipped classrooms put the onus on individual teachers to choose or create downloadable content. In contrast, the Transmedia model exploits a ‘wisdom of the crowds’ approach by confidently assuming that Millennials have the requisite skills and technology to create high quality projects. Our experience is that students learn what is possible from evaluating previous students’ work

and then seek to match or exceed it. We have not observed the prioritisation of group harmony over "cognitive contributions" (Lee & Lim, 2012, p. 219). This could be due to high levels of motivation and/or because the teacher plays an important consulting role. Most students report that their primary motivation becomes intrinsic rather than grade-driven and they consistently produce high quality work. While it is impossible to definitively measure whether students acquire knowledge at a greater rate and depth than students in more traditional settings, it is the case that exam scores have been higher than in previous years, indicating this to be the case. It is also indisputable that this method empowers the student and relieves the burden on the teacher to be the primary vehicle of input. It fosters group cohesion and develops skills that encompass negotiation, technology, authentic L2 use, time-management, research, public speaking, critical thinking and creativity.

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