I first heard the term “flipped classroom” a couple of years ago. Every year in February Burnaby hosts a district professional development day where teachers are asked to volunteer to present what they have been doing in their classrooms. As I read through the blurbs of the presentations, “Flipped Classroom” stood out- so I did what everyone does when they get curious: I googled it, read the Wikipedia article and watched a couple of YouTube videos. In about 30 minutes I had decided that not only was I was going to the presentation, I was going to be radically transforming the way I taught. Time to throw out the chalk!

However, it didn’t go as I expected.

There was nothing wrong with the presentation, but I became very aware of how much additional work the flipped classroom entailed. As the teachers who had done the “flipping” at Burnaby Central explained the long hours they worked making videos, my enthusiasm began to wane. It’s not that I am lazy- though I can be. I just began to appreciate that the flipping was good for high-school because they covered the same content, hour after hour- day after day - year after year- especially in the maths and sciences (which these teachers taught). Once the videos were made, which was a very time consuming process, they might not ever need to be updated as the process for solving quadratic equations will never change. Furthermore, from the sounds of it- they would be teaching the same courses for many years to come.

I, on the other hand, partially through circumstance and partially through design have never taught the same grade two years in a row. Just in the last 6 years I have run the gamut from English 12 to ESL/Resource to Grade 3/4. The idea of working a full day at school then going home to make videos all evening for Math, Science, Socials and Language Arts- then doing it all over again next year and the year after that, was about as appealing as a root canal. No thank-you- not going to do it. Give me back my chalk.

However this week, I find myself revisiting that decision. When I need a break from writing report cards, I have been going to Khan Academy website and learning about Buddhism. I feel less attached already!

I was very impressed with Khan and his vision for the future of education. I think the benefits are obvious. I have been frustrated by the “teaching to the mean” since I was a child. When I became a teacher I vowed that I would be different. I was going to make sure that the bright kids were challenged and that the challenged kids got the extra attention they needed.

However, again, it didn’t go as I expected.

As every teacher in the world has discovered once they enter into the profession, there is a finite amount of hours in a day and an infinite amount of work that you could do. An essential skill that teachers have to develop is how to prioritize. What do we do? We figure out how to do the greatest good for the greatest number of students- then we focus on the neediest students and finally we address the advanced learners. Seldom, if ever, are we successful at reaching everybody.

Khan’s flipped classroom could change that. Students can work through the videos and exercises at their own pace either at home or for part of their school day. Then the remaining “class time” could be spent working on projects and challenges where the students must apply what they have learned.

Best of all, the bulk of the teacher’s drudge work- marking math and grammar exercises- will now be taken care of by Khan’s program. Teachers can easily identify problem areas and address them with short tutorials.

Individualized, student centered learning is at last a real, viable possibility- and that should be great news for everybody. When teachers realize how much better, easier and more enjoyable their teaching can be they are going to be flipping their classrooms and pushing their administrators to create blended programs across the province.

However-if history has taught me anything it’s that things do not often go as I expect.

Teachers, not just teachers, people are very resistant to change. The most obvious example to me at this moment is the “qwerty” keyboard that I am writing this on. A more efficient and logically designed keyboard was introduced by Dvorak almost a hundred years ago. It still hasn’t caught on. Convincing people to try something radically different is always a tough sell. On top of that, teachers tend to have blinders on when it comes to the educational system.

After all, getting into teacher’s college or a PDP program, as they are known here in BC, requires some pretty good grades. This means that the people we put in charge of maintaining our educational system tend to be the ones who did exceedingly well within the educational system. They paid attention and handed their assignments in on time. Their work was neat and organized with the date in the top right corner and their names in the top left. They had impeccable grammar, everything was spelled correctly and all their sources were referenced as per the APA style guide. How do you convince these people that the skills that made them successful, the skills which gave them their self-esteem and made them feel “special” aren’t really important anymore?

The problem with Khan’s idea of “liberating” teachers from the drudgery of lecture to pursue creative problem solving activities is that, and I mean this with the upmost respect, many teachers are far more comfortable with the bureaucratic transmission of knowledge than they are creating games, activities and challenges for students to apply their knowledge. It’s going to be hard to convince a profession largely made up of “Type-A” personalities that the most important thing for them and their students going forward is to become better at daydreaming, but I think that is the challenge for educational leadership going forward.