

# Creating Community, Enhancing Engagement, and Fostering Verbal Expression Through A Video Discussion Platform

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## Abstract

*Although student-centered learning and use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has taken hold in many pre K-12 districts and classrooms across the country, its assimilation into higher education has been slower. Lecture still seems to dominate most face-to-face courses. Conversely, today's undergraduate learners are typically digital natives; that is, they have grown up and are comfortable with technology. How can post-secondary educators reduce lecture, increase learner engagement, and take a significant step toward incorporating technology and putting UDL principles into practice? This paper introduces Flipgrid, an online video social platform that provides multiple options for engagement, representation, and action and expression with course learning.*

## INTRODUCTION

UDL-centric educator thinking and practice places learners front and center. Traditional instructional approaches do not take into consideration diverse learning needs. We know variability exists among all learners, and we need to design and implement instruction that takes into consideration this variability. We also know that learner engagement facilitates learning, so we need to provide more opportunities for greater student engagement.

## UDL IN HIGHER EDUCATION

An examination of outdated instructional methodologies, widespread reluctance to embrace UDL, and future workplace needs suggest that higher education must adopt a quicker response to practices aligned with Universal Design for Learning.

Lecture is still the most widely used method of teaching in higher education (Jaschik, 20018). University of Nebraska researchers recently conducted a large-scale observational study of nearly 550 faculty teaching more than 700 undergraduate courses at 25 institutions in the United States and Canada. Over 2000 classes were observed. The results suggested that over 55 percent of classes observed were predominantly conventional lecture. Only 18 percent of all observed classes were student-centered with a strong emphasis on group work and discussion, while another 27 percent were lecture with some interactivity.

In general, campuses have been slow to implement professional development, resources, and other supports to align educator practices and courses with UDL principles, though some higher education institutions have implemented UDL initiatives. This hesitancy may be due to several factors. Faculty may associate UDL with the need to provide accommodations to learners with disabilities, rather than an approach to enhance learning for all. Fur-

thermore, the paltry number of research studies published in peer-reviewed journals on UDL implementation in higher education, suggests that UDL is in its infancy at the post-secondary level.

Research suggests that social and emotional skills will be required in 30 to 40 percent of the projected fastest growing occupations (Microsoft, 2018). If we want learners to be life-ready, social-emotional learning must become a priority. Flipgrid provides an easy first step to address UDL, build learner's collaborative, social and emotional skills, and infuse technology into higher education classrooms.

## FLIPGRID

What is Flipgrid's story? Flipgrid was first rolled out in 2014 by Dr. Charlie Miller, an associate professor at the University of Minnesota and former co-director of its Learning Technologies Media Lab. He created an early iteration of Flipgrid to continue discussions with his graduate students while he did research abroad. (Flipgrid, 2017). Each year since then, Flipgrid's growth has been explosive. In summer 2018, Microsoft acquired Flipgrid and made it part of its suite of free tools available to educators, schools, districts and colleges. Now Flipgrid has over 20 million users world-wide in 180 countries.

How do educators use Flipgrid? The first step is to open an educator account at [www.flipgrid.com](http://www.flipgrid.com) by signing up through Google or Microsoft. The sign-up page includes a blog, help center, and resources so educators who may not be comfortable in the beginning get immediate support. However, the platform is very intuitive, and takes very little time to learn.

Educators are ready to create their first "grid" once they open an account. Grids can be organized by course sections. For example, if an educator has three sections of the same course, then she would most likely create three grids even if the topic is the same for each section. However, if the educator wants to create a larger community, she may want to create one grid and require all learners from each section to post responses on the same grid. Educators can create any number of grids for any number of courses or course sections. Finally, educators provide learners or entire classes access to grids through one of several ways including QR codes, flipcodes, or through learning communities using *Remind*, *Google Classroom*, or embedded codes on the campus LMS.

How do learners use Flipgrid? Once learners receive the code to their course Flipgrid, they view the prompt and directions provided by the educator and record their re-

sponses. A wonderful feature of Flipgrid is the varied ways that prompts that can be created. For example, educators can have learners view a video clip and respond, read two articles and respond (compare, contrast, and evaluate ideas addressed in the articles), or describe their experience in creating a group project. Educators may create their own video clip describing the assignment. The possibilities are limitless! Educators can choose to provide learner video recording lengths from 15 seconds to 5 minutes. Learners can record and re-record until they are satisfied with their responses, can attach files to their recorded videos, and can jazz up their screenshot to include a wide variety of stickers.

Too many features exist to mention and Flipgrid is consistently adding new features to expand possibilities of its use. The best way to learn how to use this intuitive social platform is to experiment and learn as you go.

### UDL & FLIPGRID: A GREAT MATCH

Every educator creates her own experiences with Flipgrid. My first-year experience with this social learning platform was teaching three sections of an elementary education preparation course. Learners were second year, spring semester educator candidates who were part of a “two by two” program; learners were in their last semester in a community college setting prior to transferring to a state four-year university program. The course, *Introduction to Exceptional Education*, was their first introduction to exceptional learners and it targeted instructional practices to ready them to teach in inclusive, general education elementary school settings.

Flipgrid provided a different platform through which learners could express their thoughts and opinions and interact with their classmates. In other words, Flipgrid offered me different ways to incorporate Universal Design for Learning through engagement, representation, and action and expression.

### Engagement

The learners in all sections of my spring 2017 *Introduction to Exceptional Education* were young, enthusiastic and digital natives. None were familiar with Flipgrid, but quickly embraced and used it. In fact, prior to one section’s first day of class, a learner had completed and uploaded his first assignment—his introduction to classmates. My experiences since then suggest that digital natives quickly embrace Flipgrid, whereas digital immigrants need more support to learn and use it. The following are a just a few ways that I found that Flipgrid enhanced engagement for learners.

#### Engagement

- Introductions; in-class activities build community
- Bring students together from multiple sections of a course to the same grid to spark ideas and create cross-course section community
- Digital natives’ natural comfort with and enjoyment of technology; views of classmates’ responses & response mechanism (“likes”)

Figure 1. Considerations for engagement using Flipgrid.

Using Flipgrid’s “like” button, learners can encourage each other by acknowledging classmates responses. Educators, likewise, become engaged and motivated by being able to view all statistics of their Flipgrid account at any time throughout the course (see Table 1). I would often share with classes the number of total views they had per week of each other’s submissions. This would invariably lead to additional in-class discussion and engagement about the week’s topic.



Figure 2. My Flipgrid educator account and engagement information, Display information adapted from <https://admin.flipgrid.com/manage/grids>.

Educators can personalize feedback and further engage learners using Flipgrid’s many feedback tools. For example, educators can provide feedback on learners ideas and performance through a grading rubric, private written feedback, and private video feedback. Educators can create a “mixtape” where they feature outstanding responses as part of a semester highlights or project showcase.

### Representation

Since learners are already familiar with and use varied video platforms to connect socially, they welcome a platform that supports self-expression in learning. Additionally, Flipgrid provides educators varied ways to spark learner interest and introduce assignments. I typically create videoclips of myself at the beginning of the semester explaining what they need to include in their video responses. However, as the semester progresses, I became more creative. For example, when assigning learners to describe inclusive practices in their field study classroom, I provided written directions and upload videoclips of an effective inclusive practice so they are guided and reinforced with an example. In a later course on research, I provided written directions, but rather than describe a research study, I uploaded a videoclip from the “marshmallow experiment” about instant gratification. The following are additional ways representation can be used:

#### Representation

- Introduce a course
- Introduce an assignment; create a topic using a student’s video as the topic resource; “feature” a student response
- Multiple means for representation of the assignment—through informative or humorous video, instructor-made video clip, reading/text; Instructor can provide private written, video, or number rating feedback (ideas and/or performance)

Figure 3. Alternate representations uses with Flipgrid.

### Action & Expression

College learners are typically expected to provide written responses to assignments. Academic writing is an important part of being a learner in higher education. However, we also know that learners need to develop their soft-skills to better communicate and prepare for workplace settings. Providing an alternate format for a recorded response can build learners verbal skills, especially when responding to specific questions in a timed format. Multiple opportunities to re-record can support learners as they attempt to create clear and concise responses in the allotted time-frame. I found that learners became clearer and more articulate in their responses as the semester progressed. Learners final Flipgrid semester response required them to share their experiences related to completing their teams game board project. They could record as a team or individually, but they had to describe their games evolution and creation process, their roles, and the collaborative process. Learners self-rated their teams in each area using a provided rubric with a narrative description and justification. Flipgrid provided me insight into numerous background details about their creation processes which was so much more meaningful than just seeing their final projects.

#### Flipgrid Responses for Final Course Project



Figure 4. Students explain their final course project creation using Flipgrid, photos taken from Flipgrid responses.

The following are other ways that Flipgrid supported learner action and expression:

**Action & Expression**

- Ask questions through a virtual online office
- Express their thinking in a safe forum; respond to prompts as teams
- Provides insight into student thinking; "individual time" with each student
- Alternate response format; break from heavy emphasis on writing

Figure 5. Considerations for alternate student expression using Flipgrid.

### Flipgrid Community

One of the outstanding features of Flipgrid is the multiple levels of available support and community. Flipgrid is dedicated to constantly expanding its capabilities and

types of supports. One can find many video and print supports on Flipgrid's website including an Educator's Guide, Higher Education Guide and Integration Documents. The "Integration Docs" provide subject and age-specific documents in language arts, math, science, social studies as well as specialty areas such as music and art, world languages, health and physical education, and professional development.

Flipgrid provides opportunities for around-the-world connections with other professionals and their classes through #gridpals. Educators also can connect with other Flipgrid users through Flipgrid Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram communities. Flipgrid issues a monthly newsletter on its website with product and news updates. In addition, Flipgrid supports numerous live webcasts and options to earn levels of Flipgrid educator certification.

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