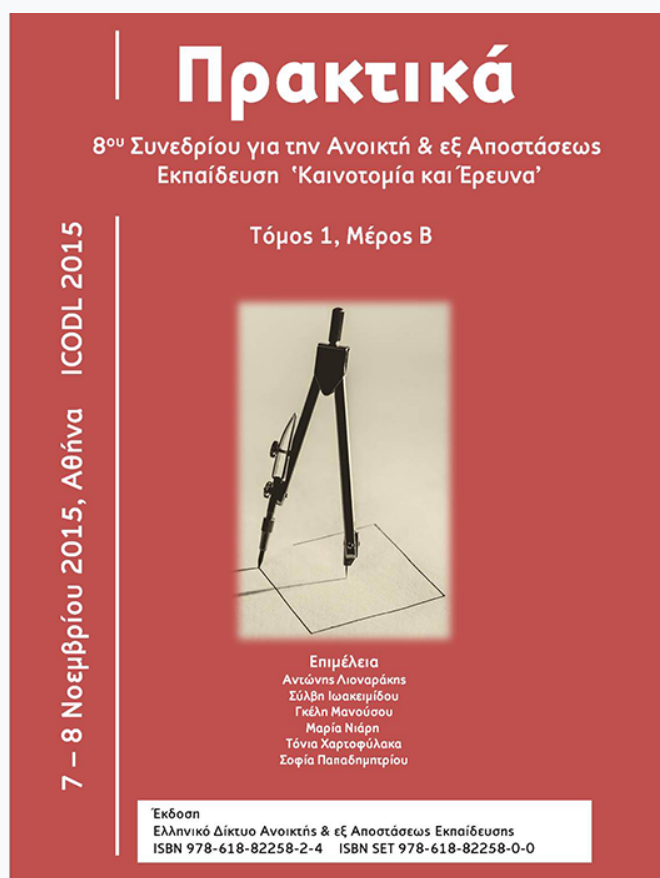# Διεθνές Συνέδριο για την Ανοικτή & εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευση

Καινοτομία & Έρευνα στην Ανοικτή & εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευση & στις Τεχνολογίες Πληροφορίας & Επικοινωνίας

Πρακτικά

8ου Συνεδρίου για την Ανοικτή & εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευση 'Καινοτομία και Έρευνα'

Τόμος 1, Μέρος B

7 – 8 Νοεμβρίου 2015, Αθήνα   ICODL 2015

Επιμέλεια
Αντώνης Λιοναράκης
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Σοφία Παπαδημητρίου

Έκδοση
Ελληνικό Δίκτυο Ανοικτής & εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευσης
ISBN 978-618-82258-2-4   ISBN SET 978-618-82258-0-0

Innovation through i2Flex: The Transformation of a Classic in the Humanities Program

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Innovation through i²Flex:
The Transformation of a Classic in the Humanities Program

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Abstract
Innovative since its inception, the ACS Honors Humanities program has a long history of more than 40 years as an interdisciplinary team-taught course that examines essential questions through literature, visual and performing arts, philosophy and history. This innovative approach has continued to motivate successive teaching teams to modify and enhance a program that challenges students academically, utilizing the best possible resources and taking advantage of new technology. In this article, we present one in-depth case study where we explain how we transformed the Honors Humanities course from Face To Face to i²Flex. We will describe and present examples of how we redesigned the course format and presentation, learning activities and assessment. We present data on student feedback and our findings regarding the benefits and challenges of adopting the i²Flex methodology for this course.

Key-words: *i²Flex, blended learning, interdisciplinary, humanities*

1. Introduction
1.1. From Face To Face to i²Flex
Innovative since its inception, the ACS Honors Humanities program has a long history of more than 40 years as an interdisciplinary team-taught course that examines essential questions through literature, visual and performing arts, philosophy and history. This innovative approach has continued to motivate successive teaching teams to modify and enhance a program that challenges students academically, utilizing the best possible resources and taking advantage of new technology. In 2008, the Face to Face (F2F) model began its transformation into the completely new i²Flex program. Today, the program consists of two year-long, completely integrated i²Flex ACS Athens Honors diploma courses and three i²Flex 20-week enrichment courses accessible to students anywhere.

We share a map of our journey here through the presentation of one in-depth case study as a reference for teachers, teachers in training and professionals who train teachers.

1.2. What is i²Flex?
The i²Flex methodology is a unique type of hybrid/blended approach. "Hybrid" or "Blended" are names commonly used to describe courses in which some traditional face-to-face "seat time" has been replaced by online learning activities. The purpose of a hybrid course is to take advantage of the best features of both face-to-face and online learning (About Hybrid).

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i^{2}Flex includes the following components:
i: independent student learning
i: inquiry-based student learning

Flex: Face-to-Face, Flexible, Guided student learning supported by technology
The i^{2}Flex methodology integrates internet-based delivery of content and instruction with faculty-guided, independent student learning, in combination with face-to-face classroom instruction aiming at developing higher order cognitive skills within a learning design framework that is flexible in terms of time, pace, place, and/or mode. (Avgerinou, Gialamas & Tsoukia 2014, p. 301)
The Honors i^{2}Flex Humanities course for the ACS Diploma has been re-designed to fully integrate the three aspects of the i^{2}Flex paradigm: independent learning that takes place online, teacher-guided inquiry and Face-to-Face (F2F) classroom interaction that enables students to use higher level cognition to construct their own meaning. The terms "web-based" and "digital learning" will be used interchangeably to describe the guided independent online sessions.
The course follows the i^{2}Flex model, and instruction is equally divided between F2F time in a traditional classroom setting and guided, independent digital learning activities. Emphasis is placed on developing students' critical thinking, reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. Collaborative learning is encouraged through a variety of projects, including scene study, write-around activities, and writing for publication. A unique feature of the course is the opportunity for extensive field study both within and outside of Greece. For example, as part of their study of how belief in a higher power has shaped civilisations, students visit the Byzantine and Christian Museum, the Museum of Islamic Art and the Byzantine city of Mistra to study the art, architecture and thought of two god-centered civilisations. This study is the basis for further field study in Florence and Rome, where students explore the transition from a completely god-centered civilisation to the rebirth of classical humanism in the Italian Renaissance.

2. In-depth Case Study
As educators in the 21st century, we are faced with many questions, numerous challenges and new opportunities to improve teaching and learning. Some of these concerns are encapsulated in questions such as, how can we prepare students for the future world of work? How do we engage students in the kind of critical thinking necessary to solve the many problems facing our society? How can teachers harness technology to meet students' academic needs?
In order to illustrate how we have transformed the Honors Humanities program using the i^{2}Flex paradigm we offer the following case study:

2.1. Honors i^{2}Flex Humanities for the ACS Diploma
2.1.1. Format and Presentation
An important first step in re-designing the Honors Humanities course for the ACS Diploma was changing the format of the course on the Moodle platform, using the Quality Matters Standards Rubric ® (2011 - 2013) as a guide. We now use a template that is set up more like websites familiar to students. The home page is organized with tabs, one for each unit, rather than a weekly format that requires students to scroll down endless weeks and sections. Each unit is divided further into two subpages per week: one for the F2F class and one for the guided independent web-based sessions.

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This format is more streamlined and efficient because it allows students to immediately access the work, resources or assignments for both aspects of the course.

2.1.2. Re-Designing Learning Activities

After redesigning the format of the Moodle page, we reviewed how we present and design the learning activities of the course. First, we considered what kind of activities and learning work best in the classroom, and which activities could work better in an independent, but guided, online session. For instance, as part of our study of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* students were assigned to write a character study of the Wife of Bath, one of Chaucer's more colorful characters. Before introducing the i^{2}Flex methodology, students began the writing process by brainstorming individually or in small groups during class time. We decided to try conducting brainstorming activities during the web-based sessions by using software such as VoiceThread® (2015). Students were assigned to groups and shared initial ideas and impressions on this character using our guiding questions to structure their brainstorming. Students then had to present their VoiceThread® (2015) comments, and develop their ideas in the F2F classroom setting. Through this activity, students would collaboratively create a rich resource of ideas for classroom discussion and for students to use to develop the first draft of the character study.

The class discussion that followed the VoiceThread activity was indeed more detailed, clear and thoughtful than discussions based on previous F2F forms of brainstorming. The fact that they had documented their collaborative thinking served as a tool for them to develop a thesis and first draft. Moreover, they had included excerpts with page numbers on VoiceThread to support their views resulting in essays that made more direct references to the text, a skill that we wanted to cultivate in our students. As a result, we are continuing to use this technique for a large variety of interactive, brainstorming activities.

Another way we used our web-based sessions is to provide students with essential background knowledge for introducing them to new topics. For instance, we began our study of The Plague of 1348 by asking students to view a video and take notes using guiding questions to direct their learning. They then studied several web-based primary sources and drew conclusions about what these sources could tell them about the historical event. After debriefing and checking for understanding in the subsequent F2F session, students critically evaluated the primary sources and determined their reliability and usefulness. Giving students the time and space to explore the information independently, guiding them through the selection of sources and checking for understanding, enabled students to exercise deeper critical thinking. We found that class discussions were more thoughtful and students were able to make connections between ideas. By using digital resources to provide background information and guide students to begin thinking about the topic, we noticed that they could move on during the F2F sessions to more demanding discussions and activities, such as panel presentations and informal debates.

In addition to our classroom discussions, we regularly incorporate Discussion Forums into the synchronous and asynchronous digital learning so that students can share ideas and research, and comment on each others' postings online. For instance, while studying Islamic art and architecture we created a digital research assignment in which students explored various types of the minor arts and selected one example to research. They posted an image of their chosen example with relevant, documented research information and personal reflection. We all found this a very interesting and informative way to expand our knowledge and understanding of Islamic art beyond the

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classroom focus on architecture. In addition, this type of activity shifts the focus from teacher-centered to student-centered learning, allowing students more choice in the content and direction of the discussion, as well as more time to engage with the material.

As teachers we also use the i^{2}Flex methodology to comment on student work, through software programs that encourage interactive writing, such as Digication® (2015). We used this program for the first time for an essay assignment on a student-selected Renaissance painting. Before writing the essay, students spent two months documenting their observations, reflections, interviews and formal research notes in seven journals. In past years, these journals were submitted to us as hard copies, on which we provided written feedback on each journal. Students were supposed to keep them in a folder as resources for writing the essay. With Digication® (2015) we provided a template which students used to create their own digital portfolio for all seven journals. We found this to be a much more efficient way for all of us, students and teachers, to have immediate access to the journals as the study progressed. We noticed that students were more engaged in following up on the digital comments that they received. Moreover, with the editing feature of Digication, students found it easier to expand on their ideas and research notes. As they began to write the first draft of their essay they had a rich portfolio of thoughtful observations, interview responses, research and reflections to help them find a focus and develop it. Based on our experience we plan to continue our use of Digication for the painting essay and will explore ways to integrate this program into other writing projects.

2.1.3. Assessment

In re-designing the learning activities in the Humanities course this year, we have found it necessary to make changes in the way we assess student learning. The major change in summative assessment is in the way we administer slide tests. As part of our study of art history, we use PowerPoint slide tests to assess student knowledge and understanding of specific art styles, artists and their works. In order to make the best use of F2F class time we now use the i^{2}Flex sessions instead. We create several versions of each slide test and students are assigned by groups to a specific test. To ensure academic integrity, we only open access to the test during a limited time period during the web-based sessions. One advantage of this method is that we conserve valuable F2F time which we can devote to in-depth classroom discussions. Also students have a more immediate, less stressful experience with the test since they view it on their individual devices and not on a large screen. Moreover, students take the test in several smaller groups rather than in the larger F2F class, which is particularly effective for students with learning differences such as ADHD.

Regarding formative assessment, we use the independent digital learning activities to gauge student knowledge of basic concepts before we develop deeper understanding of the topics in class discussions. Students then demonstrate their understanding through traditional summative assessments such as essays, tests and projects. To illustrate, after each i^{2}Flex session we give a completion grade for the assigned work. This is the first stage of the formative assessment. Other forms of this type of assessment are quality grades based on a rubric for Discussion Forum postings, Digication journals and comments posted on VoiceThread for brainstorming activities. Our experience this year indicates that this allows for a greater variety of assessment and provides us with a better understanding of the level of student progress.

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2.1.4. Student Feedback

Based on our observations, the students seemed to be adapting well to the new way the course was organized. They were focused and productive in the independent web-based sessions and actively participated in F2F group activities and class discussions, elaborating their thinking and generating new understanding.

We supplemented our class room observations by conducting a survey of our students, using Survey Monkey as our online research tool. Of the 20 students enrolled in the class, 18 students responded to the survey. The survey had 15 quantitative questions and five qualitative questions. The quantitative questions asked the students to respond to a statement by marking one of the following options: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree. The qualitative questions asked the students to write an answer to each question, using specific examples and clear explanations.

Of the 15 quantitative questions, five had to do with ease of navigation and effective design of the Moodle site. Following are the results for these questions:

- 65% agreed or strongly agreed that the Moodle Shell was easy to navigate
- 94% agreed or strongly agreed that the instructions were clear and comprehensive and that due dates and time frames were clear
- 82% agreed or strongly agreed that it was easy to distinguish between i^{2}Flex and Face-to-Face course material and assignments
- 70.6% agreed or strongly agreed that the template made it easy to find relevant resources.

Seven of the 15 questions asked students to rank how useful the i^{2}Flex approach was in achieving certain learning objectives. Following are the results for these questions:

- 76.6 % of students agreed or strongly agreed that the i^{2}Flex approached provided necessary context; that it provided the basis for deeper understanding of the subject; and that it helped generate ideas for written assignments.
- 82% agreed or strongly agreed that using web-based sessions for activities like slide tests allowed us to make better use of the F2F class time for class discussions and collaborative activities.
- 65% agreed or strongly agreed that teacher monitoring of independent digital learning helped them keep up with the assignments so that they are prepared for the F2F class.
- Over half the respondents (53%) agreed or strongly agreed that having been guided to develop context and background knowledge during web-based sessions prepared them for more successful collaboration in the F2F class.
- 48% agreed or strongly agreed that teacher online feedback was helpful

Three of the 15 questions asked about specific web-based platforms used in the course to share and document ideas. The most popular of the platforms mentioned in the survey was Digication, with 76.5 % of the respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that Digication folders are an efficient and effective method for sharing documents, such as pre-writing journals, receiving digital feedback from the teacher, and keeping this work all in one place for future reference. VoiceThread and Discussion Forum were also considered somewhat useful, with 35% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that both of these are productive platforms for brainstorming and sharing ideas.

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2.1.5. Discussion of Student Feedback

Overall results for effectiveness of navigation and design of the Moodle site were very positive. Although the fact that 70% of the students agreed that the template made it easy to find relevant resources may seem acceptable, this is the lowest ranking in the navigation and design section of the survey. Therefore, it is an area of concern, especially since our observations throughout the year also indicated that some students did have problems locating the relevant resources.

The results for questions having to do with the effectiveness of the i^2Flex approach in achieving specific learning objectives were also very positive. Statements receiving the highest percentages of agreement (76% - 82%) were those learning and teaching objectives we were most interested in achieving through the i^2Flex approach: building context and a basis for deeper understanding of the subject, helping generate ideas for writing assignments and using face-to-face time more efficiently. The area of some concern is that only 48% agreed or strongly agreed that teacher online feedback was helpful. It is true that although we did give feedback on Digication journals and Discussion forums, much of our feedback was not given digitally.

Responses to the survey suggest that students found Digication, a more useful web-based platform than the Discussion Forums and the VoiceThread, something that surprised us since both of the latter were used for more interactive assignments, and students seemed to react to them very positively during the course. Also, in their responses to the qualitative questions, several students mentioned these two platforms specifically as being activities they most enjoyed. Actually, we observed that group brainstorming activities on VoiceThread helped students contribute more specific supporting details and relevant observations in the class discussions, and some of this did find its way into the literary essays and commentaries they wrote.

Something interesting to consider, given the fact that our students are "digital natives," is that although their responses definitely indicated their appreciation for independent web-based learning as a way of building context, almost every one of the respondents stressed that F2F class discussion guided by the teacher was very important in helping them develop deeper understanding of the course content. Some students also remarked that they preferred F2F group activities to interactive web-based activities. Another aspect that needs more thought is how to better balance the work assigned during web-based sessions with the time available for each session. Several of the students remarked that they didn't always have enough time to finish the assignments carefully, while a few others thought that the assignments should be more intensive.

Finally, the survey was not only very helpful in that it gave us insights into how we might be able to improve the students' experience in the course, but it also was very gratifying in that it supported the idea that students seem to generally understand and agree with the approach we are taking. It was especially encouraging to read the enthusiastic responses to Question 5, such as the following: "I would recommend this course to everyone but more specifically to people who love history and art, because the way that it is being taught is amazing. "

3. Conclusion

There is no question in our minds about the overwhelming benefits of the i^2Flex paradigm for improving student learning and teaching practice. Firstly, i^2Flex allows teachers to use many different approaches to the content to meet the needs of diverse students, while also fostering critical thinking by building context online through which students develop their own understanding. We believe that the F2F, i^2Flex and field study components of our course equip students with skills for lifelong learning

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and prepare them for online university study by providing authentic experience with educational technology. Through this method, students become independent, responsible learners. The i²Flex paradigm meets students where they are and challenges them to find deeper meaning, while also providing a context for teachers and students to interact to solve problems. Finally, in a practical sense, scheduling students and teachers is much more flexible.

However, there are numerous challenges that accompany these benefits. The following challenges, which are within our locus of control, will continue to guide the re-design and revision of the i²Flex Humanities Program. Firstly, we need to consider the importance of finding and maintaining a balance between independent web-based learning and F2F activities and discussions. The vast resources made available in this new teaching paradigm make planning, selecting and adapting resource to learning objectives very time-consuming for the teaching team. There is also the need for very careful and consistent administration of the Moodle site. Finally, teachers need to be committed and diligent in executing this method in order to overcome the resistance to change among students, parents and teachers.

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