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Using a Student Centred Learning Approach in a Large Class Context



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Teaching large classes has become a reality for most courses in Australian universities. While many academics recognise the benefits to students and themselves of using alternative teaching methodologies, many resort to the traditional formal lecture approach when it comes to teaching large classes. This paper examines the tension between providing a meaningful learning experience for university students and the constraints of increased class sizes. Presented as a case study, it challenges the assumptions of staff and students in terms of what constitutes an appropriate learning environment and identifies strategies that could usefully be transferred from a small class to a large class context. The unit presented as the case study was co-ordinated by the first author with the support and guidance of the second author. Sections of the paper are written in the first person and it is the voice of the first author as she discusses her personal experience of, and response to, the challenge of using small class strategies within the context of a large class.

The context of higher education in Australia has seen an increase in enrolments across courses and institutions as we move from elite to a mass education system (Nelson Report, 2002). This increase in enrolments though has not seen a corresponding improvement in staff numbers, which has had the effect of higher staff student ratios. Higher enrolments have also resulted in greater heterogeneity within the student population requiring an understanding of the diversity among students in terms of background and learning styles (Ward & Jenkins, 1992). This paper examines the tension between providing a meaningful learning experience for university students within the constraints of large class sizes. The context is a first year psychology unit delivered for Bachelor of Social Science students by the School of Psychology (SoP) at a Western Australian University. Presented as a case study, it challenges the traditional idea of staff and students in terms of what constitutes an appropriate learning environment and identifies strategies that could usefully be transferred from a small to a large class context.

The realities of teaching large classes (those in excess of 50 students) means that educators often resort to the traditional ‘sage-on-stage’ delivery format with the lecturer standing behind a lectern delivering the material with students passively

taking notes. This is particularly true in undergraduate psychology classes with the discipline being highly conservative in nature and relying on the traditional approach to education. Student feedback over the past forty years suggests that this style of learning is not effective and leads students to 'tune out' (Bloom, 1953; Biggs, 1999; Papo, 1999; Ward & Jenkins, 1992). Staff too often find this a less than satisfying way of delivering material. However, the financial imperatives currently facing Australian universities make the large class structure a reality.

Critical pedagogy provides a framework for educators to address both the needs of students and the limitations of the large class structure by providing strategies to engage students and encourage them to become active participants in the learning process. These include the use of visual aids and multimedia, group work, student centred discussion, handouts and role-plays. This approach has found empirical support from a number of studies (Slavin, 1990; Smith, & Boyer, 1996; Tinto 1995; Vachris, 1999; Wink, 1997). It also has the additional benefit of encouraging students to critically engage in the material being delivered in that they actively question, debate and challenge the research, theory and assumptions of their chosen profession. This degree of debate and critique allows students (and academics) to voice concerns and provide a different perspective on long held 'truths' which in turn has the power to effect change. Critical theory in psychology and education holds that the values of society are influenced and shaped in large part by the values and 'truths' taught in educational institutions (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002).

The strategies employed by critical pedagogy are particularly useful in small class settings (less than 30 students) as critical pedagogy as a learning tool recognises and values the various experiences and expertise students bring to the learning environment and provides a setting for this to be utilised to enhance the learning process (Varan, 2002). Student centred discussion is one such strategy that encourages students to become active participants in the learning process by sharing ideas and experiences. The benefits and management of such a strategy are easily identified in the context of a small class but would be far more difficult to facilitate in a large lecture theatre with hundreds of undergraduate students all with differing needs, expectations, and learning styles.

Philosophy

My previous teaching experience consisted of small classes of up to 30 students and I had adopted a critical pedagogy approach to teaching long before I discovered the term or the literature explaining and supporting such an approach. My ideas of effective learning were based in large part on my own undergraduate experience of feeling that there needed to be something more than simply passively taking notes in a lecture, and a few fleeting experiences of debate and discussion with a handful of exciting, supportive lecturers and tutors. However, it was when I entered the postgraduate programme in psychology that I realised what learning could be like. We had small classes of approximately 10 students and our lecturers wanted to hear our views and ideas. Suddenly I felt valued as an integral part of the learning process and as a result learnt more about my discipline and what education could be than at any time in the past. This experience influenced my own approach to teaching and learning and I adopted a student centred discussion format whenever I could.

Case Study

In the second semester of 2002 an opportunity arose for me to implement the philosophy of critical education with a large class of approximately 80 students studying lifespan development. Because I had previously only taught small classes I felt a little daunted and anxious at the prospect of managing a large group and also of teaching in a formal tiered lecture theatre. This was compounded by my lack of experience in teaching first year students. The decision to use a student centred discussion approach in this class was made partly to reduce anxiety in that I was familiar with the techniques and felt that students would benefit from the experience.

Essentially the intention was to use a combination of traditional structured lecturing, activities, group work and discussion as well as the use of multimedia. Tutorials were then organised to follow the lecture and provide further group and individual activities to consolidate the concepts discussed in the lecture.

The entire first lecture was devoted to the proposed teaching methods and rationale, and the benefits students could derive from this. It also served to establish rapport with the group, as well as providing an opportunity to discuss and negotiate ground rules. To initiate conversation students were asked to spend a few minutes thinking about their expectations of the unit, the role and responsibilities of the lecturer and themselves in the learning process.

The majority of the students saw the role of the lecturer as that of a 'teacher', to 'teach' them and impart knowledge to them. Their own role was defined as receiving information, listening attentively, and producing assignments. Discussions followed which explained the role of an educator in a university setting. The notion that the lecturer was a facilitator to guide and support their learning was presented and debated and this generated a great deal of discussion about what constituted learning.

Students were made aware of the goals of the unit in terms of the proposed content and the issue of confidentiality. Some students expressed surprise at this but it was explained that human development contained many topics that could be distressing for a number of reasons. For example students might have experienced involuntary infertility or the distress of miscarriage, therefore the mechanics of conception and birth could be highly painful and difficult. Likewise issues such as parenting, adolescence, and death could raise problems for students. Because of the emphasis on discussion and debate of issues in class there was the potential that students might make personal disclosures and the need for discretion was highlighted should this occur.

Students expressed some surprise that so much time was devoted to discussion rather than the 'teaching' of course content and they were worried that little actual learning would occur. To alleviate this anxiety, it was decided that weekly handouts based on the lecture material would be produced that synthesised the information and this was readily accepted as a useful tool. It was apparent during the discussion that the proposed form of learning was vastly different to anything these students had experienced previously. For some students this was their initial university experience

and they had preconceived ideas about what constituted a lecture. In order to ensure their experience was positive, the provision of detailed weekly summaries of the content material would alleviate some of the apprehension students were experiencing.

In the second and third weeks the lecture content was interspersed with questions to the class as an impetus for discussion. Initially few students were confident at speaking in front of the whole class and these tended to be the ones who responded in the early days. Videos and cartoons were also used to illustrate concepts. The content of the early lectures included conception, birth, and infancy, topics that almost everyone had some detailed knowledge of if not personal experience and this encouraged student participation in the class discussions.

A change of pace and structure was needed by week four and instead of talking to the class and posing questions they were asked to form into 6 groups. Each group was assigned one of the topic areas so that two groups examined each of the areas of physical, cognitive, and psychosocial development in early childhood. Students were then asked to discuss this topic area and identify the key issues by consulting whatever resources were available on campus. This meant that students were able to move outside of the confines of the lecture theatre to access the library for books or to use the computer databases.

While the groups were working on this task I moved from group to group to discuss the task in detail. As they had all taken the opportunity to work outside in the sun, or had gone to the library for resources this took a while to complete! This proved useful as it provided the opportunity to talk to students and hear how they felt about the task.

After a short break the groups reformed by combining the common topic groups. That is the two groups who had looked at cognitive development would team up as would those who looked at physical or psychosocial development which resulted in the formation of three larger groups. Students were asked to combine their information, identify the five or six key issues and to prepare a brief presentation to the class. Each group could negotiate among the members how to tackle the task, each person could report to the class or they could nominate one or two speakers. Again this generated much discussion and tension with the class and some students expressed their dissatisfaction with the process suggesting that this was an inappropriate activity for a lecture.

Following the presentations, a discussion with the students identified their concerns, the reasons for their dissatisfaction, and recognised their feelings. However, it was emphasised that the presentations had been most professional and students negotiated the task rather than simply refusing to engage in the process. At the end of the class a number of students, one of whom had been particularly vocal in her opposition to the task, expressed their enjoyment of the experience and felt they had learnt more than had they received the same information via the traditional lecture format.

This experience proved a personal turning point in the semester. After feeling apprehensive about utilising group activity with a large class and my response should they refuse, the temptation to resort to the familiar method of lecturing was very strong. I felt nervous, inexperienced and unsure - but it had worked! The students

were willing to engage in the process in spite of their initial reservations and by discussing their concerns any resentment was dealt with and dispelled.

In comparison the remainder of the semester was relatively easy. A range of activities and techniques were utilised including inviting guest speakers to address particular topics on the basis of their knowledge and expertise. In the early weeks the discussion in the class was between the lecturer and the students who felt able to respond or challenge. Gradually however a shift occurred and the conversations were taking place between students with me acting as a facilitator rather than initiator of discussion and debate.

The highlight of this process was to occur a few weeks later when almost the entire class was involved in a debate over parenting issues. A reticent young woman, joined the conversation by explaining what it was like for a 17 year old to be viewed as an adult in one part of her life (at work and university) but as a child in another (at home). The parents in the room saw the situation through the eyes of their children and the other young people were empowered to join a debate that they had perhaps felt was excluding them because they were not actually parents. The result of this incident was that students were able to participate in a valuable learning experience as few would leave the theatre without having learnt what it was like to view something from another perspective.

At the end of semester students were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire which reviewed the unit. It was explained that the feedback would be used to improve the mechanics of the unit and to develop the student centred discussion format. Every student in the group completed the questionnaire, with many of them providing detailed information about their experience of the content and the process of the unit. The majority of the students expressed satisfaction with the teaching approach adopted for the class although there were a few for whom this style did not work. Whether this is a reflection of deficits in the approach or the fact that earlier learning environments train students to expect a more didactic teaching and learning experience is a topic for further research.

Reflections

One of the biggest hurdles experienced was the degree of resistance from the students in the early weeks. They were unsettled by the idea of participating in an unfamiliar format even when the benefits had been explained. In future, it would be useful to present the idea to them by developing a firmer theoretical foundation. Students could be provided with key articles to read to develop their understanding of the philosophy that underpins this mode of teaching. It might prove beneficial to introduce the ideas of authors such as Giroux and Apple (e.g. Apple, 2000; Giroux, 2001) on the topic of critical pedagogy and present the notion of the student as a partner in the learning process. Although these ideas and values influence much research and practice this was not explicitly introduced to students. Had this been done it is possible they would have been more able to understand the difference between what was being proposed and the more traditional styles of teaching.

This positive experience of adopting a student centred discussion approach has resulted in a renewed enthusiasm for teaching large classes. While recognising the

difficulties inherent in adopting this type of approach there are strategies and techniques that can prove effective. Fundamentally the worst thing we as educators can do is assume that because a task presents difficulties or challenges that these cannot be overcome. We need to learn how to relish and revel in these challenges and develop creative ways of overcoming them.

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