

CHALLENGES OF TEACHING LARGE CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to investigate the challenges encountered by teachers teaching students in large classes. It aims at exploring the root causes of these challenges and why they occur. Furthermore, the article aims to highlight not only the barriers but also the benefits of teaching large classes. The main concepts teaching, classroom, teacher and student will also be broadly defined. This will hopefully be beneficial as I will also make suggestions on possible methods of teaching large classes and making recommendations for teachers of larger classes so they can improve certain areas of their teaching styles/patterns as this will impact on their effectiveness in service delivery.

Keywords: teaching, classroom, teacher, student

INTRODUCTION

Teaching large classes can be a daunting experience. How do you keep students engaged and active without losing control of the classroom? With so many students, how do you know if they are learning? Should you attempt to take attendance seriously or risk losing students? How do you build rapport when learning 200 names isn't a possibility? If you have taught (or are preparing to teach) a large class, you have probably asked yourself these questions (Strovas; 2015). Yelkperli, Namale, Donkoh and Dwamena (2012) argue that large class size is one of the problems in the educational sector that developing nations have been grappling with. Ghana as a developing nation is no exception and has its own fair share of this problem at the pre-tertiary and tertiary levels of education. The sight of large classes at the tertiary level is appalling and a headache to teachers at that level.

Teachers in different countries have different opinions about what a large class is (Rohin, 2013). Almost all teachers think that their own classes are too large, even in Europe where classes usually have 20-40 pupils! However, many teachers around the

world have over 40 pupils, and some have over 100. This presents them with many challenges. The good news is that there are possible solutions to all of these challenges, and many of these solutions have been developed in African and Asian countries by teachers like you (Anderson; 2015).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I have located the research of this paper within a qualitative approach (Gay 1992; Babbie 1998; Leedy & Ormrod 2013). This decision was informed by the fact that this paper is not interested in the quantification of data. But its main interest lies in the painting of qualitatively rich picture of the phenomena being studied within the context of limited respondents (Hall 2007; Maserumule 2011; Baugh & Guion 2016). To this end, the problem of this study is explained descriptively and theoretically for the purpose of generating a crispy understanding of challenges of teaching large classes. Among others, these sources included journal articles, books, magazines and newspapers in the area of challenges of teaching large classes.

DEFINING LARGE CLASS

What is considered a large class? This question is not easily answered because it is dependent upon many factors, for example, institution, discipline, and even the class itself. A large creative writing class may have 40 students while a large biology class may have over 200. If the workload for the course is higher than normal because of the number of students enrolled, then I think it is safe to be labelled a large class. In addition to the number of students, Hornsby, Osman & De Matos-Ala (2013) suggest that the diversity of student characteristics (e.g., ability, age, background, and experience) as well as instructor characteristics (e.g., experience, skills, competencies) should be considered when labelling a class as “large.” In the end, these are not important. What’s important is that you recognise when to tweak your instructional strategies to better cater to a large number of students and/ or workload (Hornsby *et al*, 2013)

Handi and Arante (2015) posit that a class comprising of 30 students is considered a normal class and if it exceeds that number, then such a class can be classified as a large class. For language learning, a class with more than 20 students might be perceived as a large class. However, there is no clear definition of what constitutes a large class (Rohin, 2013)

THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING LARGE CLASSES

Teaching large classes can be challenging. Logical concerns, such as taking attendance register, grading, and providing frequent and detailed feedback, can quickly become unmanageable. To account for these logical concerns many instructors may use unproductive teaching methods like relying strictly on lecture. A lecture-based, large class leads to very little interaction between instructor and student, causing the student to feel anonymous and isolated (Sulistiyowati, 2012)

These feelings of isolation lead to

lower motivation, poor engagement, lower attendance, and more distracting behaviours (e.g., students talking, texting, surfing online, etc.) for the students. In large, lecture-based classes, students are also more likely to report low satisfaction levels on semester evaluations (Hornsby *et al*, 2013)

ATTENDANCE

Students tend to feel anonymous and isolated in large classes which makes them less likely to attend regularly, especially if the class doesn’t apply to them directly (e.g., non-majors taking an introductory history class). Attendance can also be logically difficult to record when you have many students to account for. According to Sulistiyowati (2012), before writing an attendance policy, you need to determine your philosophy on the issue. Is it important that every student attend every class day? If so, then writing a clear attendance policy would be important for you. If you do not plan on taking attendance, and feel that it is the individual student’s responsibility to choose to attend class, then you will not need an attendance policy. With either attendance philosophy, you’ll need to implement strategies to encourage students to come to class: engaging lectures, active learning, and relating the material to students’ lives. If you choose not to take attendance, you may want to give students the occasional extra credit point when they come to class and participate in active learning (Hornsby *et al*, 2013)

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

In large classrooms where students feel anonymous, you are more likely to have distracting behaviours such as coming in late, leaving early, side conversations, texting, and students doing other activities on their laptops (Zaidah, 2007). The unfortunate reality is; you cannot control all of these aspects (nor should you try to). One of the most important lessons in managing large classrooms is that you need to pick

your babbles. For examples, students who check their cell phones frequently in a small classroom can be distracting – both to you and other students. However, in a class of 200 students, cell phone use might be the least of your problems (Marais, 2016).

According to Marais (2016) the first problem a large class encounters is that because there are so many students, the teacher cannot give attention equally to all of them. Therefore, when questions are asked, only abler and less shy students are eager to answer. Too often, interaction is restricted to students in the front rows. In support, (Zaidah, 2007) argues that the teacher cannot pay equal attention to all students – if he tried to call on everybody in the class to answer his questions, it would take too much time. The lesson would never be finished and uninvolved students would get bored and start to do something else.

A second problem is due to differences in background knowledge (Hayes, 2016). Large classes are always heterogeneous and heterogeneous classes are especially problematic when they are large. Because of the fact that in a large, heterogeneous class, students' levels of English vary greatly, the materials used are too easy for some students, but too difficult for others. Some students have no problem following the lesson, while others seem at a total loss. So while some students have to struggle hard to understand English in focus, other students find the book too easy. In a class in which some students are quite fluent in expressing opinions about various daily problems, but others either find it difficult to express themselves or are not interested in these problems, it is very difficult for teachers to fulfil their duty of helping students to express what they think in their own words (Marais, 2016, Wadesango, 2020).

Another problem that a teacher of a large class must cope with is how to correct written work. After giving a test to a class

with 50 students, the teacher has to take home 50 papers to correct. It should also be borne in mind that he/she does not teach only one class and that each of his/her classes might take three or four tests every semester (Bahanshal, 2013). Besides the above, discipline can be a problem in large classes. The fact that a class is large does not directly cause discipline problems, but when a problem arises, large groups are more difficult to handle (Marais, 2016; Hornsby *et al*, 2013).

One final problem a teacher of a large class must deal with is that it is difficult to get to know all the students. How can I distinguish one student among fifty or more other when we meet only once or twice a week? Matters only get worse when a teacher is in charge of three or four large classes (Hasha and Wadesango, 2021).

Marais (2016:34) outlined the challenges of teaching large classes into five categories:

Mission: we concluded that we were faced with a mission that called for quality learning opportunities, commitment to active and interactive strategies, priority concern for developing critical thinking and high-level problem solving capabilities and a large lecture class structure that appeared to work against all those aims.

Students: there was consensus that students were part of the problem, partially because of poor general preparation as well as specific preparation for dealing with this different form and scope of a class, and partially because of an apparent lack of motivation.

Teachers: there was an equal consensus that teachers were part of the problem for two reasons. Firstly, many faculty and teachers lack skills and preparation for teaching in this kind of environment. Secondly, large classes impose constraint upon such important factors as accessibility to students.

Challenges of teaching large classes

Administration and management: while there was too much variation in terms of specifics to pinpoint the problem, the team agreed that the assignment of individuals to teach large classes, and the reward structure associated with such an important assignment, did not suggest that “the organisation/institution” was making the of decisions or following the kind of policy that would help ensure high quality in large classes.

Physical context: lack of adequate and conducive spaces, properly outfitted to facilitate innovative and technology-aided teaching in classes, was another component of the problem (Marais, 2016).

Brady (2011:65) outlined common problems in large classes below:

- **Classroom management:**

When you talk to one group, another group is goofing off. Learning everyone’s name is hard. It’s difficult to get students to pay attention. Cheating can become a problem when you can’t be everywhere at once. In a large class, there’s more chance that making one student happy will make another student unhappy. Everything takes more time. Space and a sufficient amount of materials become classroom management problems: teachers cannot monitor groups if there is no space to walk around the room and if you have 100 students, can you regularly make 100 copies?

- **Assessment:**

Assignments and giving written feedback take much time. Grading can be more complicated. With oral activities, it may be hard to know who is succeeding in a large class because it may be hard to know what mistakes are being made by whom.

- **Differentiation:**

How do you keep good students occupied if they finish quickly? What about

the struggling student who can’t keep up? You can’t spend extra time with that student when you have so many others to pay attention to. How can the student be allowed to participate according to her or his abilities?

There are three commonly perceived problems associated with teaching in large classes, namely physical, psychological and technical (Handi and Arante, 2015). Handi and Arante further explain these problems in detail as follows:

The teachers in large classes may feel **physically** weary; they may unknowingly speak louder and move more often or longer distances than they do in small classes etc.

Psychologically; some teachers find it intimidating to face a large “crowd” of students, especially when they do not have much idea who their students are and what their students are expecting from them. To the teachers in large classes, students are not “faces”.

Other problems such as **monitoring attendance** and checking assignments are also constantly worrying many teachers involved in large class teaching (Brady, 2011).

Carbone and Greenberg (2013:45) listed top five root causes of challenges of teaching big classes as follows:

- Conflict between large class format and learning goals
- Perceived lack of accessibility to students and personal contact
- Lack of student motivation and preparation for large class format
- Lack of reward structure for successful large class teaching
- Lack of accountability in student classroom performance

Furthermore, Carbone and Greenberg

(2013), postulate that some of the important factors which make teaching big classes more daunting and challenging are:

- Overall dissatisfaction with the quality of large class learning experience
- Lack of interaction with faculty (in and out of class)
- Lack of structure in lecture
- Lack of/ poor discussion sections
- Inadequacy of classroom facilities and environment
- Lack of frequent testing/ graded assignments (Carbone and Greenberg, 2013:56).

THE ADVANTAGES OF TEACHING LARGE CLASSES

According to Bosser, Lundin, Lindahl and Linder (2015), a large class present many problems for both teacher and students, but it also has several advantages that teachers can exploit to help their students study well. First, more students mean more competition, in a large class, there are students of different levels, but it is human nature to want to perform better than others. Furthermore, abler students will complete with other advanced students and even weaker students will want to compete so as not to be considered to be among the poor students. Teachers can take advantage of this fact in any different ways.

Second, a large class can encourage students' confidence (Hasha and Wadesango, 2021). In this kind of class, a weak student is likely to find many other students of the same level. She will find that she is not the only weak student (Bosser *et al*, 2015). Whenever she speaks, she knows that if she says something wrong, other students will be sympathetic and not so critical of her mistakes. This builds up her confidence, which is an important factor

when learning a language. Furthermore, doing group work makes students less shy when contributing- if they make a mistake, only a few people hear it, not the whole class (Bosser *et al*, 2015).

Thirdly, having many students in one class means sharing more experiences and the more students you have in a class, the more knowledge and experiences that can be shared among the class members. This makes the class an enjoyable place for students to learn and an interesting group for a teacher to teach (Bosser *et al*, 2015).

Finally, a large class creates an atmosphere of cooperation. Since students know that the teacher cannot attend to every individual, they have no other choice but to help themselves make progress. By teaching themselves and collaborating, everybody feels they are close to each other and this in turn helps to improve the results of their studying (Bosser *et al*, 2015).

Teaching large classes provides you with a large and highly diverse population of students (Bahanshal, 2013). Whatever topic you are teaching, there is a good chance that one of your students is well versed in that area. Further, by using active learning you can leverage the diversity in your classroom and improve the students' learning experiences. Large classes also have their own synergy, where students from all backgrounds come together and form a body of knowledge that is greater than its parts (Bosser *et al*, 2015). They further state that this synergy is dynamic and can be used to encourage positive attitudes toward the overall learning experience when you use best practices in teaching. For those instructors who are in the early stages of their career, large classes look great on CVs and tenure dossiers by showing the hiring/ promotion committee that you have diverse teaching experiences. Lastly, teaching a large class is simply a great professional development experience. It requires you to think outside of your

typical strategies and be creative (Bossler *et al.*, 2015).

SUGGESTIONS

Active Learning: Contreras and Corzo (2011) stated that one can incorporate active learning into their lecture as this could encourage active learning and increase attendance because students are more engaged in the material and therefore more motivated to attend class. In addition to promoting student engagement, active learning gives you opportunities for formal and informal assessment. These activities can also provide a tool for keeping track of the students who attend.

According to Hornsby & De Matos (2013), active learning is often seen as the best way to address concerns over student engagement. Students often thrive in contexts where they can be more self-directed, work in groups of peers, engage in the course via a mix of synchronous and asynchronous events or activities. They respond well to formative assessments that get them to apply their knowledge as opposed to drawing on recall of information through summative assessments (Taras, 2005). As Ira Shor (1992: 19) notes: "Passive curricula help prepare students for life in undemocratic institutions.

McKinney (2010:45) gives the following examples of "active learning" activities:

A class discussion may be held in person or in an online environment. Discussions can be conducted with any class size, although it is typically more effective in smaller group settings. This environment allows for instructor guidance of the learning experience. Discussion requires the learners to think critically on the subject matter and use logic to evaluate their and others' positions. As learners are expected to discuss material constructively and intelligently, a discussion is a good follow-up activity given the unit has been

sufficiently covered already.

A think-pair-share activity is when learners take a minute to ponder the previous lesson, later to discuss it with one or more of their peers, finally to share it with the class as part of a formal discussion. It is during this formal discussion that the instructor should clarify misconceptions. However, students need a background in the subject matter to converse in a meaningful way. Therefore, a "think-pair-share" exercise is useful in situations where learners can identify and relate what they already know to others. So preparation is key. Prepare learners with sound instruction before expecting them to discuss it on their own.

A learning cell is an effective way for a pair of students to study and learn together. The learning cell was developed by Marcel Goldschmid of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (Goldschmid, 1971). A learning cell is a process of learning where two students alternate asking and answering questions on commonly read materials. To prepare for the assignment, the students will read the assignment and write down questions that they have about the reading. At the next class meeting, the teacher will randomly put the students in pairs. The process begins by designating one student from each group to begin by asking one of their questions to the other. Once the two students discuss the question. The other student will ask a question and they will alternate accordingly. During this time, the teacher is going around the class from group to group giving feedback and answering questions. This system is also referred to as a student dyad.

A short written exercise that is often used is the "one-minute paper." This is a good way to review materials and provide feedback. However, a "one-minute paper" does not take one minute and for students to concisely summarize it is suggested that

they have at least 10 minutes to work on this exercise.

A collaborative learning group is a successful way to learn different material for different classes. It is where you assign students in groups of 3-6 people and they are given an assignment or task to work on together. This assignment could be either to answer a question to present to the entire class or a project. Make sure that the students in the group choose a leader and a note-taker to keep them on track with the process. This is a good example of active learning because it causes the students to review the work that is being required at an earlier time to participate.

A student debate is an active way for students to learn because they allow students the chance to take a position and gather information to support their view and explain it to others. These debates not only give the student a chance to participate in a fun activity but it also lets them gain some experience with giving a verbal presentation

A reaction to a video is also an example of active learning because most students love to watch movies. The video helps the student to understand what they are learning at the time in an alternative presentation mode. Make sure that the video relates to the topic that they are studying at the moment. Try to include a few questions before you start the video so they will pay more attention and notice where to focus at during the video. After the video is complete divide the students either into groups or pairs so that they may discuss what they learned and write a review or reaction to the movie.

A class game is also considered an energetic way to learn because it not only helps the students to review the course material before a big exam but it helps them to enjoy learning about a topic. Different games such as jeopardy and crossword puzzles always seem to get the students

minds going.

Walk around the classroom as you teach. When lecturing, don't stand in a single spot. Walk around the room; walk up the stairs. Move! You don't want to be so active that you become a distraction, but if you find that you have been standing in one place for 5 minutes, move to the other side of the stage (Contreras and Corzo, 2011).

The use of technology can be efficient method for taking care of attendance. This technology will give you a digital record of attendance that can be easily downloaded into a grade spread sheet (Contreras and Corzo, 2011).

Collaboration; weaker students together with more advanced students helping weaker students as their contribution to a lesson (Contreras and Cozo, 2011).

Extra classwork; teachers can give students assignments with levels from a minimum that all students must do to more advanced work for better students in the class (Contreras and Corzo, 2011).

Pair and group work can help students increase their participation. Through pair and group work, students, especially shy ones, can work together and have a chance to practice English (Contreras and Corzo, 2011).

CONCLUSION

From the discussion above, it was revealed that teachers encounter various barriers when teaching large classes which somehow had negative effects on their physical, psychological aspects and to some extent it may be due to inadequate technical skills. However, it was highlighted that in spite of those challenges there are also advantages that add to teachers' experiences in teaching large classrooms. Suggestions are made which are believed could make a positive impact on both

teachers and students in large classes if they are taken into consideration. In a nutshell, we can safely say that teaching a large class is not necessarily a burden if viewed in light of its benefits.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers of large classes need to be given special training programmes which possibly would best make the most impact toward improving the teaching of large classes with necessary skills which not only benefit the teachers but also their students. This can be achieved through workshops and consultations with the teachers. It is crucial for the stakeholders like governments, private and trade unions to find creative ways to collaborate on issues pertaining to the management of teaching large classes and avail more resources in order to increase the prospects of success.

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