

# **Write Side Up:**

Using Neuroscience to Flip  
the Business English Classroom

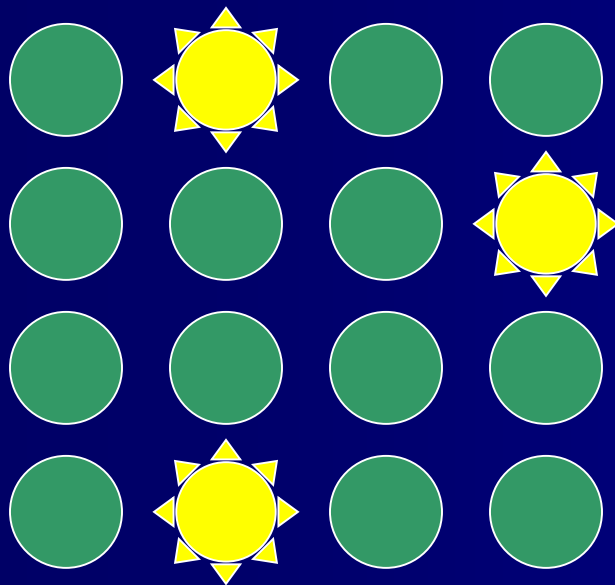
January 7, 2015  
Robert M. Rowan

# Overview

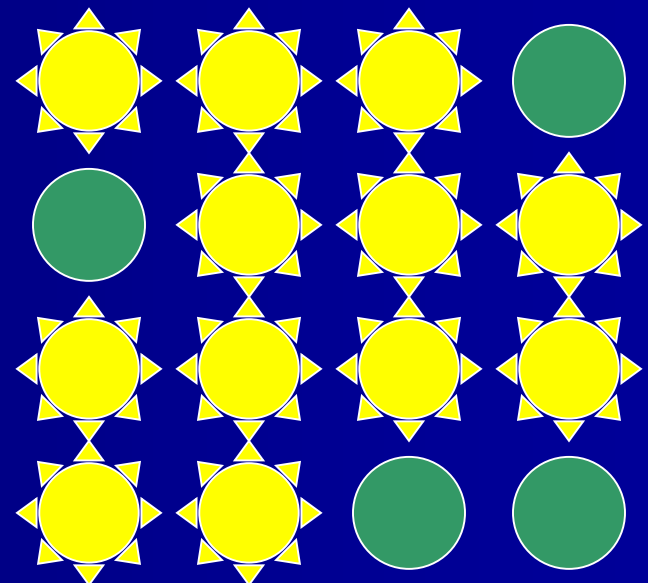
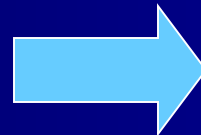
- We learn best in a challenging but supportive environment
- Lectures may be efficient, but experiences are more effective
- The flipped classroom isn't a new concept, but it connects well with our improved understanding of how people learn
- "From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side" (King)
- We can create a wide variety of engaging and relevant experiences for our students; flipping the classroom can be as simple or complex as we choose to make it
- Our primary goal as educators should be to empower our students to take control of their own learning processes
- We are not owed trust by our students, but we need it. We must earn and maintain their trust throughout the semester

# Preparing to Learn

Helping our students *get ready to learn* is an important and often overlooked part of a teacher's job. The flipped classroom can provide a suite of tools to invigorate and encourage learning.



**Get students engaged**



**Keep them engaged**

# The Role of Emotion

- Emotion is the foundation of learning. A positive emotional state plays a critical role in retention and integration of material (Zull)
- A moderate level of arousal (alertness) triggers neural plasticity by increasing production of neurotransmitters and neural growth hormones (Cozolino and Sprokay; Wolfe; Zull)
- The brain is a social organ innately designed to construct knowledge through shared experiences and collaboration (Cozolino and Sprokay; Wolfe)
- Fear and anxiety can have negative effects on learning, so minimizing these is important (Cozolino and Sprokay; Perry)

# Changing the Brain

- Learning alters the brain's neural pathways, and we can help by creating optimal conditions for our learners (Ambrose et al; Cozolino and Sprokay; Wolfe; Zull)
- The more parts of our brain that we engage during learning, the better and longer-lasting the learning tends to be
- The Four Pillars of Learning (Zull)
  - Gathering Data
  - Reflecting
  - Creating
  - Testing

# Quick Review

- Students often don't know how learning works, but we do. This puts the ethical burden on us to do more than just blast them with information and assume it will stick
- Learning (in and out of the classroom) ideally involves
  - A safe and trusting relationship with an attuned other
  - Maintenance of a moderate level of arousal (where the learner is attentive and motivated to learn)
  - Activation of both thinking and feeling
  - A language of self-reflection
  - Engagement of multiple parts of the brain (Cozolino and Sprokay; Zull)
- Can the flipped classroom provide these things? Yes!

# Flipping 101

## Features and Benefits:

- Allows a fresh approach to “old” material
- Hands-on activities, experiments, or assignments
- Collaborative learning
- Shifted risk (“perfection” is not the goal, and students have the right to fail occasionally)
- Background info is read or viewed outside of class (video lectures, written explanations, and so forth)
- The teacher acts as a guide, observing students and helping when needed
- Empowers students by giving them greater control over their own learning

# Business English Setting

- Sophomore business majors; haven't started major classes
- Enrollment is capped at 18 students
- Classrooms have computers for each student
- Seating configuration allows for groups of 3-4
- Students arrive with many (wrong) expectations about the class and about writing in the workplace
- The Writing Program uses a genre theory and writing research approach: students are asked to analyze the writing tasks they're given and the ways in which the piece of writing will get used by other people in the workplace
- The College of Business (understandably) has high expectations for the outcomes of this class



# Flipped Business English

Flipped classrooms can have many different elements. These are some of mine.

- Learning (grading) contract (Danielewicz and Elbow)
- Key concepts are written down and uploaded to ReggieNet
- Full-semester projects with a direct connection to their future schooling and career plans
- Flexible assignment options
- Students research each type (or genre) of writing they create (Artemeva and Fox; Bawarshi and Reiff; Kain and Wardle)
- Part of each assignment involves reviewing and reflecting on the work they did

# The Learning Contract

Common features of learning (or grading) contracts:

- Describes in general (but not vague) terms what a successful assignment should look like
- Includes expectations for the students and the teacher
- De-emphasizes the importance of grades on individual assignments, allowing students to experiment and occasionally make mistakes without severe penalties
- Students are offered a baseline grade (usually a B) if they do a decent job on most or all of their assignments
- Provides multiple paths or opportunities for students to earn the course grade they desire

# Course Projects

- Students are assigned to groups of 3 or 4; assignments are a mixture of collaborative and individual work
- Over the course of the semester, students create a small business and grow it to maturity
- The documents they research and create are related to the business's growth and operations
- Most assignments have several different options, allowing students to customize their learning experience
- Students are asked to think about the role of writing outside the walls of school, and they are almost always surprised to learn how much writing happens in the workplace

# Daily Activities

- Discussions and conversations instead of lectures
- Short in-class writing prompts can be useful in jump-starting conversations
- The first few days of class may be lecture-heavy as you're setting up the course, but after that most days should be reserved for in-class research and writing
- You've put the pieces in motion, and now your job is to be available for questions
- Resist the temptation to fill up space!
- Students might take short breaks from their work – don't be too quick to jump on them for this

# Self-Diagnostics

- Invite your students to reflect on their work, in writing or in class discussions (or both)
- Provide opportunities for broader reflection too, when possible – how does the course material relate to their other classes or their plans for the future?
- The GUS (Genre Understanding Sheet) is a series of open-ended questions that invite self-analysis
- Many students will not be used to thinking about their own thinking (much less writing about it), so be patient and encouraging with them as they figure out how to do it
- Remind students that the purpose of analyzing their own thought process is to give them more control over it

# Parting Thoughts

- Flip your class slowly – sudden radical change is not required
- Communicate your intentions fully and clearly with your students, and don't drop surprises on them. You want and need their buy-in
- Allow your students and yourself to fail *with dignity* and to learn from it – a critical part of experience-based learning
- Present yourself as a co-learner and invite your students to give thoughtful feedback on flipped components
- Email me at [rmrowan@ilstu.edu](mailto:rmrowan@ilstu.edu) if you'd like a copy of any of my course materials