Original Paper

Developing a Shared Understanding of a Sense of Community

in Large Classes

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Abstract

Over the past ten years, universities and other tertiary level institutions have seen a considerable increase in student enrolment. This has led to larger class sizes both in the lecture hall and tutorial classroom. Research has indicated that larger classes at the tertiary level have not only burdened teaching staff, but have also led to student disengagement in the lecture hall. Students, new to university life, have been found to be particularly unprepared for this type of learning environment. This project explores the shared understanding of how to create a sense of community in large class sizes within a School of Education. Three academics formed a partnership in an effort to share techniques that actively created a sense of community in lecture halls of over 200 students. This research is relevant not only in highlighting this problem, but in the sharing of recommendations and suggestions for large group teaching.

Keywords

community, large class sizes, tertiary level institutions

1. Introduction

This paper responds to key research in the Australian higher education context in arguing that in spite of the challenges of large classes, it was possible to create a sense of community in teaching three different teaching areas. Class sizes at Australian higher education institutions have increased in the past decade to deal with the increasing demand of higher education (Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education, 2008). Currently, research about class size focuses on the whole university rather than individual units or subjects. Most of the research tends to focus on student performance rather than student engagement with the empirical link between class size and student performance being debated for decades (Towner, 2016). The premise seems logical: As class size decreases, academic achievement

increases. The research, however, is rather mixed and inconclusive. The aim of this paper is to provide the shared understanding of three academics lived experiences in teaching large cohorts in a Bachelor of Education degree. The three lecturers involved in the study aimed to create a sense of community and belongingness in their units by actively engaging pre-service teachers in a range of strategies and then collaboratively reflecting upon their findings in order to build this shared understanding. The results are presented as a narrative. This collaborative approach has the potential to assist in student retention and encourage students to undertake further study beyond the bachelor level degree.

1.1 Background

A large class is considered to consist of 80 or more students (Teaching Large Classes Brief Guide: Faculty of Economics and Business, Sydney University, 2011); however, the definition of a large class varies across universities and faculties (Burnett & Krause, n.d.). In some disciplines, such as the sciences, an instructor-to-student ratio may be as little as 1:12 to be considered a large class. In this study, a large class is considered to consist of 200 or more students as this is the maximum number of students that can be hosted in a given lecture hall within the institution where the study was conducted. There is no auditorium/lecture hall that can host more than 200 students compared with other institutions in Australia that can lecture to some 1000 students in a single sitting. This smaller lecture theatre, however, has the added pressures of repeat lectures to facilitate all 700 enrolled students in a single unit. While 200 students are much smaller than larger universities, an individual student can feel confronted by the large number of students. Such large classes can make individual students feel isolated even alienated from others and this can impact negatively on the university experience (Bradley Review of Higher Education, 2008; Scott, 2008).

The Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education (2008) states that "the teacher-to-student ratio has changed from 12.9 students per instructor in 1990 to 20.5 students per instructor in 2006" (p. 71). This large increase of student numbers in classes makes it difficult to develop community (Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education, 2008; James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010). Moltzen (2011) comments that it is only through time that the institution will respond to the individual, often in the students' final years. In a recent study conducted by James, Krause and Jennings (2010), 50% of the students surveyed identified that feeling a sense of belonging to the university community was an important factor in their university experience. Previous studies have found that students who attend classes four to five days per week are more likely to be engaged in the university and learning community (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010). At the university where this study was set, there is an emphasis on face-to-face teaching and attendance so the ability to engage students in the sense of community is increased, and the university is being proactive in developing the sense early on in the bachelor degree. James, Krause and Jennings (2010) comment that "universities should make the most of every opportunity to ensure that they are proactive in developing among students a sense of belonging and community from early in the first year" (p. 41). Previous research has suggested the need for developing a sense of community in large classes early on in the degree and the community that is developed may be between lecturer and

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student; tutor and student; lecturer and tutor; lecturer and lecturer; and tutor and tutor (Moltzen, 2011). The Bradley Review of Higher Education report (2008) reflects this perception by reporting that "a very significant number [of students] reported negatively on aspects of the student experience, including many who complained that in their university class sizes were too large" (p. 71). Some of the factors identified in the only Australian study to investigate a sense of community at the undergraduate level include but are not limited to "the social climate established on campus, the academic, social and financial support provided by the institution, student in-class and out-of class involvement with campus life, and frequent feedback provided to students and staff about their performance" (Scott, 2008, p. 32). However, research also suggests that performance may also be dependent on discipline with research in fields such as political demonstrating no adverse effects on student performance (Towner, 2016).

2. Method and Results

In this qualitative design study, three aims were explored for educators: (1) to describe our shared experiences since the implementation of large cohorts; (2) to describe perception of their students' experiences; and (3) to examine the effect that the large cohort model has on the delivery of effective education within a university setting. We adopted a shared lived experience approach. This approach of examining shared experiences is more commonly seen in health care, see, for example, the studies of de Vries, LeBlanc, Frost, Alston-Stepnitz, Stephenson and Woodyatt (2017) and Ott and Ross (2014). The results of our semester long live experience is presented as a narrative inquiry. Narrative, as a research method, has had a rich intellectual tradition. Under the broader term of narrative inquiry, researchers can use myriad types of data collection, including: storytelling, journaling, and various types of interviews (Winsor, 2014). Winsor (2014) further adds that writing memos can be a valuable technique to use in narrative inquiry by contributing to analysis and interpretation. The use of procedural and analytic memos were relevant to our study as they provided the researchers with a means to record experiences in a timely and efficient manner.

Narrative inquiry methodology is appropriate for understanding the meanings of participants' experiences within a specified context or culture. A number of disciplines believe that human experience is actually a phenomenon that is best understood through narrative. These disciplines include: anthropology, linguistics, literary theory, theology, philosophy, psychology, organizational theory, psychotherapy, geography, history, law, women's studies and medicine (Garvis, 2015). Narrative inquiry will here refer to a method of investigation into a problem, following pragmatism, inspired by John Dewey (1938). Following this tradition, narrative inquiry will also mean a way of knowing by telling and reflecting. Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding our shared experience. It is collaboration between researchers and participants, over time in a place or series of places, and in a social context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The primary research outputs of a narrative inquiry are constructed or co-constructed accounts that describe people's personal and professional experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These accounts offer others an opportunity to develop insights or an

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understanding of the ways in which particular individuals have been affected by the events that occur in their lives (Trzebiński, 2005). Winsor (2014) explains that narrative inquiry is well suited to assisting researchers to understand the experiences of vulnerable populations, such as undergraduate; however, it is noted that the researchers need to become engaged collaboratively with the data analysis in order for a collective understanding of the experience to be developed. Here, we offer a narrative of our experiences trying to build a community within a large lecture group.

2.1 The Narrative Inquiry

2.1.1 Forming a Professional Community

The School of Education provides information on each academic teaching load including student numbers. Three academics one new to academia, one mid-career and one senior identified the possible issues that all three may face as they taught nearly two-thirds (700 students of 1,100 students) of the students in the Bachelor of Education program. The initial reaction to these large classes for all three lecturers was "how are we going to manage with all of the other requirements for research and professional contributions to their research areas". The lecturers identified the need to streamline the administrative processes such as the assessment submission procedure and from those initial discussions, a series of informal meetings occurred in how best to approach such a unit. Bell (2005) identifies that peer partnerships can enhance teaching and administration by critically reviewing existing knowledge and materials to formulate new knowledge and processes. Jungic, Kent, and Menz (2006) comment that careful time management is essential when managing large classes and from this research, weekly discussions and informal hallway discussions between the lecturers reduced the sense of feeling isolated. Many topics were discussed such as management, administration issues, preparation and marking load. The academics valued the sense of community greatly and wanted to instill this into their large lectures to ensure student attrition and positive student engagement (Matthews, Andrews, & Adams, 2011).

Collaborative peer engagements transpired between the three lecturers. No one lecturer had all of the answers, so the three worked together to offer opinions, thought processes, development of new strategies and solve problems together (Barnard, Croft, Irons, & Cuffe, 2011). The Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australia (HERDSA) has identified that "support for academics in local teaching communities should include peer support amongst other initiatives" (p. 2). There is a real potential to empower academics through the peer relationship process such as the enhancement of innovation, management, engagement, teaching, learning and scholarship (Bell, 2001; Ferren, 2001; Keig & Waggoner, 1995).

Each academic went about the management of their own unit in a very different way, but the ideas from one lecturer to the other were shared without reservation. The students were enrolled in first and second year teaching courses in: Human Development and Learning, Science Education and Creative Arts. Whilst all three lectures were from different areas within the School of Education, students often undertook two of the three units. Hence, there was an opportunity for the academics to reflect upon the

differing experiences of teaching the large cohorts. At this university, the university places value on working in collaboration thereby enhancing the relationship. The lecturers developed a sense of confidence in their own community through the inter-lecturer links. The success and failures experienced in managing such a large student cohort and a large number of tutors were shared in a supportive way. The lectures debriefed on almost a daily basis on how they were undertaking the management of the courses this was done on the basis of memeos that were recorded after the lectures. The community developed between the three lecturers, was that "we are all in this together and we will come out of it together at the end". According to Brennan and Shah (2000), peers offer a "moral authority" that allows for a self-check in a supportive non-hierarchical environment to the way in which the lecturer is managing his or her unit. Harris, Farrell, Bell, Devlin and James (2008); Bell (2001), Mackinnon (2001) and Magin (1998) support the view that peer review in higher education is an effective strategy when undertaking academic development such as unit coordination, teaching and learning. All three lecturers related to this form of "moral authority" as they were able to run ideas past the other academics and make a decision. The lecturers referred to this "moral authority" through: identifying assigned readings, development of lecture content, communicating with tutors, recruitment of tutors, replying to student emails and the general administration of the units. The inter-lecturer support encouraged each coordinator to develop effective tutor teams, considered an important factor in the successful management of these three large cohorts. The development of community between the three lecturers was developed with the tutor teams and subsequently passed on to students in the face-to-face teaching.

2.1.2 Creating a Sense of Community in Large Classes

McMillan and Chavis (1986) define community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 9). The essential elements of community are outlined by Rovai (2002) as being: mutual inter-dependence amongst students, a sense of belonging, connectedness, spirit, trust, interactivity, common expectations, shared values and goals, and overlapping histories among members. These key aspects of community are mirrored in the Objects of the university, which are:

The provision of an excellent standard of:

i.   teaching, scholarship and research;

ii.   training for the professions, and

iii.   pastoral care for its students.

The issue of pastoral care for students when we have 700 students undertaking our units presents challenges. The lecturers' were concerned as to how they could continue to engage students so that students avoid the feeling of being a nameless and faceless individual. It has been previously established by Kerr (2011) that "a student's sense of belonging and ability to connect with teaching staff and other students played an important part in fostering student engagement and better learning

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outcomes" (p. 15). So how does one ensure that there is a sense of belonging and community in such large classes with so many students? One way to provide a sense of belonging is the ability of the lecturers to strategically move throughout the lecture theater as no more than 200 students were present. This is in contrast to other higher education institutions in which there is often a fixed lectern at the front of the lecture hall, focusing attention to the lecturer (Carter, Barrett, & Park, 2011). By moving throughout the lecture theatre, the lecturer was presented with the opportunity to have close proximity to all students regardless of where they sat. As a result of having the ability to navigate the lecture theatre, the ability for student to be active participants is encouraged rather than being passive recipients of information.

Current research defines personalization as the connection between the individual and the collective. According to Leadbeater (2004) this is done by "allowing users a more direct, informed and creative say in rewriting the script by which the service they use is designed, planned, delivered and evaluated" (p. 59). How, however, can it possibly be achieved when teaching some 700 students in first-year who come to university with a large diversity of knowledge and skills? Whilst Leadbeater's (2004) approach is respected, it is more appropriate for courses in final-years with fewer students who can work with the instructor to guide and design their course of learning. It simply would not work with a lecture of 200 students and a cohort of 700 students where students are seen as such a heterogeneous group. Long and Coldren (2006) identify that when lecturers are able to actively engage students in learning, the students achieved higher results and higher levels of satisfaction in the course. Students who were actively involved with other students along with being actively engaged in learning rate themselves as higher performing (Carter, Barrett, & Park, 2011). The lecturers achieved this by using a variety of engaging techniques to promote a student's sense of belonging and to enhance their learning. The process of community between the three lecturers acted as an impetus to develop these types of strategies further.

In the lecture series, all three lecturers used a variety of engagement strategies. These included asking the students to vote on possible answers/solutions, allowing students to ask questions, identifying specific students to answer questions and getting students to interact with peers in the lecture time, which are all possible in smaller lecture spaces. The lecturers often used problem questions and allowed the students time to discuss the possible answers with peers before reporting back to the lecturer. The results between groups were then tabulated so that the students had a sense of ownership of the course content. This assisted in the development of community between the students and lecturer. Krause (2005) found that campus experiences can be intimidating, leaving students feeling isolated and unvalued. Communicating with students and encouraging them is essential in assisting them in gaining a sense of belonging and purpose on campus.

Getting to know students names has been seen in the research of Brehl (2013) who identifies that this strategy will enhance the sense of community. However, how can a single lecturer learn 700 names when he/she only interacts with the students for 13 hours over the entire semester and lectures are not

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compulsory? A possible strategy identified was when students answered questions, they were to state their name so that the lecturer had a sense of being able to identify some of the students in the lecture. Another strategy used was to get all the students to write their names on a sticky note and to randomly select a few of these per week. Whilst this meant that only the vocal student's names or the names of the students whose names were randomly selected from the sticky notes exercise, it was one way of attempting to learn some of the first-year student's names. There are multiple ways in which university lectures can get to know students names, however, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss every possible strategy.

As coordinators we encouraged the tutors with classes of between 22-24 students to further establish the sense of community by considering the physical and social aspects of their classes. For example, the furniture in the room could be moved to provide for an inclusive environment by arranging the furniture into a U shape where everyone could see everyone else. Creative initiatives were the student a sense of self-worth. Teaching and Educational Development Institute (2003) identifies that the creation of a sense of community to engage with students plays an important part in fostering student engagement and enhances learning outcomes. An examination of courses such as medicine and the sciences where there is an emphasis on significant number of contact hours per week through subsequent tutorials and laboratories, students can more easily interact with peers, tutors and lecturers. However, as students in the School of Education undertake somewhere between 12-15 hours per week in face-to-face classes, it would appear that developing this sense of community has the added pressure of limited time.

These lecturers identified the need to develop a sense of community not only within the lecture hall, but also with their tutor teams in order to further enhance student belonging. Each lecturer took the time to meet with the tutor team prior, during and post course. Previous research has found that forming a social network develops a sense of belonging (Matthews, Andrews, & Adams, 2011) and it was therefore encouraged that the tutors should learn student names and attempt to develop this sense of community within the tutorials that consisted of 22-24 students. A number of tasks were undertaken to assist the tutor in developing this approach. Often students in first-year classes experience a sense of isolation and anonymity in large classes (Debowski, 2012,). As a result, a strategy employed by the lecturers was the use of group presentations/group micro-teaching/group experiments as an assessment task where students had to work cooperatively with 2-3 others. This provided the students with a sense of self-efficacy in the large units.

3. Discussion

We cannot justify large cohorts as effective teaching; however, we discovered a relational aspect enabling the three individuals to successfully counterbalance the difficulties that presented themselves in the respective units in a non-competitive environment. An informal network developed between the three lectures and encouraged our skills to successfully form a sense of community in a challenging environment. A limitation of this study was the small sample size. In future iterations of the study, we would aim for a longitudinal study in order to get more depth from the experience rather than expanding that sample size. That is, it would be good to know if the community persisted in subsequent years of the students' degrees. Also, participating academics were teaching different courses. In order to build validity into the study, another colleague reviewed the data and the narrative in order to ensure that the findings presented here were credible. On reflecting, one of the ways forward is the establishment of informal networks with non-hierarchical peers who are personally encouraging, knowledgeable and helpful. Universities have, in recent times, attempted to develop this through a compulsory mentoring system; however, this is not always a requirement and the individual is responsible for forming their own network. Being together in this difficult climate in teaching large classes, responding to the individual and creating a sense of community enhanced our sense of confidence and abilities to deal with complex issues that presented themselves over the course of the semester. It was refreshing for each of the lecturers involved to know physically, emotionally and psychologically what the others were going through and this added to their own survival techniques and strategies. For such a system to work effectively, all members of the peer support group shared openly and continually sought moral authority from one another on the decisions that were made as unit coordinators. This situation could have been a deterrent to continue in academia and teaching, however, the sense of confidence in informal discussions that were kept confidential from supervisors added to the lecturers' confidence in surviving in the current climate. It is important to note that this is not a system of duplication, but rather a reflection on circumstances that many of us as academics find ourselves in current situations.

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