

# Servant Leadership: Empowering Learners through ‘Flipped’ Classrooms

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**Abstract** The paper explains the concept of servant leadership in relation to teaching and learning. A teacher who is a servant-leader enables each student to be a servant-leader. The teacher empowers students to help each student to grow and have the opportunity of being a leader. To empower learners their lecturers must themselves be empowered, so that they can empower their students. To empower ourselves and our students our learning/teaching strategy should include the establishment of a community of learners. A community of learners is established by the teacher moving from the position of lecturer to a position of a facilitator of collaborative learning, where the students learn from each other, as well as from their teacher, who is a co-participant in the learning process. When teachers give up their powerful position as teacher, students have the opportunity to take responsibility for their learning. An obstacle to empowering learners is the teacher-centred learning methods we adopt. The author argues that ‘flipped’ classrooms are the way forward to empowering learners and enabling them to become critical and independent learners, developing skills such as leadership and communication. ‘Flipped’ classrooms are classes where the lecture content delivery takes place before the ‘lecture’. The students can access the content of the lecture before the lecture. The ‘lecture’ slot will consist of checking understanding of key concepts and principles and a discussion of difficult concepts. The students who have grasped the difficult concepts could explain them to the students who have not done so in a collaborative community of learners. The ‘lecture’ time is used as an interactive team work session where students engage in active learning, applying the knowledge they have gained in their prior reading. The aim is to create a student-centred learning environment giving each student the opportunity of achieving their full potential. The research methodology is to conduct a literature review on servant leadership, empowering learners and ‘flipped’ classrooms to investigate whether the three concepts could be linked in the context of teaching/learning. The methodology is theoretical and exploratory.

**Keywords:** *servant leadership, empowering learners, ‘Flipped’ classrooms, student-centred learning, student success*

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## 1. Introduction

What is meant by the concept of servant leadership? The key principles of servant leadership are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of the people, building community. How can a teacher be a servant-leader? Such a teacher should enable each student to be a servant-leader. Each student should be empowered so that each student grows and has the opportunity of becoming a servant-leader.

Establishing a community of learners is essential to empowering teachers and their students to become servant-leaders. In traditional teaching environments, the teacher is the central figure, giving information to students who are passive listeners. A teacher should adopt the position of a facilitator of collaborative learning so that

students can learn from each other as well as the teacher who becomes a co-participant in the learning process. Students will have the opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning when the teacher gives up their dominant role. Even a large group could be divided into smaller groups with set tasks so that the group could assign various roles (including leadership roles) within the group.

Do our current teaching methods empower learners? An obstacle to empowering learners is the teacher-centred learning methods we adopt by delivering traditional lectures and tutor-led seminars/tutorials. To enable students to become critical and independent learners, developing skills such as leadership, communication and team work, teachers should ‘flip’ their classrooms.

In ‘flipped’ classrooms the delivery of content takes place before the ‘lecture’ slot. The students can access the lectures, read the content before the lecture and prepare answers to comprehension questions. The teacher can

make use of the 'lecture' slot to check understanding of key concepts and principles and enable students to discuss difficult concepts. Students learn better when they have to explain difficult concepts to other students. In the 'lecture' slot students could engage in collaborative team-work sessions so that they are actively involved in the learning process. They have the opportunity to apply the knowledge gained from their prior reading. Seminars will be student-led, with students discussing the questions in small teams and a leader of each group giving presentations summarising the discussion of the members.

A theoretical and exploratory research methodology will be adopted. A literature review on servant leadership, empowering learners and 'flipped' classrooms will be conducted to investigate whether the three concepts could be linked in the context of teaching/learning.

Servant leadership is a management philosophy. Is it possible to transpose the concept of servant leadership to a teaching philosophy? Empowering learners is based on the servant leader's commitment to the growth of students. Traditional lecture delivery where students are passive recipients of information does not enable them to grow. Such lectures will also not enable the development of a community of learners, an essential of servant leadership. Traditional lecture delivery encourages isolated learning as there is no communication between students during the lecture. In 'flipped' classrooms, it is possible to enable students to have group discussions about the lecture content. The collaborative learning environment will assist in students learning from each other as well as from their teacher. This process will also enable students to be independent critical learners.

## 2. Servant Leadership

Servant leadership has existed since Jesus of Nazareth said, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Matthew 20:28a). [1] Aristotle stated that the essence of life is to serve others and do well. [2] The founder of the modern movement of servant-leadership is Robert Greenleaf, [3] who asks "Do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?"

The teacher should be a servant of the students, placing them on the top of the pyramid [4] and serving their needs. [1] The classrooms of a teacher who is a servant leader should be one of caring, empathy and understanding. [5] A servant leader should develop people by providing new learning opportunities and working with students rather than simply telling them what to do. [6]

The desire of the servant leader is to enable students to achieve their full potential. [7]

### 2.1. Characteristics of a Servant-leader

The following are the characteristics of a teacher who is a servant-leader: [8]

- Listening – An essential element in effective communication is listening, not only to the words expressed by students, but also what is unsaid, non-verbal cues such as body language, tone of voice, facial expression, gestures.

- Empathy – A teacher must fully understand the feelings of students and support them. The teacher must learn to accept students for what they are. Students who feel that their teacher understands and supports them are more likely to trust the teacher.
- Healing – The teacher should recognise the difficulties of students and be supportive, so that students become happier in the supportive environment and are better able to cope with their difficulties.
- Awareness – The teacher should reflect and be self-aware and better understand their identity, values, goals, capabilities and personality.
- Persuasion – A teacher should not coerce students into accepting his/her idea, but should put forward rational arguments to convince students through consensus, so that in time students adopt the ideas as their own.
- Conceptualization – The teacher should think beyond immediate realities and have a big-picture perspective.
- Foresight – The teacher while considering the past and the present should be able to project into the future to see the outcome.
- Stewardship – A teacher should consider the rights of students and establish systems for the common good of all students, serving their needs.
- Commitment to the growth of others – A teacher should assist students in their professional, spiritual and emotional growth, which will in turn increase the motivation of students in the learning process. A sign of a teacher who is a good servant-leader is to ask whether the students are reaching their full potential and whether they are learning.
- Building Community – A teacher should build a community of learners where all members of the community and students and teachers are learning from each other.
- Calling – a servant-leader should sacrifice his/her own self-interest and give priority to the students s/he serves.

### 2.2. Student Feedback

In Hays [9] a student reports a teacher who incorporated servant leadership into classroom teaching as turning the class into a unique learning culture based on the highest level of trust, respect and honesty. Another student [9] comments that the servant leadership style of teaching stimulates interest, engages the students in hands-on learning, enables idea exchange via communication and results in a powerful learning experience. A third student reports [9] that the teacher who is a servant leader has had an enormous influence on the students and made them think of themselves, their work and their lives.

### 2.3. Faculty Feedback

'Faculty who develop interpersonal leadership behaviors such as active listening, encouragement, and affirmation, plus a willingness to actively engage the students toward collaborative learning (including professors learning from the students) will more likely meet the learning expectations of students in the 21<sup>st</sup>

century.’ [10] The teacher should adopt a ‘first among equals’ approach which will enable the teacher to establish collaborative learning where students learn not only from the teacher but also from each other [10].

The literature survey indicates that servant leadership can easily be transposed from a management philosophy into a teaching philosophy, with the teacher taking on the role of servant with the goal of developing students to grow to become leaders.

### 3. Empowering Learners

The concept of empowering learners is a development of the servant-leader concept of ‘commitment to the growth of others’. Empowerment is defined as the ‘opportunities an individual has for autonomy, choice, responsibility, and participation, in decision making in organizations [11].

A teacher should give opportunities for students to grow by adopting a student-centred focus to teaching. A teacher-centred approach where the teacher is the fountain of all knowledge encourages passivity, disengagement and de-motivation of the learner who feels that s/he is not part of the learning process. The goal of the teacher who is a servant-leader should be to step out of the instructional role and adopt a facilitator of learning role. S/he should organise learning so that students have learning opportunities which will enable them to discover knowledge through research, taking responsibility for their own learning and becoming independent and critical learners.

#### 3.1. Guidelines

Following are some of the guidelines that teachers should follow for producing engaged, highly-motivated and empowered learners: [12]

- Providing many learning opportunities for the students;
- Creating a learning environment which is challenging but not threatening;
- Encouraging students to adopt a life-long learning experience where they see learning as an enjoyable experience;
- Setting high (but attainable with guidance) expectations and standards for students;
- Pose questions rather than informing students of the answers;
- Bridge the gap between theory and practice and vice versa;
- Encourage critical thinking by avoiding spoon-feeding techniques;
- Enable students to learn the positive effects of learning by making mistakes;
- Make use of a variety of resources and techniques in the teaching practice;
- Incorporate diversity in all aspects of learning;
- Encourage research;
- Engage students in active learning.

#### 3.2. Community of Learners

Another way of empowering learners is through establishing a community of learners, to enable students

not only to learn from the tutor, but also for students to learn from each other. In a collaborative learning environment students not only engage in their own learning, but also assist their team members to learn. [13] Teaching fellow-students is a powerful learning tool. Students should be given opportunities to engage in research and do presentations of their findings [14].

#### 3.3. Deep Learning

Student should be encouraged to engage in deep and meaningful learning where they absorb new ideas and relate them to existing knowledge and ideas. [15] Students who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to engage in deep learning. [13] There is intrinsic motivation when students undertake a learning activity for enjoyment, to obtain a sense of accomplishment. [16] It is important for the teacher to show students that the teacher trusts them and believes in their ability to learn [17].

### 4. ‘Flipped’ Classrooms

What is a ‘flipped’ classroom? It means reversing the information delivery taking place in a traditional face-to-face lecture to a place outside the classroom, [18] where the student accesses the lecture before the weekly ‘lecture’ slot. The student can listen to, see and read an audio/video Powerpoint presentation and gain knowledge of the lecture material before the lecture at a time and location convenient to the student. The student can pause the lecture at any time to reflect on the understanding of the lecture content. If at the end of the lecture there are certain concepts that the student did not quite understand, the student can replay the whole or part of the lecture. [19] The student is in ‘control’ of the lecture. Quizzes can be fed in to the audio-video lecture to test students understanding of important concepts in the lecture [19].

The ‘flipped’ classroom is an alternative to the traditional teacher-centred lecture where the lecturer does most of the talking with the students being passive recipients, the only activity being listening and making notes. When the lecturer speaks at a fast pace (in order to cover the material for the lecture), the student might miss some of the points made in the lecture. It is not possible to listen to the lecture again in order to ‘catch up’ on what has been missed. There is not time in the lecture for the student to reflect, understand, critically analyse and apply the information being presented. Lancaster and Read [20] report on studies which indicate that students are no more attentive in lectures than following television. The authors report that in the schools of chemistry in the Universities of East Anglia and Southampton the majority of the first year lectures are recorded and posted on virtual learning environments and that while this is popular with students, it has not had a negative impact on ‘lecture’ attendance.

In a ‘flipped’ classroom, the ‘lecture’ slot becomes student-centred. The lecturer could use the class-room time in a variety of ways such as checking understanding of the lecture content for example by quizzes, group discussions of problem-solving exercises, presentation of research papers by students, based on reading lecture content, the textbook, cases, statutes, recommended journal articles and articles found by independent research. Students can ‘act’ as teacher, explaining concepts to their

peers. The classroom is converted to a collaborative learning community of students learning from each other as well as the lecturer.

As students have already engaged in group discussions learning basic concepts in the 'lecture' slot', the seminar slot could be used for engaging in problem solving based on difficult concepts, role playing, debates, moots giving the opportunity for students to develop higher level critical thinking skills.

#### 4.1. Advantages and Disadvantages

Research demonstrates that the 'flipped' classroom model has increased student engagement and enjoyment of the content of the course. Students' performance at assessments has improved [18].

There are disadvantages in the 'flipped' classroom. Lecturers have to spend more time in learning how to do audio-video lectures and once the training period is over, preparing the presentations in advance of the class. Some students who have been attending traditional lectures, prefer this method of teaching, as it does not require them to spend time before the classes reading the lecture content. [18] Some may prefer to play a passive role in lectures (apart from note taking) and attending tutor-led seminars. There will also be students who do not do the required preparation for class, when the teacher has to cope with students who are prepared and students who are not. A teacher who encounters this situation could however continue with the active learning activities, which will make the class difficult to follow those unprepared. After such an experience, those who are unprepared are more likely to do the necessary preparation.

An advantage of the 'flipped' classroom where the content learning takes place outside the classroom and the classroom becomes a student-led classroom is that the teacher becomes a servant-leader of the students acting as their guide, mentor and facilitator of learning instead of a 'sage on the stage'[21] as the fountain of wisdom. The 'flipped' classroom empowers student to become independent critical life-long learners in mastery of the learning content. It is a more effective learning environment as it enables active learning. Students are given the opportunity to become teachers, enhancing the learning environment [22].

Kathleen Fulton cited by Freeman Herral and Schiller [18] lists the following as advantages of 'flipped' classrooms: students work at their own pace (in contrast to the traditional lecture slot decided by the institution); in the 'lecture' slot teachers get a better insight of student difficulties with regard to content; teachers can more easily customize and update the curriculum and provide to students; there are increased levels of student achievement, interest and engagement reported by teachers who used the 'flipped' method; learning theory supports the new approach; technology is used flexibly and is appropriate to 21<sup>st</sup> century learning.

Freeman Herral and Schiller [18] also report other advantages mentioned by teachers who used the 'flipped' method such as more time to spend with students on research; the method promotes thinking inside and outside the classroom; students are more actively involved in the learning process; they really like it. Clark [23] reports that students had a positive view of the 'flipped' classroom, as

learning was more personalized, co-operative learning groups enabled the development of critical thinking, online resources provided students with more control over their learning. The opportunity to listen to pre-recorded lectures are useful for students for whom English is not their first language. [19] The 'flipped' model requires a role change for teachers from being at the front in the classroom to making collaborative and co-operative contributions to the learning process. [19] The students have to convert from being passive recipients of information to having responsibility for their own learning. [19] Pre-recorded lectures are also useful in revision before assessments.

In a study by Zappe, Leicht, Messner, Litzinger and Lee [18] it is reported that students were of the view that 'flipped' classrooms were more effective than traditional lecture delivery. In a study carried out in the University of Sussex [19] it was found that listening to pre-recorded lectures increased students' understanding and enabled them to perform better in assessments; students gave high ratings to the pre-recorded lectures and liked the option of the video and text form; lecturers required minimal support to prerecord their lectures. In an Australian study [24] it was found that the students in a 'flipped' classroom environment with active learning methods in the classroom were more satisfied with the course in comparison with the control group who followed the same course the previous year when traditional teaching methods were used.

An advantage of a 'flipped' classroom is that it enables students to become active learners, improving their assessment performance, student engagement, critical thinking skills, reduces misconceptions and develops a better attitude towards learning [25].

In traditional classrooms, teachers focus on the lower levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, [26] understanding and remembering. In 'flipped' classrooms the lower levels could be shifted to learning outside the classroom and the higher levels of applying, analysing and creating to inside the classroom [25].

Faculty can no longer rely on delivering one-way lectures but must empower students to make them autonomous learners gaining team-learning experiences. [10].

## 5. Discussion

The empirical research on 'flipped' classrooms cited in this study provides evidence that the student-centred activity in the classroom not only engages students but also they perform better in the assessments. Although there are disadvantages in 'flipped' classrooms in comparison with traditional classrooms, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

The author's experience of conducting traditional lectures indicates that such lectures encourage passivity and the dependency of students on their teachers. Such lectures do not enable students to grow to become servant leaders, as the lecture format does not empower students. Some students do not have the confidence to take the assessments and the majority of those who do take the assessments do not perform well.

An educational institution which has adopted the servant-leader teaching philosophy should not continue with traditional lectures and tutor-led seminars. They should encourage the teachers to prepare pre-recorded lectures, so that students can listen to the lectures outside the classroom at a time and pace suited to them. The lecture time could be then used to develop higher level thinking skills such as applying, analysing and creating. The seminars could then become student-led with the teacher acting as a facilitator of learning.

## 6. Conclusion

The paper has focussed on a link between servant-leadership, empowering students and 'flipped' classrooms. A key aspect of servant-leadership is the growth and development of students, so that they are in a position to take on positions of leadership. Empowerment and development of leadership skills cannot take place in a passive learning environment with the lecturer playing the dominant role. The teacher's role as expert is recognised by the lecturer spending time and care producing audio-video recordings of lectures, so that the student is given the opportunity to master content. However, the student is given the opportunity to progress to developing higher order thinking skills of critical analysis, synthesis and evaluation. The teacher gives priority to the needs of students and enables them to grow intellectually as well as developing skills such as teamwork, oral and written communication, research.

While there is theoretical research on servant leadership and empowering learners, empirical research should be carried out on the link between servant-leadership, empowering learners and 'flipped' classrooms.

Confucius:

'Tell me and I will forget  
Show me and I may remember  
Involve me and I will understand' [27].

## Statement of Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests.

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