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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Higher Education Context and Policy: Large Class Pedagogical Complications

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is discuss the pedagogical hitches of large classes in higher education in their significance thereof. The paper is chastely theoretical, therefore, data is solicited through literature review. Large-class environments are a reality for many who teach at higher education institutions around the world. A number of factors have recently placed greater demands and pressure on institutions of higher education to provide a quality undergraduate education. Although, different strategies are used in different combinations for different group of students to improve their learning outcomes. Some teaching strategies are better suited to teaching certain skills and fields of knowledge than are others. Some strategies are better suited to certain student backgrounds, learning styles and abilities. The paper argues that large classes pose a potential threat to the quality of the educational environment and may have particular ramifications in developing countries, were higher education constitutes a core dimension of the economic and societal development process. This is because such environments are commonly believed to pose real challenges for educators as they seek to deliver a meaningful learning experience, furthermore, they not only seek to gain knowledge, but also to develop critical thinking skills. The paper concludes that in order for efforts to improve teaching in large classes to have any chance of success, there must be a significant change in institutional attitude and practices towards the development of teaching among academics. The responsibility for teaching large classes needs to be in the hands of senior academics who have a proven record of success in their own teaching development and who are able to mentor junior and less experienced staff in teaching teams assigned to large classes.

INTRODUCTION

Large-class environments are a reality for many who teach at higher education institutions around the world. Such environments are commonly believed to pose real challenges for educators and students alike because they seek to deliver a meaningful learning experience; and the latter, because they not only seek to gain knowledge, but also to develop critical thinking skills (Masenya & Maloa, 2024). Indeed, large classes pose a potential threat to the quality of the educational environment and may have particular ramifications in developing countries, where higher education constitutes a core dimension of the economic and societal development process. The link between quality education and socio-economic development is almost a truism today, and it is safe to assert that quality education is a key component in the development of all countries and can be correlated with improved income levels and economic growth (UNESCO, 2005). The provision of quality education is considered to instil key aptitudes and attitudes necessary for economic growth, from essential literacy and numeracy to equally importantly motivation and perseverance (UNESCO, 2005).

The notion of a citizen who is literate; capable of reasoning with numbers; and enthusiastic about, and able to stick to, the task at hand speaks to a type of person who is an active learner (De Hei, Strijbos, Sjoer, & Admiraal, 2015). Active learners think critically about their environment and consider knowledge to be an evolving state of being, where new information can fundamentally

refocus one's understanding of and approaches to everyday phenomena (Masenya, 2023). A number of factors have recently placed greater demands and pressures on institutions of higher education to provide a quality undergraduate education. In 1994, the Wingspread Group outlined the following quality performance goals for graduates of colleges and universities: Technical competence in a given field communications, computational, and technological literacy, ability to gain and apply new knowledge and skills as needed, ability to function well in a global community range of attitudes including flexibility, adaptability, ease with diversity, motivation, ethical and civil behaviour, creativity, resourcefulness and the ability to work with others, especially in teams and demonstrated ability to use all of the above to address problems in complex, real-world settings (Masenya & Maloa, 2024).

Larger Class Pedagogy

Pedagogy is the art (and science) of teaching (Molefe, Mokumo & Masenya 2024). Effective teachers use an array of teaching strategies because there is no single, universal approach that suits all situations (Ntseane, 2011). Different strategies used in different combinations with different groups of students to improve their learning outcomes. Some teaching strategies are better suited to teaching certain skills and fields of knowledge than are others. Some strategies are better suited to certain student backgrounds, learning styles and abilities (Graham, Woodfield and Harrison, 2013). Pedagogy, incorporating an array of teaching strategies that support intellectual engagement, connectedness to the wider world, supportive classroom environments and recognition of difference, should be implemented across all key learning, and subject areas (Masenya & Maloa, 2024). Pedagogical practice promotes the wellbeing of students, teachers and the school community, it improves student's and teacher's confidence and contributes to their sense of purpose for being at school; it builds community confidence in the quality of learning and teaching in the school.

Large class not in terms of a numerical threshold, rather as an environment where the quality of student learning may be negatively impacted by the number of students in the class (Masenya, 2023). Given the diversity of learning contexts that may exist varying approaches and styles of learning, unequal access to teaching and learning support mechanisms, unique disciplinary milieus, and developed vs developing countries a large class may be defined in different terms depending on the discipline and/or the pedagogical needs of the learning environment (Glazers, 2011). For example, in theatre studies, any class with more than fifteen students may be considered large, whereas a first-year biology class would be defined as large if the number of students exceeds a hundred; and a higher education institution with limited access to teaching technology may have a different opinion from one with ample technological resources when it comes to what constitutes a large class (Fevolden & Tømte, 2015). While assigning numerical thresholds for conceptual purposes is discouraged as some of the authors do, the concept of large class is considered to be broader and wish to advance an interdisciplinary debate about how to cope with these environments, as opposed to imposing a numerical shackle. Most of the authors provide deep insights about fostering teaching and learning in large classes and in varying disciplinary contexts (Bloom, Canning & Chan 2005; OECD 2008; World Bank 2012). Given the clear link between higher education, health, empowerment and economic development, there is increasing pressure in many countries to enrol as many students as possible in higher education. Producing more graduates holds both private and public benefits for a country (Masenya, 2021). Private benefits are evidenced by a rise in employment prospects and income (Molefe *et al*, 2024). However, intensity of student-teacher interaction decreases as tends to happen in large-class environments (Exeter, *et al* 2010; Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). Regardless, of their learning style, students also exhibit poor levels of engagement with material, less commitment to courses, and lower motivation levels when presented with large classes (MulryanKyne, 2010). All things considered, large classes do not appear to be conducive to establishing the higher order cognitive skills noted earlier.

Learning Theories

Learning Theory describe how students absorb, process, and retain knowledge during learning. Cognitive, emotional, and environmental influences, as well as prior experience, all play a part in how understanding, or a world view, is acquired or changed and knowledge and skills retained.

Constructivism Theory

Constructivism as a paradigm or worldview posits that learning is an active, constructive process (Hsueh-Jui & Lan, 2016). The learner is an information constructor. People actively construct or create their own subjective representations of objective reality. New information is linked to prior knowledge; thus mental representations are subjective. Knowledge is constructed based on personal experiences and hypotheses of the environment (Fanghanel, Pritchard, Potter, & Wisker, 2016). Learners continuously test these hypotheses through social negotiation. Each person has a different interpretation and construction of knowledge process. The learner is not a blank slate however, brings past experiences and cultural factors to a situation.

Social Constructivism Theory

This learning context is set within an authentic environment wherein students are encouraged to answer real-life questions that they have identified based on their own experiences (Shawa, 2019). The assigned exercise provides students with opportunities to use and gain experience with the cultural tools (semiotic tools) typical to the discipline. The use of heterogeneous student groups insures diversity of thought, ability, prior knowledge, and experience, allowing students to provide expertise to the group in areas reflecting their strengths. The milestones serve as informal assessments that allow faculty members to determine the students' accuracy of understanding, misconceptions, or dysfunctional group processes (Hsueh-Jui & Lan, 2016).

As learners do not come as tabula rasa, learning will take place through cooperative learning which emphases is placed on student involvement in active learning and the development of social skills (Hằng, Ngo, & Pilot, 2017). Since the outcomes of cooperative learning are strongly dependent on detailed planning and implementation, cooperative learning has become the most operationally well-defined and procedurally structured form of collaborative learning (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). The reasons of adopting constructivism and social constructivism through cooperative learning are: positive-interdependence: students have to believe, and act, as if they are in it together, and must care about each other's learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1984). Sustained learning groups and reward structures are used to encourage this. Group work will better prepare students for the workforce by developing skills in teamwork within diverse groups. Social skills are promoted and enhanced in the task oriented group environment, since students must exercise their leadership, communication, trust-building and conflict resolution skills so they can function efficiently and effectively. A high degree of face-to-face verbal interaction is needed so that students are active in the learning process by explaining, arguing, elaborating and linking the new learning material to previously learned facts and concepts (Kaufman, Sutow, & Dunn, 1997). Cooperative learning requires students to take responsibility for their own learning through the use of examinations that demand individual accountability. Even though students help one another, no group member can afford to sit back and hitchhike. Group processing requires members to periodically assess how well they are working together and how they could improve to ensure successful and efficient completion of their academic tasks, as well as score high in tests (Masenya & Maloa, 2024). Lastly, appropriate grouping by the teacher ensures that each group contains members with various attributes to strengthen problem-solving and social skill building of all group members.

Behaviourism

Behaviorism is a worldview that operates on a principle of "stimulus-response." All behaviour caused by external stimuli (operant conditioning) (Fevolden & Tømte, 2015). All behaviour can be explained without the need to consider internal mental states or consciousness Behaviourism is a worldview that assumes a learner is essentially passive, responding to environmental stimuli. The learner starts off as a clean slate (i.e. tabula rasa) and behaviour is shaped through positive reinforcement or negative reinforcement. Both positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement increase the probability that the antecedent behaviour will happen again (Masenya, 2023). In contrast, punishment (both positive and negative) decreases the likelihood that the antecedent behaviour will happen again. Positive indicates the application of a stimulus; Negative indicates the withholding of a stimulus. Learning is therefore defined as a change in behaviour in the learner (Molefe *et al*, 2024).

Humanism

Humanism is a paradigm/philosophy/pedagogical approach that believes learning is viewed as a personal act to fulfil one's potential (Masenya, 2021). Humanism, a paradigm emerged in the 1960s, focuses on the human freedom, dignity, and potential (Masenya, 2023). A central assumption of humanism, according to Huitt (2001), is that people act with intentionality and values. This is in contrast to the behaviourist notion of operant conditioning (which argues that all behaviour is the result of the application of consequences) and the cognitive psychologist belief that the discovering knowledge or constructing meaning is central to learning (Molefe *et al*, 2024). Humanists also believe that it is necessary to study the person as a whole, especially as an individual grows and develops over the lifespan. It follows that the study of the self, motivation, and goals are areas of particular interest.

South African Large Class Pedagogy Realm

There is a long-standing belief that the number of students in a class affects the quality of the learning environment (Ehrenberg, Brewer, Gamoran & Willms, 2001). In particular, large classes are believed to correlate with low student performance. However, class size in and of itself is not a distinguishing feature of student performance; instead, class size matters in relation to education goals and the quality of the educational experience (Fevolden & Tømte, 2015). In higher education, education goals move beyond simple knowledge acquisition to promoting student engagement and higher order cognitive functions characteristics of deep learning. Here, class size does matter and can affect the quality of student learning (McKeachie 1980; Cooper & Robinson 2000; MulryanKyne 2010).

Despite the problems of large-class teaching, it is a reality that many higher education institutions must face as more and more students seek and require degrees in order to secure employment (Masenya, 2021). While this is a problem facing developed and developing countries in equal measure, the issue has higher stakes in developing contexts, for a number of reasons. Firstly, higher education and access to it are considered as key elements in national development (OECD, 2008), which is why increasing student numbers is a key objective in developing countries. However, when students lack motivation or show poor engagement with their subjects and higher order cognitive skills are not fostered, the quality of the learning environment and the educational experience is called into question (Masenya & Maloa, 2024). As a result, in developing countries, teaching in large-class contexts has direct negative ramifications not only for the quality of the educational experience, but for development per se (UNESCO, 2005).

Secondly, the general challenges of large-class teaching are compounded in developing countries in that there are less economic resources available to fund higher education institutions (Masenya, 2021). This means that, in proportion to the population seeking higher education experiences, there are fewer institutions available in developing countries for students to attend, which in turn increases pressure on these institutions to increase intake (Fevolden & Tømte, 2015). South Africa, with its population of over 50 million, has only twenty-three university institutions. In addition, developing countries and their relatively poorer populations have less financial resources with which to provide for and support higher education students, adding further to the pressure to adopt large class formats.

Poor student performance (especially among students from vulnerable groups) associated with large classes also has more detrimental effects in like in many other universities (Masenya, 2023). If large classes are associated with higher dropout and failure rates, or students only superficially mastering course content, then they have the potential to reverse the very gains that developing countries hope to achieve by expanding enrolment in the first place (Molefe *et al*, 2024). Moreover, in an economic environment that advocates the efficient allocation of resources, this situation represents a waste of scarce government funds. It is therefore essential to adopt practice that mitigates these adverse outcomes in large-class contexts.

Measures of Enhancing Large Class Learning

Treat the classroom as a sacred temple of teach (Jenkins, 1997). This management style or philosophy is marked by a strong notion of control and preparation. In this model of management, teachers are very prepared and plan for as many aspects of the class as they can (Masenya, 2021). Teachers do not tolerate latecomers, side talking, reading, or early departures. They establish at the beginning of the term that the classroom is a place to be respected and students must behave in ways that are appropriate. The consequences for inappropriate behaviour are public notice of the

inappropriate behaviour and embarrassment (Masenya, 2023). In this management style, the teacher is not afraid to act as the policeman.

Treat the classroom as a relaxed, "laissez-faire" place of learning. This management style or philosophy is very relaxed and "hands off". Teachers who use this style of management are very flexible and respond to changes easily (Molefe *et al*, 2024). They do minimal planning, and while they can be quite prepared to deliver course content and material, they dislike rigid control and value the ability of respond to changes. The focus in this type of classroom is a comfortable, relaxed atmosphere where the teacher tolerates reading, talking, and late arrivals or early departures (Masenya & Maloa, 2024). Usually, the more attentive students sit in the front half of the classroom, and the teacher speaks to them.

Treat the classroom as something in between a sacred temple and a laissez-faire place of learning. This management style or philosophy is right in the middle of the two extremes (Masenya, 2023). Here, teachers choose which aspects of the course they wish to control, how they decide to control those aspects, and what they are willing to let go (Masenya, 2021). With this type of classroom management, the teacher decides which behaviours are tolerated and which are not. There is an expectation of respectful behaviour, and the teacher will speak to students who are disruptive after class (rather than calling attention to the disruptive students during class). Also, some instances of late arrival and early departure are acceptable, with permission in writing from the teacher (Fevolden & Tømte, 2015).

Make a Large Class Feel Small

Many instructors try to "make a large class small" by treating it as such. Methods include walking around the classroom while lecturing, moving toward the student asking a question, helping TAs distribute handouts, and developing other methods that allow you to be closer to the students you are teaching (Masenya, 2021). One instructor holds an "open house" during the first session in which students briefly chat with the TAs and the professor while choosing their lab sections. Group work, described in the section can also help create a more intimate atmosphere.

Encourage Questions

Most students are reluctant to ask questions or make comments in front of dozens of our peers. When students do ask questions in large classes, it is important that the instructor respond in ways that encourage more questions (Molefe *et al*, 2024). Students will not feel comfortable raising questions if they feel scorned, humiliated or embarrassed by a sarcastic response. Responses such as "I'm glad you asked that" or "That's a good question" will encourage students to continue asking questions (Masenya, 2021). If appropriate, you might bring a question raised during office hours or after class into the classroom and mention the student's name, for example, Ann asked me an interesting question about. Non-verbal responses such as smiling or nodding can also indicate your support of student questions. When asking students questions, it is important to allow enough time-at least five to ten seconds for them to consider their response (Fevolden & Tømte, 2015).

A number of methods exist that encourage student feedback and questions (Jenkin, 1997). A question-answer box set up in the classroom or lab or outside the professor's office allows students to raise questions outside of the classroom. Students can sign their questions or submit them anonymously. The professor responds to the questions during class. Extra credit can be given to students who sign their names and whose questions are answered during class (Masenya & Maloa, 2024). Another way to personalize feedback is to invite students of a particular subgroup, e.g., "Let's hear from someone who lives on campus or someone majoring in science". In courses in which problem-solving is important, such as those in math or science, you might ask students to write any problems they have had difficulty solving on the board before class begins (and perhaps before you arrive). At the beginning of class, the instructor solves the problem.

Be Available

A shortcoming of large classes is the high student-instructor ratio (Masenya, 2023). Being available to students both before and after class can combat this problem. Before class, you might walk around the room and ask students how things are going (Entwistle, 1991). After class, you can be available to answer questions. In addition, indicate that you take office hours seriously by informing students

when you will and won't be in your office (Masenya, 2023). Some instructors have taken advantage of electronic mail and have had students send questions or concerns in this form.

Try to Learn Student Names

Although it may seem daunting, it is important to attempt to learn your students' names. Methods facilitating this attempt include using a seating chart of students (though this requires that students always sit in the same seat), taking pictures of the students, or having them make name cards that they place in front of them during class (Fevolden & Tømte, 2015). Taking attendance can help you learn their names and shows students that you are interested in doing so. Asking individual students to assist you with demonstrations or other equipment in the class can also help you learn their names (Masenya, 2021). Once you have learned some students' names, use them to show that you are interested in learning the rest.

Relate Lectures and Discussions to Student Experiences

Some instructors integrate into the lecture information that they have gathered about students from information cards or questionnaires (Masenya & Maloa, 2024). Knowing the backgrounds of your students can also be used in asking for questions from a member of the band, from a person who lives on campus. Show that you are open to the non-traditional students in the class by incorporating their life experiences into the class (Cowan, 1998). You might also ask individuals or groups of students to provide examples or materials applicable to the class or have students complete a questionnaire, survey, or other instrument prior to class. You can then incorporate the tabulation and analysis of results into the lecture.

Pay Attention to Individual Students

One of the ways in which a large class differs from a small class is in the increased number of students who need attention from an instructor. While students who have done well in small classes tend to continue to do well in large ones, the performance of those who require more guidance from their instructors suffer in large classes (Molefe *et al*, 2024). This problem can be combated by keeping an eye on students' progress by reviewing their attendance, their performance on exams and homework, and requesting reports from TAs leading discussion sections (Healey & Jenkins, 2000). If you notice an abrupt change in the behaviour or performance of a particular student, you might have an individual conference with him or her. If a student's problem is beyond the scope of the course material, you might refer him or her to campus help sources, such as the Learning Assistance Centre (Fevolden & Tømte, 2015). If enough students are having difficulty, you might arrange group sessions to review material and answer questions. Remember also to praise students for positive changes.

Consider Self-Presentation

Personalizing a course also involves presenting yourself to students as a person rather than just a reader of lectures and a vessel of knowledge. While it is not appropriate to reveal intimate personal details, including information about yourself in your lectures can help personalize the learning environment (Evans & Kozhevnikova, 2011). The process can begin the first day if, while discussing the syllabus, you explain your philosophy behind certain policies or your experience in how students learn best (Masenya & Maloa, 2024). In explaining a challenging unit, you might discuss your difficulties in encountering it and learning it for the first time. Humour and showing that you can laugh at yourself can help establish rapport with students.

Give Personalized Feedback

It is difficult in a class of hundred(s) to provide every student with individualized feedback. One way to provide such feedback to each student at some time in the semester is to comment on a different group of exams or papers each time (Masenya, 2023). That way, while not every student gets personalized feedback very time, they get individualized commentary from the professor at least once during the semester. In managing the paperwork in large classes, one professor has found it helpful to have a student mailbox for every student (Jenkins, 1997). The mailbox is a manila folder that contains quizzes and other papers; it helps the instructor organize papers and offers a degree of privacy to the student. The mailboxes also provide a way for the instructor to review periodically how students are doing and send those notes on their progress.

CONCLUSION

In order for efforts to improve teaching in large classes to have any chance of success, there must be a significant change in institutional attitude and practices towards the development of teaching among academics, and due recognition of the amount of expertise needed to make a success of facilitating learning in large classes. The responsibility for teaching large classes needs to be in the hands of senior academics who have a proven record of success in their own teaching development and who are able to mentor junior and less experienced staff in teaching teams assigned to large classes. These teams must be sufficiently well resourced to take advantage of the potential of large-class lectures, alongside other learning activities, to excite, motivate and inspire students to pursue the discipline. Without such a system in place, our students will have to continue suffering our attempts at waging a losing battle, while our colleagues will continue to demonise large classes as being part of the problem of rather than part of the solution to providing effective learning experiences.

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