

Pedagogy for Higher Education Large Classes (PHELC21)

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That was fun: The pleasure and excitement of large class teaching

James Arvanitakis

Australian American Fulbright Commission. Adjunct Professor, Institute for Culture and Society (Western Sydney University)

Abstract

In this short paper, based on a keynote address delivered at the PHELC21 symposium, I argue that while the technology pivot that forced us to turn to online instructions has many valuable dimensions, these should not replace face to face educational settings including large classroom lecture delivery. Rather, large classroom settings are a valuable educational medium we should embrace and continue to employ.

Keywords: *Large class; fun; technology, face to face; fun.*

1. Introduction

In a recent presentation, Australia's Education Minister, Alan Tudge (2021), delivered at the Universities Australia conference, the Minister listed a positive the 'on campus' experience as one of the government's key priority areas as the sector begins to recover from the global pandemic. While the relationship between Australia's university sector and conservative governments has frequently been tense, Minister Tudge's priorities are worth noting because they capture something that we as educators have always known: a university education is not simply about the discipline knowledge that we impart, but the many social experiences that accompany time on campus.

It is difficult to outline all of the benefits of a positive on campus experience, but these include the skills that develop through discussion, debate and collaboration, the networks built that are likely to prove invaluable into the future and the socialisation of the many ideals of higher education: the pursuit of knowledge and scholarship as well as understanding the obligations of that we as citizens owe to both our community as well as broader society. While these somewhat lofty ideals are not always met, we as educators continue to strive to make the higher education experience greater than the sum of its parts. This is because if education was simply the distribution of knowledge, we could all save time by writing textbooks and holiday in exotic locations around the world.

The on campus experience I am discussing here includes face-to-face instruction. This is the opportunity to share a physical location with our students to converse, deliberate and disagree. It is an opportunity to create safe spaces where we can investigate challenging ideas as well as 'brave spaces' that draw on the educational power of discomfort and 'uncomfortableness.' These include ideas that we may not agree with and find challenging but should investigate and unpack to understand different perspectives that test us and our own ontological security. In a political world marked by deep partisanship, it is also learning to converse with those we disagree with.

To achieve these goals, we need to draw on a series of educational and pedagogical tools and environments including large class teaching. That is, like a watching a movie in a theatre rather than on the couch at home, different educational mediums offer us the opportunity to confront ideas in a variety of ways. This is not to argue against employing technology – far from it as technology should be an integral part of what we do – but that large class pedagogy is a specific experience that takes us as educators, as well as our students, on a unique learning journey.

2. Technology and Education

Ever since I entered higher education two decades ago, the sector has been in a state of flux and subject to disruption. Countless reports have outlined the many disruptions that come from multiple directions including government legislative changes, increasing competition

within and across the sector, the emergence of new entrants (including private providers), a rise of anti-intellectualism driven by the election of populist leaders, and most importantly, technology (see for example KPMG, 2020).

The impact of technology has been both overwhelming and underwhelming. For example, many predicated that the emergence of Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) would spell the end of higher education as we know it (Marginson, 2012) but over the years, they have had little impact. In contrast, the rise of mobile technologies has empowered educators with the opportunity to engage their student cohort both within the classroom setting and in accessing educational materials ‘on the go.’ The emergence of mobile devices has distressed other educators who see them as a distraction and talk as if there existed some ‘golden age’ when students were always alert, focused and engaged (Dontre, 2020).

Another aspect that has followed the rise of technology has been an overwhelming number of ‘buzz’ words that have meant to capture the new educational environment. We have seen phrases such as ‘blended learning’, ‘flipped classroom’ and more recently ‘hyflex’. While such terms seem to make great titles for conferences we may enjoy attending, they are hard to distinguish and seem to add little pedagogically.

Personally, I have been one of those that has seen technological tools as powerful educational devices allowing educators to engage students in different ways – from requesting students do undertake research exercises during class time to documenting their daily lives by taking photos and sharing these experiences. My preference is to argue that good pedagogy is good pedagogy no matter the technology employed (if any at all). That is, the educator must reflect on what they are attempting to share with the student body and use the appropriate tools to achieve this goal: this may be wholly online, partially online or totally face to face. We need to avoid artificial targets such as ‘all courses should have 50 percent online content’ to meet administrative targets that add little to the educational experience and journey.

3. What we Learnt during Covid

Part of the technological discussion has focused on the flexibility of students to undertake ‘just in time learning’ (Petrus Mahlangu, 2017) whereby students can attend class without leaving their homes (or even their beds). This was seen as a good thing – until Covid came along and we learnt that this is not an ideal learning experience.

While the sentiment is that ‘Covid changed everything’ – including the learning that students expect – I would argue that this misrepresents the learning experience that students desire (and have always desired). It is true that students have always wanted some flexibility, and some prefer online environments, but most of the students that physically want to attend a higher education institute do so understanding that their learning experience will transcend the educational material.

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Rather than ‘change everything’, the Covid experience has confirmed three important insights. The first is that students can learn online if required but prefer a face-to-face experience (Hoh, 2020). Much has been said that Covid has reminded us about the importance of human interactions and relationships – and no matter how good the online experience is, we crave human connections (Walter, 2020).

The second is that regardless of preferences, online engagement and collaborations are fundamental skills that must be part of the learning experience. Understanding and employing engagement tools, be they Zoom, Skype or Teams, are important tools that will be utilised into the future even when (hopefully) Covid becomes a distant memory. As such, even if we could instantly return to a pre-Covid world, the abilities to utilise such tools should be seen as being part of the important suite of skills our students (and colleagues) embrace.

Thirdly, students want learning choices. In our yet to be published research, my colleague from Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia), Dr Trina Jorre De St Jorre, undertook a survey with students to understand their learning preferences. Undertaking this survey long before Covid, we identified that while students enjoyed flexibility, they wanted the experience to be well resourced. That is, be it online or in-person, the experience was driven by the pedagogy employed and the resources available.

In other words, Covid has not altered the way we learn – just confirmed that we want a well-designed experience. This includes the experiences in large classes that do not need to be impersonal and disconnected: they can be fulfilling, engaging, empowering and fun (yes fun). Large class engagement can be just as much an educational powerful tool as can be any other mechanism – it must be planned and executed with the educational goal in mind.

4. If you are Going to do it, do it Right...

In this final section, I want to outline three important ways to ensure that large classes are successful pedagogical mechanisms (Arvanitakis, 2014). The first is to ensure you take advantage of the class size by undertaking specific challenges that make the experience valuable. For example, in one class on unconscious bias, I ask all students to write down five stereotypes about themselves: these do not have to be true, just stereotypes about their own cultural background (see Nomikoudis & Starr, 2017). I then ask them to circle how many of these are true. The students are then asked to stand, and I ask those to stay standing if two or more stereotypes are true. In the many times I have undertaken this exercise, invariably about 80 percent of students sit-down. This highlights how the perceived stereotypes about us are not true – and as such, neither can they be true of others. Such an exercise is most powerful in a large class setting.

The second is that the large class should be interactive to ensure that they are engaging. That is, they should not be a one-way form of communication but include questions, quizzes, small group discussions and knowledge sharing. This builds the cohort experience. My rule of thumb is that such an interactive process should occur every 10-12 minutes – not only engaging the student body but cementing the key lessons being shared.

Thirdly, large classes can be used to draw out the valuable experiences of the student body. Paulo Friere's key message in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) is that the students he engaged had as much to teach him as he can teach them. They are not empty vessels to be 'filled' with his expert knowledge but have insights, experiences and histories that he does not. It means that their knowledge should be just as valuable as his – it is just different. In a large class, the opportunity to share knowledge with and by your students is there – we just have to find ways to ensure they feel comfortable in sharing. In my own work, I ask students to write an experience related to the subject matter: not an essay but rather, a story. Then, if they feel comfortable, to share it with me and in turn, I will share it with the class. In this way, I have uncovered and shared stories about topics as broad as toxic masculinity to the challenges of studying with a severe disability – experiences brought to the student body by students themselves.

5. Concluding Comments: The Path of the Citizen Scholar

Over the last decade, Dr David Hornsby and other colleagues around the world have unpacked the concept of the 'citizen scholar', arguing that the role of the contemporary university should be not only to ensure the highest scholarship, but that our students also become active, engaged and empowered citizens (Arvanitakis & Hornsby, 2017). In so doing, we have outlined a series of skills and attributes that need to be embedded within the curriculum including empathy, curiosity, mistakability and problem definition. These are often termed 'soft skills' but such a description is misleading because it indicates they are of second order importance.

What the citizen scholar approach drives is the ability to apply the knowledge learnt in such a way that graduates understand their broader obligations. This must be socialised, tested and challenged in an environment that is both safe and confronting – and the large classroom provide that opportunity. We must take advantage of this pedagogical tool and do so in a way that further develops and our students and us as educators.

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