# Flipping a Jewish Studies Classroom

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## Introduction

Technology, like pedagogy itself, is useful to the extent that it helps us solve problems or create opportunities. The most significant problems I faced in teaching "Conceptions of Jews and Judaism," an annual survey of pre-modern Jewish life, were twofold. Many students did not internalize the content of assigned readings before class, which meant that I needed to devote most of class time to lectures in order to ensure that students understood the content I wanted them to learn. As a result, there was almost no time to teach students the skills of critical reading, which are especially important in this course given the quantity of primary sources I like to assign. By replacing textbook readings with online lectures, I was able to solve both of these problems while creating opportunities for more engaging and interactive classroom pedagogy. The process of flipping "Conceptions" has been daunting, but also quite rewarding.

## Course design

Students begin their preparation of each lesson by watching 2–4 short lectures, each roughly 10 minutes in length and accessible through the course website. (A link to a sample lecture appears at the conclusion of this essay.) These are not simply talking-head videos, although they aren't professional quality either. For most of each lecture, the screen displays slides (created with Prezi) that include key terms, relevant images, timelines, and other visual aids designed to help students remember and understand the lecture content. Students are encouraged not only to watch each video but also to read the full text of the lecture, which I

provide in pdf format on the same screen as the video link. Students reported spending 15–30 minutes on each 10-minute lecture, including time to pause, take notes, and replay segments that they didn't fully understand the first time. After each lecture, students take a short online quiz that assesses their memory of key lecture content. These quizzes are required but ungraded, and students receive instantaneous feedback on the accuracy of their responses so that they can review segments of the lecture they didn't remember or understand correctly. In their end-of-term feedback, students expressed appreciation for the ability to review lectures at will and requested longer quizzes so that they could better test their own grasp of the material.

Lectures prepare students to understand the assigned readings, a mix of primary and secondary sources; for lessons with longer reading assignments, there are fewer lectures. These assignments, in turn, provide opportunities for students to apply what they learn from the lectures. When possible, I include not only texts but also images and even music. In one of my favorite lessons, students read selections from First and Second Maccabees along with classical rabbinic texts about Hanukkah and then watch YouTube videos of pop music Hanukkah songs by Adam Sandler, the Maccabeats, and the Israeli hip-hop artist Subliminal. We spend part of that lesson's class sesssion discussing the similarities and differences in how these ancient and contemporary works represent and reimagine events associated with the Maccabean Revolt.

I now devote a significant percentage of class time to discussion and close reading of the assigned sources. My goal for these portions of class is to help students become more careful and critical readers by teaching skills associated with analysis and evaluation. One aspect of this pedagogy that I look forward to developing further next year is instruction in note-taking techniques. We also spend time in class discussing the relationship of that lesson's content to the overarching themes of the course; I make a point of integrating these themes into my lectures,

and to focusing on these themes in the exams. In addition, I devote part of each class to student-generated questions about the lectures and readings. My classroom now feels more like a seminar than a large lecture, in part because I have the luxury of teaching a relatively small number of students. I suspect, however, that colleagues who teach in packed lecture halls could find ways to accomplish many of these in-class goals with a similar course design.

Students write two exams and three essays over the course of the semester. The first essay asks them to evaluate the merits of two different academic approaches to understanding ancient Israelites and the Hebrew Bible, exemplified in secondary sources that we study in class. In the second essay, students analyze a classical rabbinic text that we did not study in class, drawing on what they have learned from lectures and assigned readings. At the end of the term, students write an essay that analyzes a medieval source of their choosing in light of one of the major themes of the course; they draw both on content from throughout the term and on their own library research. These increasingly complex assignments prompt students to develop and apply both the critical reading skills that they learn in class and the content that they learn from online lectures. Exam questions—and, more importantly, the pre-exam study guides—prompt students to think about the course content in light of overarching themes. Students are responsible for everything contained in the lectures, whether or not we discuss that material in class. The last question on the final exam asks students to analyze sight unseen a text that does not appear on the syllabus, a true test of the knowledge and skills I seek to teach in this course.

## The flipping process

I designed this course to be as tightly integrated as possible: lectures relate directly to exams, to essay assignments, to readings, and to one another. These lectures—there will be about 60 once course design is complete this coming summer—are also carefully written in order

to convey as much content as possible in a brief period of time. I quickly discovered that designing lectures to replace the textbook and introduce other readings is quite different from my previous practice of lecturing to reinforce previously assigned material; my old lecture notes were not nearly as helpful as I had anticipated. I tended to write each lecture on the basis of two or three secondary sources, often written by my mentors or by other scholars whose work has shaped my own thought; the print version of each lecture includes a bibliography and recommended reading list.

Drafting the lecture is only the first stage of the production process. Once each draft was reviewed by my assistants (more on them in a moment), we created the accompanying Prezi presentations. Visual aids not only reinforce lecture content but also help to fine-tune the lectures themselves: on many occasions I revised the text of a lecture to better match the accompanying visuals. After finalizing the lecture text and accompanying Prezi, I delivered the lecture to a video camera. My assistants then combined the talking-head video recording with the Prezi, adding a musical clip at the beginning to accompany the title slide and again the end, while image and presentation credits appear on screen. After uploading the finished video and a pdf of the lecture text, we designed the accompanying quiz using WordPress's LearnDash plugin. (Students prefer questions that require matching or organizing rather than multiple choice; because the quizzes are auto-graded, questions that call for free-form responses are problematic.) We clocked the production time from start to finish for one lecture that required no background research and that adhered closely to my old lecture notes: about 14 hours of work for a video that lasts 9:32.

I naively began the process of flipping "Conceptions of Jews and Judaism" last spring with the expectation of completing the work by the end of the summer. After two months of

full-time work by myself and my two student assistants, we had completed lectures for only half of the course, and we spent the fall semester scrambling to stay ahead of the class. I discovered that the design process I had begun in fact takes two summers, with a semester of beta-testing in between. I plan to use the coming summer to create lectures that I skipped this fall due to time constraints and to revise many of the existing lectures in light of student feedback and my improved understanding of how best to design these videos. My hope is that after I finish the design process this summer, I will replace at most a handful of lectures each year.

The process I developed for flipping "Conceptions of Jews and Judaism" simply cannot be done single-handedly. This past summer and fall, I worked with two student assistants. Both took "Conceptions" and two of my other courses the previous year, so they were familiar with the subject matter and with my strengths and weaknesses as a teacher. I counted on them to flag material in the lectures that students might not understand and to offer feedback on draft reading and essay assignments. We also brainstormed together about classroom pedagogy techniques that would effectively engage students with diverse learning styles. Having student input during the design process proved invaluable: while this year's course content was far from perfect, my assistants spotted and helped to resolve many potential problems in advance. This coming summer, I look forward to working with a different student assistant who has taken several courses with me but has not yet taken "Conceptions." Her first task will be to watch/read all of the lectures and highlight everything that isn't sufficiently clear to someone encountering this material for the first time. In addition to providing crucial feedback, my assistants take the lead in designing Prezis, bringing a fresh perspective to the lecture content and to the needs of my student audience. They also handle all technical aspects of video recording and production.

Results

Public health professionals, my wife tells me, evaluate health care systems in terms of three metrics: cost, access, and quality. Those same metrics are useful in assessing the redesigned "Conceptions of Jews and Judaism." Flipping this course has proven to be quite cost-intensive, especially when cost is measured in terms of time. My scholarly research has temporarily ground to a halt, and while I may save a bit of time in future years by not needing to revise lecture notes or review textbook readings, I will never come close to recouping the time spent on the initial design process. Additional costs include the wages of student assistants and the time spent by Colby's instructional technology staff facilitating the design process. The college has committed roughly $14,000 toward student wages and a modest stipend for my own work on this course, and the provost designated this project a top priority for our IT staff. I was also able to take advantage of Colby's technological infrastructure, including a high quality recording studio as well as the necessary hardware and software.

What makes these costs worthwhile is the sharp increase in course access and course quality. "Conceptions of Jews and Judaism" now appeals not only to the relatively small number of Colby students interested in its subject matter but also to a much larger group interested in improving their critical reading skills. One class member informed me that she had no interest at all in Jews or Judaism but knew that she needed to improve her reading abilities. She was one of several students who enrolled on the recommendation of their first-year academic advisors, to whom I promoted this course as an introduction to reading at the college level. I'm delighted to not only increase enrollment in Jewish studies courses but also help prepare students for success in other areas of study.

Thanks to the online lectures, students came to class with a far better grasp of the subject matter than in previous years, and they participated more actively in class discussions. They also learned much more this year, particularly in the area of critial reading skills. Grades on essays and exams were on par with previous years, but only because I moved the goalposts by designing more challenging assignments. Student evaluations were also more positive this year than last, and a larger number of students expressed interest in taking another course with me in the future. From my own perspective, however, what matters most is that *I* am far more satisfied with the quality of this course. The flipped format enables me to teach the content and skills that I care about in an effective and engaging manner. I would do it all again—just not anytime soon.

## A sample online lecture

The following lecture, part of the course's first lesson, exemplifies the way in which I use lectures to introduce reading assignments as well as the way in which I use visual aids to enrich lectures. The video, like all those associated with this course, is archived on YouTube but can only be accessed by those with the precise url.

https://youtu.be/SIRGehWJl6U