Reflections on large class teaching in the social sciences -
Rabiul Islam

Reflections on Large Class Teaching — Charles Sturt University
By Rabiul Islam

As far as large class teaching is concerned, the large class has several disadvantages over a small class. The opportunity for contact between students and lecturers is significantly reduced which results in less individual attention for the student. A more restricted range of teaching and learning activities is available and it is much harder to effectively manage group work.

To stimulate and sustain interest in learning materials is the first priority to address with large class teaching. To build rapport with the students and recognise the individuality of each student is another major factor. It is also very important to appear approachable. One particular strategy I have found very helpful to increase students' accessibility to me as a lecturer is to arrive at class early to listen to their concerns and to actively involve students during at least a small part of every class. It is also important to understand the students' lifestyles and adopt any strategies, which may accommodate them. Completing a two-minute work sheet in the class may be a successful strategy, for example, but expecting students to complete the same work sheet during their free time in the dormitory may be a different matter!

It is crucial to realise that students are very active observers who frequently scrutinise how much effort the lecturer puts into the teaching process. If they find the lecturer is very well organised and puts real effort into making the large class teaching interesting, they will also take an active part in the whole process.

I take the matter of eliciting student feedback as a prime challenge. I believe that the lecturer must appear to the students that he/she is prepared to listen to them, to act upon their concerns and to respect their views. Even when a concern is impractical, the lecturer should respond in a way that indicates the concern has been taken seriously, even if it is currently unable to be accommodated. Recently when I introduced power-point presentations in a first-year class, students raised concern about physical environment (relatively dark room), restricted movements by lecturer and also the relatively more one-way structure. Following an open discussion with students I eventually decided not to use power point in this class. I encourage my students to indicate when the pace of the class is too fast or too slow and I adjust my lecture accordingly. I have also shifted an exam date for the students as the original date coincided with their Cindy-Ball. As one of my students put it last year, *The respect that he gives to the student, in return it motivates us to do well.*

From the student's perspective the main problem with large classes is the feeling of anonymity which makes it harder for them to be motivated to keep up. Many feel too intimidated to ask questions or to participate in class discussion. Presenting subjects in a way that is of some interest to students is a real bonus. Using examples that involve current issues they can relate to is a good idea. This year I integrated the Big Brother characters into the class discussion. A discussion of why Anita couldn't...
cope with the group but Sara-Marie could easily function as a very effective and popular behavioural analysis in the first year Psychology class.

Seventeen years of tertiary level teaching experience has made me aware that different students have different learning styles in large classes. Some students prefer to learn by listening, others like visual representations, and still others learn by doing. I try to incorporate a variety of presentations into my lecture to increase the chance that a different activity will clarify a concept for students who may not be as strong in one particular style. Often students are apprehensive about their assignments and simply reluctant to raise questions in the large class lecture. I have found discussing a sample of student’s assignments in the large class very fruitful particularly in reassuring the students that everybody in the class is in the same position.

Personalizing the large class is undoubtedly a real challenge. My strategy so far has been to make the students feel like individual people rather than mere faces in the crowd. I try, for example, to remember at least 30 names in a large class of 100. As difficult as this is, it goes a long way toward personalizing the class. I also use a number of active learning strategies which can easily be adapted - asking students to share personal experiences relating to the course content; using two-minute peer feedback in the class; asking the students to review each other’s notes and the use of two minute two people discussion opportunities.

Sometimes I use a tutoring procedure in the large class. After lecturing for half the time, I ask the students to write down the most important themes I have mentioned and come up with a difference of opinion. I then write one answer from each raw note on an overhead and ask the students to compare their answers with these. This process makes for good two-way communication in the class and most students perceive themselves as actively participating within the class setup. In many ways I try to give my students the message that good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated.

Another strategy I use to personalise the environment is to present myself to students as a person rather than just a lecturer and definitely not as an enormous source of knowledge. I often discuss with the students my own difficulties in encountering course work at Bristol University with a poor English background. This gives them a sense that I do have my feet on the ground and am ready to understand the problems of others. I always try to remember that unless students see me as enthusiastic in teaching they themselves will never try to be active participants within the large class.

When it comes to utilising information and communication technologies, I strongly recognise the need for an exchange of views between on campus and distance students. The interaction between the remote large class and face-to-face large class is only possible using computer-mediated teaching and learning strategies. All my on-campus lecture notes are available via the forum. I provide students with study modules, study guides and selective web-links online so that their understanding is reinforced by using different modes of information. I also arrange to keep study resources in the library electronic reserve, for example, my first year subject Foundations of Psychology has over seventy full text journal articles in the e-reserve which are accessible to students from anywhere in the world.
I provide a Web-Note page for students, which includes hints for improving progress in the class and sources for obtaining help from different sectors within the University. This page also contains lists of scores and grades for each student, which are presented in a manner that maintains anonymity, and group performance information for comparison purposes. The page also has a section that includes all questions and concerns raised by on and off campus student on a weekly basis. Students also receive a weekly edition of web-modules which contains readings and concept check facilities, and take psychology beyond the text sections. In addition, the web note often publishes a weekly 500-word journal, which mainly highlights the explanations, techniques, and feedback helped to shape the course better. Students perceive this as the lecturer having a genuine concern for their improvement and it also helps to boost student confidence of their own involvement.

These web initiatives have often produced very positive outcomes. They have significantly enhanced on and off-campus student interaction, ascended quality of teaching, contributed to increased student satisfaction and have dramatically improved the quality of assessment work. In a recent survey ninety-three percent of students expressed the view that they would like to see these online support activities continued. The student’s comments also indicated that these initiatives contributed to them feeling adequately supported by the University, offering them a sense of direction, helping to create a classroom type atmosphere and contributing a lessened sense of isolation.

Perhaps, then, the last word should come from one of my students who wrote in the survey: *The constant participation of the lecturer created a classroom type atmosphere. He turned the forum from its social focus into it becoming a hugely effective educational tool. As a remote student it is easy to feel like a faceless number — the web activities for this subject went a long way to eliminating that feeling, helping me to feel like a participant student.*

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