



## Using Video Technology for Discussion Forums: Building an Engaged Online Community

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## Using Video Technology for Discussion Forums: Building an Engaged Online Community

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*Faculty used various multimedia technology delivery methods within higher education in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Instructors were urged to be more agile when considering tools to promote student engagement within the forced, online environment. Video technology is a mainstay in both online and hybrid education as well as in the workforce. Flipgrid, an agile learning tool, promotes asynchronous class discussions to reinforce higher levels of thinking in Bloom's taxonomy of learning. Data collected from three courses suggests that Flipgrid promotes student engagement in a learner-centered approach. Implications are suggested for online learning.*

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### Introduction

Faculty routinely use various types of multimedia technology to enhance content delivery within courses. The recent COVID-19 pandemic challenged faculty to find alternative delivery modes for traditional course instruction. Administrators and instructional designers encouraged faculty to use agile learning tools to promote student engagement within the forced, online environment. However, many faculty were unaware of potential options for engaging learners (Schmidt, 2021) and sought help from various sources in academia and on social media. The tendency of faculty during the pandemic to rely on tried-and-true methods was evident. Revising traditional courses to be taught remotely (Shisley, 2020; Veneri & Mongillo, 2021) challenged faculty beyond their comfort zones to provide engagement opportunities for learners. Yet, faculty were resilient in using support resources for multimedia engagement and developing their media literacy in a short period of time.

There are several operational definitions for multimedia tool use in online learning that help to situate agile teaching and learning. These are considerations faculty and instructional designers discuss through backward design of content (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). The multimedia principle serves as the underlying hypothesis

of this article, in the use of Flipgrid for discussion activities. Operational definitions are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Operational Definitions of Multimedia Use in Online Learning

Term	Definition
Multimedia	Presenting words (e.g., printed text or spoken text) and pictures (e.g., illustrations, photos, animation or video).
Multimedia Learning	Building mental representations from words and pictures.
Multimedia Instruction	Presenting words and pictures that are intended to promote learning.
Multimedia Learning Hypothesis or the Multimedia Principle	People can learn more deeply from words and pictures than from words alone.

## Background

Discussion boards are a typical strategy used to reinforce content understanding and application both in online and hybrid courses. Discussion boards promote student text-based learning in response to a prompt. The instructor uses course content with respect to the levels of learning discussed in Bloom’s taxonomy. Yet, in an online world, it is often questioned if and how we truly promote higher levels of thinking (Stoszowski et.al., 2020). Building an online community of learners needs to go beyond text-based work in the selection of engagement tools to promote higher order learning (Green & Green, 2018). In the traditional classroom, application and analysis are promoted. It is paramount for faculty and instructional designers to consider multimedia tools to foster and promote higher order thinking to critically analyze information rather than simply summarizing it.

Lowenthal and Moore (2020) stressed the importance of seeking student feedback on tool use to promote learning. Understanding the challenges and opportunities for students with multimedia tools promotes equity and better understanding of accessibility. Flower Darby (2019) reiterates the importance of timely and responsive feedback in her text *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes*, an applied version of James Lang’s text on *Small Teaching*. Key points include taking advantage of the technology breadth

and depth, setting a schedule to respond to students within your daily calendar, developing and transparently sharing grading patterns (e.g. I grade on Tuesday, grades will be posted by Wednesday at 9:00 am) and recording audio/video feedback so they can see and hear your suggestions for growth. These points reinforce the importance of backward design in course construction and selection of tool use, along with instructor practices.

Through the use of the Flipgrid tool, we were able to reconfigure the traditional discussion board into an audio-visual and text-based task in three separate courses, transforming the traditional discussion and application of course materials. Rather than using a discussion board, Flipgrid presentations provided the students with the opportunity to apply and reflect upon weekly course materials prior to constructing the recorded videos. Flipgrid is an emerging tool of choice for online engagement, due to its relevance and intuitiveness (Keiper et al., 2020; Lowenthal & Moore, 2020). Stoszowski et al. (2020) found increased frequency in student responses using Flipgrid rather than written blog responses. With the advent of forced remote learning (McCarthy, et al., 2021; Shisley, 2020), faculty must consider effective options for course instruction to support student engagement and learning needs, promoting the increased need for faculty media literacy within hybrid delivery. Continuous support for training and professional development is warranted regardless of multimedia options to support online and hybrid learning.

## **Overview of Flipgrid**

Flipgrid started at the University of Minnesota as a video-sharing application in 2014. Charles Miller, a professor of Learning Technologies, invented Flipgrid to engage students in his classroom. The idea for the application was simple: allow people to create short videos about topics and easily share them (Vander Ark, 2019). Within 17 days of its creation, Flipgrid raised 17 million dollars from more than 80 investors. In 2018, Microsoft purchased Flipgrid for an undisclosed amount. Microsoft has pledged that Flipgrid will always remain free for educators, schools, districts, and colleges (Grayson, 2018). Today, Flipgrid has approximately 20 million users and is used in K-12 schools, by undergraduates in colleges, and even by PhD students. Flipgrid calls its application a “social learning platform,” and its mission is to “empower educators as they help students define their voices, share their voices and respect the diverse voices of others” (Gnaneswaran, 2018).

Educators use Flipgrid in many different ways. Most use it as a replacement tool for online discussion forums. Others require their students to record experiences

with Flipgrid. A student, for example, might record their visit to a museum or historical landmark. Some require their students to go on “scavenger hunts,” record a book review, practice language skills, create an online portfolio, or give a virtual presentation.

Flipgrid has many real-world applications. For example, students who use Flipgrid to record themselves speaking gain valuable experience for virtual interviews or for remote working, which, as we know, has become increasingly popular because of the pandemic. Furthermore, students who use Flipgrid for virtual presentations become comfortable giving similar presentations in their professional life. Finally, students who complete examinations in Flipgrid are prepared for virtual training and evaluations in businesses and other professional institutions.

## **Analysis**

Although discussion boards are very common in online learning, educators have increasingly noticed that students do not always respond very well to this type of activity (especially when there are several discussion boards in a course) because of the overwhelming amount of content. Many educators use Flipgrid as a replacement learning tool for discussion boards because watching a video does not seem as cumbersome as reading several discussion posts (Hughes et al., 2018; O’Brien, 2017; Schmidt, 2021). Other educators have noticed that Flipgrid creates a sense of community in the online classroom because the students can both see and hear one another speak (Keiper et al., 2020; Lowenthal & Moore, 2020). Indeed, the creation of Flipgrid videos seems to reduce feelings of isolation because the students see the faces and hear the voices of their peers, promoting a sense of community in the online classroom.

While discussion boards involve a written component, Flipgrid requires students to focus on the presentation aspect, along with synthesizing materials to respond to a prompt. As an informal presentation tool, Flipgrid allows students to analyze and synthesize their ideas prior to delivery of the video. Constructing and delivering a presentation that uses evidence to prove a thesis encourages students to focus on higher levels of critical thinking.

Keiper et al. (2020) have observed that Flipgrid is emerging as a tool of choice for educators because of its relevance and intuitiveness. While “relevance” refers to the ability of students to participate in a world that is increasingly turning to the internet to conduct business, the “intuitive” aspect concerns the design of Flipgrid. In short, developers designed Flipgrid like a social media application. As

a consequence of the design of Flipgrid, anyone who has used social media can quickly make a video.

## Results

We explored several Occupational Therapy courses that used Flipgrid during the 2020-2021 academic year. Student perceptions were gathered through structured course evaluations (eXplorance Blue) and instructor-solicited feedback on the tools used for learning. Overall, student perceptions reinforced the use of Flipgrid discussions to promote a community of inquiry (100% agreement). Students were able to see how the use of Flipgrid reinforced learner to learner, learner to content, and learner to instructor relationships (Swan et. al., 2009). One student commented about how the use of Flipgrid discussions facilitated a sense of community, reinforcing the value of learner-to-learner interactions. The following student quotes reiterate the importance of building community.

"I feel like I know these students across the country. I recognize them on the visual media, we talk, and even collaborate out of class."

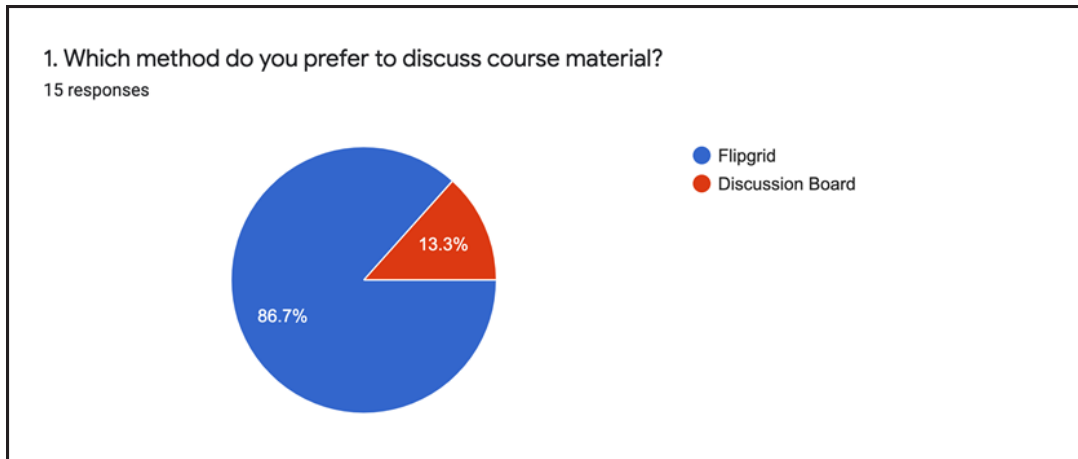
"Flipgrid was a game-changer. I will leave more elaborate feedback in the specific eval for it, but it took the discussions to a new level. I feel like I know my classmates!"

"I enjoyed being able to convey my natural and raw thoughts while also being able to learn/hear those from other students."

Students preferred Flipgrid to using traditional discussion board activities. (See Figure 1). Student comments consistently identified building and reinforcing communication skills as outcomes of the tool use.

"Flipgrid improved my public speaking, ability to give/receive feedback and strengthen peer interactions. These benefits far outweigh discussion boards."

"I find all the non-verbal communication (tone, facial expression, gestures, etc.) that's inherent to a video more efficient & effective."



**Figure 1:** Preferred Discussion Methods in an Online Course

Students identified both positive and negative components of using Flipgrid for discussion activities. As structured, students used a PowerPoint along with the Flipgrid to produce presentations. This allowed students to synthesize their thoughts and critically evaluate what they would share in the weekly discussions in response to a prompt about course topics. Students struggled initially with learning a new technology.

“Flipgrid was intimidating at first to me because I have never used it, but it was very easy to use.”

“I learned how to use Flipgrid, and it was a great way to connect with my cohort”

“I liked the use of Flipgrid for the discussions and peer feedback. It took more time initially but made the discussions more interactive and personal. I also liked being put into small groups as I felt like I was able to build connections with classmates through weekly and sharing. This really added to the course experience as I felt less isolated .” (which is a risk of online, asynchronous learning)

“The instructor really encouraged collaboration among disciplines and allowed us all to learn from one another which will be applicable in the future.”



Learning the technology quickly was a challenge for some students, even with tutorials posted. The student feedback provides an opportunity to continue revising and building upon the use of backward design in course construction.

“Yes, there were some issues with uploading. But I think that is due to EVERYONE in the world using these platforms and needing solid internet connection, but these will improve overtime.”

“I had difficulty with the embedded video with PowerPoint on Flipgrid at first, but it was helpful to have the practice Flipgrid area”

“I constantly had issues with Flipgrid. It would not work on my computer on any browser. Luckily, I was able to borrow a loaner computer from my work however, even on this computer Flipgrid would work for a short time and then freeze. Overall, it was very difficult for me to record my presentations.”

“I struggled with coordinating PowerPoint and Flipgrid. The video of myself was not present when I followed the tutorial.”

The results in this section provide learner perspectives of participating in multimedia instruction to facilitate learning.

### **Discussion/Considerations/Implications**

Overall, our students used Flipgrid as an intentional tool to promote class discussions as a positive experience, supporting the literature (Keiper et al., 2020; Lowenthal & Moore, 2020). However, unlike in these studies, no negative comments regarding anxiety of being videotaped were found. Students were comfortable sharing their videos and used the tool to build connections online. Comments from three courses at ECU were overall positive.

We have learned many lessons about Flipgrid in the Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy. First, the students require technology training. Although Flipgrid is designed to be intuitive, still some students may struggle using the application. The use of video tutorials that introduce each step of using Flipgrid has greatly helped students feel comfortable with the technology. Second, in some courses we have started using a “practice” Flipgrid. This “practice” Flipgrid is a fail-safe environment, where students can feel comfortable experimenting with the application and not be afraid of making a mistake. Third, each online course in the Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy has a virtual office devoted to technology questions, which I monitor as

the Instructional Designer. Students ask questions and seek help about Flipgrid in this virtual office. Fourth, the students greatly appreciate and benefit from the opportunity to witness a live demonstration of Flipgrid in Technology Office Hours during the first week. The technology office hours provide the students the opportunity to see Flipgrid in action and to ask questions.

We have also learned some lessons about how to use Flipgrid. First, the use of web-browsers is important. Google Chrome or Microsoft Edge are required for screen sharing. Second, the students appreciate and benefit from the ability to access Flipgrid in multiple ways. In the Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, we integrate Flipgrid in the Learning Management System with the use of an embed code. We also provide the students a URL to access Flipgrid outside of the Learning Management System. Furthermore, we provide the students a QR code that, when scanned on a mobile device, opens up the Flipgrid application. Perhaps most obvious, we have discovered that Flipgrid works best with a reliable internet speed. Video sharing, loading, and processing requires reliable internet service.

In summary, this quote provides a window into the student experience using Flipgrid in the classes reviewed.

"I was apprehensive at the beginning of the semester about utilizing Flipgrid versus a text-based discussion. Although, as the semester went on, I grew to really like how this system made the class more interactive and I felt more like I actually "knew" my classmates when otherwise I would not. Overall, Flipgrid was a positive experience and exceeded my expectations."

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