

Transforming a large class lecture theatre into an active learning environment

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ABSTRACT/DESCRIPTION OF SESSION

Are you looking for ways to enhance student engagement but are constrained by large class sizes or traditional attitudes on what lectures *should* be? Then come along to this session where you will have the opportunity to redesign your large lecture theatre course(s) to incorporate active learning techniques. This session is for both U.S. and non-U.S. instructors who lack awareness about active learning in large classes (several hundred students), and would like to explore innovative and imaginative ways of converting the ‘sage-on-the-stage’ lecture theatre into one where debates, simulations, role plays, and games are the norm.

Keywords: large classes, experiential teaching methods, active learning techniques

PLANNING DETAILS

Proposed audience:	Junior faculty members, plus seasoned veterans who integrate active learning methods into large classes are encouraged so they can help contribute to the discussion of designing/redesigning courses
Maximum number of participants:	Unlimited
Type of session:	Brainstorming and small group discussion
Special requirements:	Participants should bring along their course outline if they wish to discuss how to redesign their course
Length or Type: Please indicate min & max	Min 30 minutes, Max 60 minutes

Wright, S.L. & Lund-Dean, K. (2011) *Transforming a large class lecture theatre into an active learning environment*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA: Organizational Behaviour Teaching Conference, June 8-11, 2011.

INTRODUCTION

A lecture, according to the Collins English Dictionary is a “talk on a particular subject delivered to an audience”; it also means to “scold someone at length”.¹ Traditionally, this has meant one person, who is well versed in their subject matter, ‘lecturing’ to a certain number of students. For a number of lecturers/instructors, lecturing in this manner is unquestioned as an appropriate method of learning in higher education settings. For students passive learning is the norm. In recent years the demand for tertiary education has expanded at ever increasing rates. University systems have encouraged this traditional cost-efficient model, using the large class model as a ‘weeding’ strategy. The persistently difficult economic times are exacerbating demands on university faculty, with simultaneously increasing enrollment combined with decreased funding. This has resulted in very large class sizes with one person providing a lecture to several hundred students, even 1000, at any one time. Student engagement and their absorption of learning can suffer under this passive learning paradigm.

When I (the first author) started in my lecturing position a few years ago at a non-U.S. institution, the traditional lecture to large class sizes was the only mode of education I was familiar with. New faculty members are under immediate pressure to produce scholarship, and there was virtually no incentive for me to do a stellar job teaching the large classes. In the first couple of years of my academic career, I felt I’d made every horrendous teaching error I could possibly make. The education “system” simply didn’t prepare me to teach large classes. Lecturing to masses of students in this static manner soon became disengaging for myself and the students, despite the popular topic of ‘organizational behavior’. I started to question my ability as a ‘lecturer’, and wondered how such an intrinsically interesting subject could be so boring and unappealing? Despite my academic and practitioner background in organizational psychology, I had never heard of the word ‘pedagogy’, and knew very little about ‘experiential learning’ and active learning techniques. One day I sat in on a seminar on introducing experiential methods into the classroom. There was much resistance to such innovative ideas – our class sizes are far too big, how would we know the students are learning the content and material?, the lecture theatre would be chaotic, and so on. I decided to give it a go and transform my courses into experiential courses. The impetus for this session stems from my journey about transforming a traditional lecturing environment into an experiential learning environment, benefitting both the students and my professional reputation and motivation. This journey (and the proposed session) includes two people; myself as the novice, and the co-author as the experienced mentor.

This session will appeal to those who are new to academia who want to connect with their students in a more engaging way, but face resistance both from institutional norms and daunting class sizes. The ambitious goal of this session is to provide participants with the benefits and challenges of introducing active learning methods into the large-class university lecture theatre, and to discuss some helpful suggestions to make it a successful transition.

Learning outcomes;

- (1) Increase awareness of the range of large-class active learning activities designed to achieve course learning outcomes, and learn how best to structure the class time available.
- (2) Make explicit some of the challenges facing experiential facilitators whose larger institutional norms and traditions may resist new pedagogical techniques.

- (3) Increase awareness and appreciation of the attitude change required on behalf of the lecturer and the students to make experiential learning an effective method to increase knowledge and skill.

THEORETICAL GROUNDING

“Good teaching techniques cannot make a big class into a small class, but they can make it a much better class” (Heppner, 2007, p. x)

Despite the prevalence of research that has shown the traditional lecture format to be well inferior to the discussion format (an active learning technique) in encouraging students to retain information and apply information to new situations (McKeachie, 1980), lecture methods remain entrenched (Shakarian, 1995). Many doctoral programs still fail to address teaching at all as part of their Ph.D. student curricula (e.g., Forray, 1996) much less offering mentoring in experiential pedagogy. Although instructors may understand the learning power associated with experiential methods in lieu of lecture-based or passive instruction, large class sizes and increasing student numbers and contact demands may lead instructors to believe they have little choice in the matter. This is particularly true when the educational institution at which the instructor teaches also places heavy scholarship demands on its faculty. Newer faculty who have not had such experiential training may not have appropriate models to follow, or even an awareness of their options.

While active learning allows Organisational Behaviour students to practice applying theory to practice and helps develop personal and professional skills desirable in the workplace, it is a relatively daunting experience designing a course using active (or fully experiential) learning techniques as a newer instructor with little peer or institutional support. Important pedagogical work has been done integrating experiential learning with large class sizes, such as with developing coaching skills for teaching assistants (Sargent, et al., 2009), utilizing service-learning (Fairfield, 2010), and examining how well laptops might encourage active learning (Barak, Lipson, & Lerman, 2006). This session offers an open forum in which participants will explore challenges to experiential pedagogies under relatively difficult conditions not only related to class size, but institutional cultural norms that do not include such instruction. We will be approaching this topic from an international perspective, including both U.S. and non-U.S. institutions.

SESSION DESCRIPTION

The session will be a facilitated brain-storming session. Assuming a 60 minute block, the session will be organized as follows:

00-10 minutes Brief discussion and sharing of my (first author's) experiences facing the cultural and numbers-based challenges of using active learning and experiential learning at my institution

Break up into small groups (size will be determined by how many people turn up for the session). The groups will be a mix of junior and experienced faculty.

10-25 minutes Brainstorming session on various active learning exercises/examples that can be used in large classes

- 25-35 minutes Report back and whole-of-group discussion (including benefits of active learning for large class sizes)
- 35-45 minutes Brief demonstration on how to structure an active learning based large-class learning session
- 45-60 minutes Lessons learnt; whole group debrief on the challenges and practicalities of introducing active learning principles in lecture-normed environments

APPLICATION TO CONFERENCE THEME AND SUB-THEME(S)

The sentence in the conference theme description which resonated with us is “*Often these possibilities and potentials go unrecognized and untapped, due to time constraints, lack of innovation or imagination, or lack of awareness that they exist.*” The thought of introducing active learning techniques into a large class room can be daunting. There are so many potential obstacles in the way, including a huge attitude shift of behalf of the lecturers and students. The work involved in setting it all up seems an insurmountable task. However, so many learning opportunities are missed in large classes simply because doing things differently from the norm seems too difficult. This session makes the difficult doable. Through utilizing the vast experience within OBTS, this session provides an opportunity for junior faculty to learn innovative ways to introduce new and imaginative teaching methods into the large class, despite time constraints and other perceived obstacles. It provides those interested to ‘dip their toe in the water’ to learn the benefits of active learning methods, without feeling they are embarking on this exercise alone. Through the continued support of OBTS, the encouragement generated in the session can extend to day-to-day teaching once back on campus.

REFERENCES and ADDITIONAL MATERIALS AS AN APPENDIX

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