

SEVEN STEPS TO *flatten* YOUR CLASSROOM

by Atomic Learning: Award-Winning technology training provider
Based on an Atomic Learning workshop developed by Vicki Davis





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PREFACE BY VICKI DAVIS

Flattening Your Classroom

In October 2006, my classroom practice fundamentally changed and improved. That was when my students and I began collaboration with Julie Lindsay's class in Dhaka, Bangladesh with the first Flat Classroom™ project. This project was to have students experience the trends of globalization and interconnectedness as outlined in Thomas Friedman's book, *The World is Flat*¹. We wanted the students to experience the trends and learn about the trends as part of our Information Technology Courses.

¹ (Friedman, T.H. (2005). *The world is flat*. New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux.)

What resulted was a cultural understanding that astounded us. The students, without prompting from us, began to discuss and change their views of stereotyping people because of skin color, race, or country of origin. After two weeks, I had several students come to me and say:

"Mrs. Vicki, the news media is wrong!"

"Why?" I said.

"Because not every Muslim hates Americans. We like them and they are our friends," said the students, as my eyes teared and hope began to grow in my heart that indeed, in addition to improving our education that we can also improve our world in the process.



PREFACE BY VICKI DAVIS (CONTINUED)

For truly, the academic strength of my technology program has grown by leaps and bounds, but the greatest achievement that has occurred now, a full 9 projects and multiple international awards and a face to face conference later, is actually the change in the world view of my students. Perhaps this means more if you understand that I live in rural Georgia and that as gas prices have loomed and students have limited travel, they actually travel virtually and expand their horizons far past where their automobiles can take them anyway.

The flattening of the classroom has truly emerged from the grassroots efforts of educators using networks like Twitter, blogging, wikis, podcasts, bookmarking services, as we connect with one another. What is emerging is a redefinition of educational excellence on a global basis and flattening is moving out of just information technology courses into mainstream math, science, history, and languages. Atomic Learning contacted me about sharing many of the principles that can take an educator into this amazing grassroots movement of teachers and it was a delight and privilege to create a workshop for them entitled 7 Steps to Flatten Your Classroom upon which this e-book is based.



PREFACE BY VICKI DAVIS (CONTINUED)

This was a follow up to a course explaining the basics of Web 2.0 which was also a delight to share. As you consider “flattening” your classroom understand that my budget is a meager one, often this has been done with less than standard computers, and we do not have a 1:1 laptop program. Flattening is something that can be done with free tools in safe, sound, pedagogically effective ways that meet your curriculum. This happens because the teacher is an integral part of customizing the project for their classroom as they work with other teacher(s) around the world.

Although I did not write this e-book, Julie Lindsay and I are actively authoring a book to be published within the next year about the amazing Flat Classroom™ projects and you may follow this on my blog, [Cool Cat Teacher](#) or our website www.flatclassroomproject.org. We have many projects now that operate on a year round basis and also mentor as much as we can.

Truly, this is what our world needs at this point... people who can work together, solve problems, behave in effective, meaningful ways online AND promote excellence in education through differentiation and sound pedagogy. Best wishes and good luck!

Vicki Davis, Teacher
Author, Cool Cat Teacher Blog



INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS A FLAT CLASSROOM™?

A Flat Classroom is middle school students blogging with an astronaut on the space station. It is children around the world partnering together to speak out against the genocide in Darfur. It is expanding the classroom to include global communities and forms of communication such as blogs and wikis.

The term Flat Classroom originated from Thomas Friedman's book *The World is Flat*², where he analyzed the 10 flatteners he says are leveling the global playing field. These trends started with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and continue with Web Browsers, open sourcing, outsourcing and off-shoring, as well as trends like instant messaging, voice over Internet services, and mobile computing from cell phones and laptops.

These trends are beginning to take shape, changing classrooms by interconnecting them like never before. Although computers facilitate this process, schools do not need to have a one-to-one laptop environment to do it. Flat Classrooms can be achieved anywhere and in just about any classroom environment.

We can now work with almost anyone, any place, and at any time – and our classrooms should reflect that. The Flat Classroom is about introducing our students to the world in safe, meaningful ways that will enrich and augment the things that are already working in our schools.

This e-book is based on an Atomic Learning workshop developed by Vicki Davis, who has been recognized for her innovative use of the Web in the classroom. Vicki is currently writing a book on the topic.

² (Friedman, T.H. (2005). *The world is flat*. New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux.)



STEP 1: CONNECT YOURSELF

The first step is to connect yourself. Remember, this is an ongoing process. First, you should get an RSS reader. Additionally, you should share and read bookmarks from others, with services such as del.icio.us and diigo. Also, you should listen to podcasts. There is nothing like listening to someone who is truly excited about what is happening in their classroom. And, you should also get involved in the incredible free online conferences that are available to you as well.



- 1 [Get an RSS reader](#)
- 2 [Share and read bookmarks](#)
- 3 [Listen to podcasts](#)
- 4 [Attend free online conferences](#)





STEP 2: CONNECT STUDENTS

As you work to connect your students, keep in mind the principles of an effective Web 2.0 classroom. The engaged teacher underlies all that you do. Every online space must be monitored effectively and frequently by the teacher, particularly when you are just beginning a project or students are unfamiliar with online spaces. Any incidents that happen must be handled quickly and definitively. Additionally, you'll see that Web safety and privacy, information literacy,

digital citizenship, Web teamwork, and accountability are all important and parts of this, as well as intentional Web activities. Online spaces should never be considered babysitting tools, but instead places that will take your academic excellence to higher levels.

- 1 [Web safety and privacy](#)
- 2 [Information literacy](#)
- 3 [Digital citizenship](#)
- 4 [Web teamwork](#)
- 5 [Accountability](#)



STEP 2: CONNECT STUDENTS (CONTINUED)

As we look at a Flat Classroom project, it is important to understand that a project such as Flat Classroom is one of the highest levels of student connection. Before you are ready to connect your students at that level, you should first start within your own classroom. It is definitely a progression. First, you must connect within your own classroom. Next, connect with other teachers within your school and in your district that teach the same subject. After you've worked through the knowledge and skill sets that it takes for students to connect in these ways, then you are ready to begin connecting with man-

aged global projects. Finally, you will work up to the level where your students are able to collaborate with students around the world, and manage themselves.



- 1 [Intra-connection \(within your own class\)](#)
- 2 [Inter-connection \(with school/district\)](#)
- 3 [Managed global connection](#)
- 4 [Student to student \(with teacher management\)](#)
- 5 [Student to student \(with student management\)](#)



STEP 2: CONNECT STUDENTS (CONTINUED)

It is important to stress that classrooms that try to skip through the first phases and jump directly to projects such as the Flat Classroom invariably have some students who are not aware of the proper ways of acting in online educational networks. They see the educational network and think its Facebook – it is not Facebook. There are ways the students need to behave as professional students, and they are just not ready for that. It is much better to train students in private spaces and internally before they earn the right and ability to connect in global collaborative projects.



THE EDUCATIONAL NETWORK IS **NOT** FACEBOOK.

- 1 [Monitor and setup effective private spaces](#)
- 2 [Train students in private spaces internally](#)
- 3 [Students earn the right to connect globally](#)

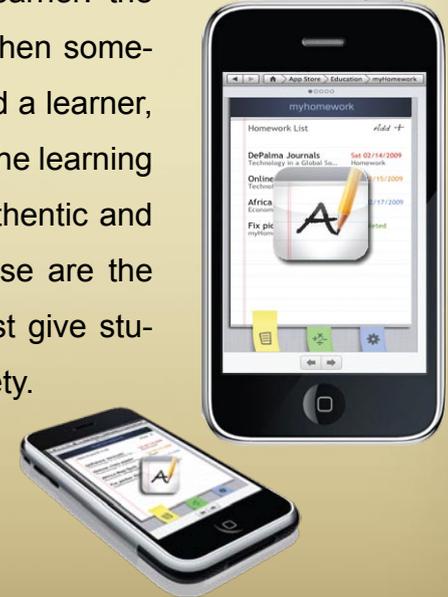


STEP 3: CREATE PROLEARNERS

Now that we've covered the mechanics of how you connect students, let's talk about what we are trying to help students become. Alvin Toffler coined the term prosumer³. A prosumer combines the word producer plus consumer. The prosumer is someone that not only uses a product like the iPhone, but also may download special games or additions to their iPhone. So they are literally producing and creating with the products that they are using. This is called the prosumer.

³ (Toffler, A. (1980). The third wave. New York: Morrow.)

Likewise, we are creating prolearners. Our students are producers, they are creating information like blog posts and wikis. As they produce and as they learn, they become a prolearner: the producing learner. When someone is a producer and a learner, they become part of the learning process in a very authentic and meaningful way. These are the opportunities we must give students in today's society.





STEP 4: COMMUNICATE

Step four of flattening your classroom is to communicate. It is very important to have an understanding up-front of the strengths and weaknesses of global collaborative projects so that your entire school structure may understand and work with the process. The challenge of a global project is that it does take time in planning—this becomes very clear when you actually participate in a project.



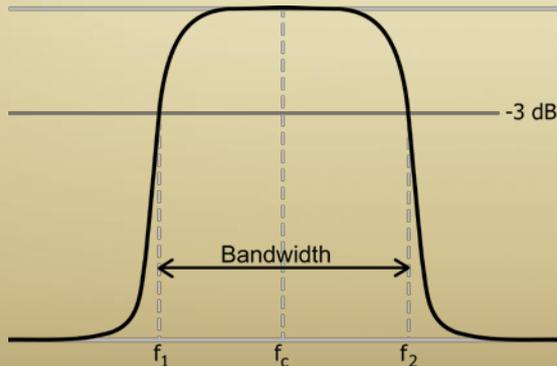
A few challenges you may encounter in a global project:

- 1** Vacations are often different in different parts of the world. The Southern Hemisphere has opposite seasons of the Northern Hemisphere.
- 2** Workdays also vary. Many countries in Asia actually go to school Sunday through Thursday whereas in North America, for example, students go to school Monday through Friday.
- 3** Time Zone differences



STEP 4: COMMUNICATE (CONTINUED)

4 Bandwidth considerations are necessary if you're going to work with some places in Africa, South America, and even rural America. You have to consider what the bandwidth capabilities of the schools you are going to be working with are.



Some benefits of participating in a global project:

- 1 Projects can meet the ISTE NET Standards for Students if structured appropriately
- 2 Your students will have a global audience
- 3 Increased cultural understanding that can't be learned in a book
- 4 Digital citizenship skills



STEP 5: CHARACTER

In step five, we talk about character. Recently, there has been a movement to have character education in schools, and really it is time for character education to go online.

There are four character traits that are especially important in online environments in addition to the traditional character traits that are a part of the character education program.

1 Discernment

dis·cern·ment: \di-'sərn-mənt, -'zərn-\ ⁴

1: the quality of being able to grasp and comprehend what is obscure

Discernment is important because students need to understand and determine when a cultural miscommunication may be happening. For example, a student from Georgia, USA was communicating with an expert from England. In southern Georgia, USA, “yes ma’am” and “yes sir” is said as a way to respect elders. However, in this person’s culture in England, “yes sir” and “yes ma’am” is often used as a sarcastic term by teenagers.

So the student and the expert had to have the cultural sensitivity to realize that there was some miscommunication. As soon as it was clarified that in the southern USA it was polite and in the United Kingdom it was considered disrespectful, they were both able to come to a mutual understanding about how they



STEP 5: CHARACTER (CONTINUED)

would interact in this situation. Discernment is essential; otherwise, you will have many cultural misunderstandings.

2 Ethics

eth·ic: \ 'e-thik\ ⁴

1: a set of moral principles: a theory or system of moral values

Ethics are also very important. Just because something can be done doesn't mean it should be done. Having empathy, seeing things from the other person's point of view, is another key character trait.

⁴ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. 2009.
<http://www.merriam-webster.com> (23 February 2009).

3 Empathy

em·pa·thy: \ 'em-pə-thē\ ⁴

1: the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner; also: the capacity for this

The last trait is patience. This is important because of the different time zones, other students going on break, the different workweeks students need to be patient and understand that they may need to work without hearing from their partner for a few days.

4 Patience

pa·tience: \ 'pā-shən(t)\ ⁴

1: the capacity, habit, or fact of being patient



STEP 6: CITIZENSHIP AND SAFETY

Step six of flattening your classroom is considering citizenship and safety. Before you begin working on such projects, you must have several agreements in place within your school and the participants on the project concerning privacy, photography, and video; how you will handle problems, a common knowledge base from respected experts; and you must have an ongoing way to stay abreast of information as it becomes available just so you can answer parent questions. Understanding these things up-front will help you as you work with your project.

And remember, this e-book is not intended to be a definitive guide on how to keep your students safe. You should consult an expert in Internet safety as you form your plan.

- 1 Pre-project agreements
- 2 Privacy, photography, and video
- 3 Process to handle problems
- 4 Common knowledge base from respected experts
- 5 Ongoing way to stay abreast of information



STEP 7: CHOICE AND FOCUS (CONTINUED)

Why are choice and focus issues? Alvin Toffler talked about overchoices. Sometimes, you can have so many choices you just stay with the status quo. We need to teach students to filter their world by creating a PLN or a personal learning network, customized to their projects at hand. It may be a term paper; it may be an online project like Flat Classroom; or a history project researching a particular subject. But whenever students are faced with a learning task, you should teach them how to create a PLN using an RSS reader. You as the

educator should create an environment of focus so although the students may be completing different tasks, they know what the final outcome should be.





REVIEW

All of this information must seem overwhelming, so let's take a quick review. As we've discussed the steps to flatten your classroom, we gave an introduction and discussed what flattening a classroom looks like. Why do we want to flatten our classroom? Then we discussed the importance of connecting yourself. After you're connected, then you can begin to connect your students. We talked about the five phases of student connection, starting within your own classroom and eventually moving out to where you are collaborating with the world. In step three,

we talked about creating ProLearners and gave several suggestions for creation—surely there are plenty more on the list.

- 1 Connect Yourself
- 2 Connect Students
- 3 Create Prolearners
- 4 Communicate
- 5 Character
- 6 Citizenship and Safety
- 7 Choice and Focus



REVIEW (CONTINUED)

In step four, we talked about communication, the misconceptions and also the strengths of the project, and how these sort of projects change things within the schools so that we can have realistic expectations. In step five, we talked about character and how character education must move online and some of the character traits that we have to look at as we consider these projects. In step six, we talked about citizenship and safety and getting on the same page and staying abreast on all of the information that comes out about online safety. And

finally, we've wrapped up seven, talking about helping students make wise choices and focus on the tasks at hand when there are so many things to decide and choose from.

Good luck as you flatten your classroom. Julie Lindsay and Vicki Davis are actively authoring a book to be published within the next year about the amazing [Flat Classroom™](#) projects .

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[Learn More!](#)