Developing a sense of community in a large class context

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Abstract

Many aspects of teaching and learning of large classes in higher education are typically considered challenging particularly as regards the student experience and creating a sense of belonging to a class community. This paper represents an analysis of, and reflection on attempts to address these challenges by enhancing opportunities for engagement and creating a sense of community during face-to-face lectures with 440+ students on a teacher education programme.

Keywords: large class; classroom community; engagement; student experience; relationships

1. Introduction

Teaching and learning in a large class context in higher education is generally viewed as being quite challenging particularly in relation to the student experience and feeling part of a class community. This paper is a reflection on efforts to create a sense of belonging to a class community by enhancing opportunities for engagement during face-to-face lectures with large classes of 440+ students on a teacher education programme. First, the pedagogical context is outlined. Second, a short review of the literature provides a pedagogical context and rationale for the practise and finally, the practises utilised in-class to create a sense of community are outlined and reflected upon.

2. Description of the Teaching/Learning Context

This reflection on practice is based on teaching two large classes of 440+ students who are enrolled on modules which focus on special and inclusive education on a BEd primary teaching programme; one in first year and one in the fourth (final) year. The classroom is a large, modern, tiered room with rows of seats in three blocks with two sets of stairs between the blocks. I have taught large classes for approximately 20 years; I enjoy working with these groups and see the challenge of enhancing the learning experience for these large classes. Some of the practices outlined in this paper are utilised with both groups of students while others are used either in the first year module or in the final year module.

Many years ago, I stopped saying "I can't do that with a large class" in favour of "How can I do that with a large class?" That change in focus changed my thinking and, in turn, my practice. I considered each element of my pedagogy (curriculum, teaching, learning, assessment) in terms of the large cohort and made small, iterative changes over time. In relation to teaching, one aspect I really wanted to tackle was the creation of a sense of community and comfort during the face-to-face sessions themselves with a view to enhancing the learning experience for my students and as it turned out, for myself also. Enabling the student voice, harnessing student expertise and providing opportunities for some fun became key aspects of each session wherever possible.

3. Literature Review

Large class cohorts create pedagogical challenges for both teachers and students, particularly in relation to building a sense of community as a class and in the classroom. Teachers may have difficulty forming relationships with students because of numbers (Auslander, 2000) and the physical distance between them and the student body (Cole & Kosc, 2010). In any pedagogical context, the relationship between student and teacher is

important; arguably assuming even greater importance as the scale and complexity of the classroom context increases. Students who need and rely upon interactions with their teacher for motivation are disadvantaged by distance (Allais, 2014), both physical and psychological. The often impersonal nature of the large class setting disadvantages many (Hornsby & Osman, 2014). Students may feel marginalised because they are afraid or reluctant to ask questions in class (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). Absenteeism can impact the overall classroom environment and climate (Westrick et al., 2009) but is often tolerated or ignored as teachers and students silently agree to disengage from each other (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). The lack of agreement on what constitutes a large class complicates research and practice, with the perception of 'large' often influenced by discipline, experience and institutional norms (Kerr, 2011). Teachers' perceptions often influence practice and, in turn, influence students' approaches to the large class environment (Prosser & Trigwell, 2014).

However, the advantages and possibilities presented by large classes are often undervalued or are not evident at all. There is an inherent energy in large groups (DeRogatis et al., 2014) which, if harnessed, can energise both students and teachers. Finding ways to reach out to students and to consider the diversity inherent in a large cohort does not just enhance learning itself in terms of aligning with learning outcomes, but also enhances the learning experience (Farrell, 2021). Hornsby (2020) outlined six principles of teaching large classes online: active learning, equity, inclusion, student success, development of appropriate skills and attributes, and an ethos of care. While he was referring to the online context, these principles are central to the face-to-face context also. Arvanitakis (2021) explores the pleasure and excitement of teaching large classes. It is in this context, that I reflect on my own teaching practice in large class contexts.

4. Analysis of/Reflection on/Implications for Practice

Initially, I developed practices with the intention of enhancing learning, engagement and understanding. However, over time, it has become clear that the practices have also contributed to the development of a sense of belonging to a class community. The following key practices are enacted in my large class face-to-face context including *inter alia* collaboration with students and other staff; varied use of technology; multiple means of representation of contested and complex concepts; and, consideration of the use of the virtual learning environment (VLE), each of which are explored below.

Collaborating with student representatives (reps) is a good first step in creating a sense of community in a large class context. I now meet with the reps either before or at the very beginning of the module to explain what the module is about; to ascertain their own expectations or concerns if any; and, to outline the possibilities of working alongside each other over the course of the semester. I ask them to model asking questions in the first or second class and I sometimes provide them with the questions, particularly for the first year reps who are often worried themselves and have not yet developed their own confidence in the large class context. I then request that they ask one of their friends to pose a question the following week. Once other students see them asking questions, some pluck up the courage to ask a question in class themselves.

One of the difficulties in a large class is that if you do opt to speak, you likely have to raise your voice to be heard by those seated furthest away from you. A 'throwable' microphone is a really good tool to overcome this problem. A catchbox™ mic is covered in foam is very light and can be thrown safely around the room. It enables the student holding it to speak in their normal voice which is then picked up by the sound system in the room so that everyone can hear. It also provides a bit of fun as it hits people on the head, often me (it does not hurt due to the foam)! The student reps often take responsibility for managing the mic which encourages students to speak more than when I am the one throwing it to them.

In the context of workshops co-taught with my colleague, students are invited to respond to problems or questions in a 'think-pair-share' scenario. They jot notes and are then invited to either share their thoughts with the group or to pass their notes to the end of the row where either myself or my colleague collect the pieces of paper. One of us reads out the responses while the other summarises on a blank powerpoint slide live on screen. This is a very low-tech but effective way of capturing student voice and engaging them in problem based learning tasks even though they are in a very large group. As one of us is normally walking around the room, it reduces the physical distance between teacher and student. It also allows for instant feedback on their work. For more detail on this practice please see Farrell and Logan (2018) and Logan and Farrell (2018).

I use a question and answer (Q&A) platform to capture student voice also both in class and between classes. It is anonymous, so students feel safe in asking questions. However, as with modelling asking questions in class, posing questions on the Q&A platform often has to be modelled also. Sometimes, I ask one of my colleagues to post a question which I have prepared on the platform while I am teaching. I 'discover' the question when I check the platform half way through the session and respond to it there and then in-class. Generally, this is enough to get the ball rolling and students begin to post questions during each class or often, between classes. As well as responding to questions in-class, I always post a written response afterwards which allows me to develop a good repository of

feedback for students. It is also useful to throw the question back to the class before responding as this sometimes sparks some discussion and allows me to assess for learning.

Using Quizzes allows students to assess their own learning in relation to that of others in the class in a safe way when the quiz is anonymous.   It also allows me as the teacher to assess for learning and to alter the progression of the lesson depending on student responses. However, one of the most important aspects of using quiz is the potential for fun and gamification particularly if something like kahoot is used.   As well as learning, students enjoy the gamified aspect of the quiz and additional fun and enjoyment can be inserted with the provision of a small token prize for the 'winners'.

As Arvanitakis (2021) points out, large classes are very likely to contain students who already have lots of knowledge and insight into some of the topics you intend to explore. At the beginning of each module, and again during the module, I invite students to contact me if they have any experience, expertise or insight which may be useful to their peers and which they would like to share. I usually get a few volunteers and I meet with them to discuss how we might harness their knowledge. They usually present for about 10-15 minutes within a relevant session. When a student stands in front of their peers to talk about a concept I am teaching, it makes the concept more tangible, relevant and understandable and heightens engagement. Students tend to be really appreciative of peers who share their experiences.

Before Covid-19, I perceived the virtual learning environment (VLE) as a 'filing cabinet' which acted as a repository for materials. During the pandemic, the VLE became my classroom and that utterly changed how I viewed that space even since we have moved back to the face-to-face classroom. For large classes in particular, It allows me to reach out and reduce the distance between me and my students by providing information or guidance through the use of short videos or audio recordings as well as or instead of written information. Indeed, many of the challenges found in the literature on online pedagogy mirror those found in the literature regarding large class pedagogy (Farrell et al., 2021).

Universal design for learning (UDL) provides a framework for teachers to consider their pedagogical practice to enable access to a diverse range of strategies/approaches. My modules focus on very contested terms and practices such 'special education', inclusive education', 'inclusion' and so on. Using UDL enables me to bring that contestation to life whereby guest speakers are invited to share their experiences and views, usually as part of a panel discussion, which brings the multiplicity of perspectives to life in a way that I alone could not enact. For my final year students in particular, the energy these panels have brought to the class is invaluable.

And, very basic, easy things to do … smile at your students. Greet them as they file into the room. Come out from behind the podium and move around the room - share your proximity to reduce the physical distance between you and the students.

As mentioned previously, I began enacting these practices with a view to enhancing engagement and understanding in the large class context. However, the unintended consequence has been that " … changing my practice … has enabled me to form a relationship with my students mainly because the avenues of engagement energised the teaching-learning dynamic in the classroom, an energy that was amplified because the class was large" (Farrell, 2021, p.384).

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