DOING MORE WITH LESS IN LARGE CLASSES

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Introduction

The Corporate Communication Unit at the University of Southern Queensland provides a service course in foundation communication for all faculties. All undergraduates are required to complete the course which is designed for their first year of tertiary study and is offered three times annually. Semester enrolments are usually of the order of 1,700, 1,000, and 300 respectively, totalling about 3,000 per year.

The course is available both internally and externally, including 'offshore,' and is a 'mixed mode' presentation. That is, the University publishes a study package with three sections:

- the Introductory Booklet contains the unit specification, 'housekeeping' information, the three assignment tasks, criteria sheets for marking assignments, explicit details about our expectations for each stage of assessment and a 'past' examination paper. This book is arranged to simplify reprinting as it includes all the material that changes from semester to semester;

- the Study Book 'leads' the student through the course. It includes material which could be seen as lecture notes. It also contains exercises and refers students to material elsewhere in the package;

- the third part of the study package is a Book of Readings, designed particularly to help the more isolated students.

A communication textbook and the AGPS *Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers*, completes the basic material required for the Unit. External and internal students must purchase the study package and the two books.

A small number of students completes the course with only these resources. Mostly, these people are extremely isolated geographically - for example 'a day's sail from Rabaul,' or in the hills bordering Pakistan. Although we stretch to help all the other students and claim one standard for all assessment, we are conscious of the special problems of these solitary people.

The printed material of the course is augmented for the great majority of students. The nature of this assistance varies.

Each week internal students attend one of four 'identical' lectures and a two hour tutorial from a choice of up to 30 such sessions available. As well, they have access to a tutor each day during nominated consultation hours. Through a network of regional liaison officers, most external students within Queensland are 'hooked up' to a one hour telephone tutorial, conducted three times each semester, outside of business hours. Though an audiotape of the teletutorials is mailed promptly to other Australian external students, postal delays may cause problems. All external students have access to a noncompulsory residential school in mid-semester. We are in contact with the major Asian centres, some of which have their own tutors. In addition, contact by telephone is readily available to alleviate the sense of isolation facing many external students, especially those who have recently returned to study. This is particularly important as many such students use this course to first 'test the waters of tertiary study.'

Thus, we teach students in large numbers from many disciplines, from a range of cultures and across age groups. The 'input' available to us varies mostly with the mode of enrolment. We have students in gaol, students in the services (including at sea), and many with special problems caused by their geographical isolation. We try hard to address the particular difficulties faced by each student.

Our teaching approach

The teaching environment and the influence of the subject matter

We believe that, for internal students, most learning occurs in tutorials. Teaching strategies are varied, but the general objective is to achieve maximum participation in a workshop environment. The subject of our unit - Communication - lends itself to interactive learning. We all communicate all the time. With encouragement, most students can contribute examples from their own background to the learning experience of the group. This effectively converts theory into practice. The diversity of our students provides us with a wealth of examples which makes the process more interesting for everyone concerned.

Spatial considerations for tutorials

Furniture is arranged to place students in groups of between four and six. This facilitates small group discussion, and tends to minimise the number of passive students who would prefer to observe rather than to participate. Most students seated thus, become actively involved almost unconsciously. Tables are arranged so that everyone has a comfortable view of the front of the room and hence the whiteboard, overhead projector, etc. This configuration allows the tutor to reassemble the class into one entity for a whole group discussion or to 'pool' the results of small group activities.

With such large numbers and so many 'repeat' classes, we claim sole use of at least one tutorial room. Thus our arrangement of furniture does not inconvenience others.

Establishing tutorial identity

Tutors work hard to develop a group identity within each tutorial. This promotes a sense of 'belonging' and creates a safe and positive learning environment in which students are encouraged to participate and take risks. 'Students take a risk by volunteering an answer. Such risks should be rewarded not discouraged since this type of interaction helps the learning process' (Freeman, 1991:3). Ongoing, functional tutorial groups and smaller subsets develop as a response to continued encouragement. This achievement requires considerable skills of observation and coordination by the tutor who, in essence, becomes the team leader.

As group identity grows, so does responsibility within the group. As students gain confidence to admit that they may not understand a point, others will offer an explanation. This encourages individual and joint responsibility for learning. Again, our subject matter helps this process and much teaching and learning occurs within groups, between peers. 'When the communication system is circular, understanding what something means becomes a shared responsibility' (Gleason, 1986:22).

Personalising instruction

Group membership makes an environment more personal and counters the dehumanising potential of large classes. Little actions which may have pleasant but minor roles in small classes, can assume much greater significance in larger groups. For example, as long as tutors 'target' students accurately, a break in the middle of a two hour session can present the opportunity for an informal but confidence building chat to a shy student. Such a relationship between tutor and students is encouraged, both in tutorials and in consultation times. Students then develop the concept of 'My tutor is ....'

Aronson considers the keys to successful teaching in large classes include'be natural, be personal, [and] prevent students from feeling insignificant and anonymous' (1987:31). Particularly in large classes, tutors must show a 'human face' to encourage those students for whom even minimal involvement may be threatening. This requires a degree of self-disclosure, sharing experiences and humour, developing rapport, providing encouragement and leadership, and most of all, motivating and infecting students with enthusiasm for the subject area.

These techniques sometimes misfire and it is always useful to develop strategies to suppress the offerings of the more garrulous.

Developing leadership

Physical division into small groups encourages both intragroup rapport and the emergence of a leader. This spokesperson is not permitted to become the permanent sole voice of the smaller group. The process by which that person emerged is analysed, as aspects of leadership constitute an important section of the course. Once more, 'content' assists 'process' as the communication taking place in groups is examined.

Teaching and learning styles

We aim to create a learning environment where tutors aspire to optimise the match between style of teaching and learning styles identifiable in any group of students. This requires tutors to implement and select the most appropriate strategies from the available range. Methods regularly used include whole group and small group discussion, role play, individual work tasks, writing workshops, learning workshops, individual and group presentations, peer instruction, and peer evaluation. Large groups may require a tutor to move from one technique to another, guided by the mood of the class.

The lecture

The role of the lecture is less clear. Again, while we acknowledge the limitations of our 'input' to external students, we are still determined to maximise the effectiveness of our contact with internal students. It is unacceptable to 'lecture' by merely reading material from the Study Book to internal students who already own the study package. Techniques of presentation are chosen to promote active involvement, and accommodate and extend the concentration span of a generation raised on Coca-Cola advertisements, whose scenes change about every 2 seconds. 'Todays students are used to sitting back and taking in. They are also used to changing channels whenever they get bored. They will resist attempts to get them involved' (Gleason, 1986:24). Particularly for a course in communication, television provides a rich source of illustrations, many instantly recognisable to the students. This encourages response and involvement, especially where popular images are used. For example, the recent Mitsubishi Magna advertisement showing the reaction of a funeral group in New Orleans to a passing Mitsubishi transport, initiated some interesting discussion.

Yet, given the nature of the subject, the traditional lecture environment presents some concerns. We are convinced that, in terms of the quality of learning experience, more can be accomplished in a tutorial than in a large, tiered lecture room with 200 students.

In the immediate future, lectures will continue. Many staff members as well as students equate the importance of a unit with the number of hours of formal lectures per week. In Australian universities, problems with the perceived 'respectability' of units such as ours, seem fairly widespread. This is so, in spite of repeated calls from a range of impressive sources for the extension of such courses. Such comments as 'How can you present material with academic integrity in a one hour lecture per week?' do not recognise the function of mixed-mode format. While such attitudes remain, pragmatic decisions based on other than good educational practice will continue to be made.

Providing maximum feedback

If students are to grow intellectually, then it is essential that they are able to identify weaknesses in their early attempts at a task, and from this experience, develop confidence that their later efforts will be more effective. All this must depend heavily on the quality, quantity and tone of feedback. Large enrolments provide absolutely no excuse for paucity in feedback to students.

Our enrolment numbers and our attitudes to feedback make it impossible to process student work without a team of extra markers. A full-time tutor teaches about 25 students in each of eight two hour sessions per week, in addition to fulfilling other responsibilities. Each of our 3,000 students 'claims' 100 minutes marking time a semester. We aim for a 'three week turnaround' for assignments - that is, assignments should be returned to students about three weeks after the date due. Simple arithmetic reveals the need for other markers. Our marking team includes experienced teachers, many of whom hold more than one degree. Some are retired academics, others may be temporarily away from work, say on maternity leave. They are all competent and dedicated people and are aware of our concerns.

The specific problems then, are twofold: fulfilling the need to maximise meaningful and helpful feedback to students; and minimising variations between markers. Our solutions are also twofold: criteria sheets and marking schemes.

The criteria sheets we supply to students, guide their performance and are submitted with each assignment. Feedback is entered on these sheets which are then returned to the students with their corrected work. A criteria sheet is developed for each assignment and these are included in the Introductory Booklet. Criteria sheets are a response to our conviction that, particularly when large numbers are involved, it is inappropriate to leave the distribution of essential information to the vagaries of mind reading, to osmosis, or to chance. We specify exactly what it is that we require from students. The sheet shows in detail how marks are given and provides a breakdown of each segment. It should also remind students of the need for particular sections. We prefer to give students an extra prompt to aid in their preparation rather than resort to the red pencil and reduced results. The sheet is designed and printed to minimise - not disperse with - the amount of comment needed from the marker. On the reverse side of the sheet, a list of hieroglyphics allows interpretation of our 'short hand' corrections or comments. If a word has a circle around it, it is misspelt. A capital S means 'that this claim needs to be substantiated,' and so on. This list is expanded every time we find ourselves writing the same comment on a series of papers. A student should easily decipher details without the need for excessive and time consuming written corrections.

Two important points assume even greater importance because of our 'short hand' system. It is crucial that feedback reflects the scores given. A minor criticism and a score of 5/10 is not acceptable. 'Just a tick' MAY be appropriate with a score of 95%, but it certainly is not if the score is 60%. Secondly, the tone of the feedback must be considered carefully. While our standards are high and uncompromising, and it can be exasperating to 'plough through' poor work, it is crucial that students are encouraged rather than diminished by feedback.

The second support for feedback is the detail with which we equip our markers and the effort expended to ensure equitable grading. Any two people will mark slightly differently. The larger the team, the greater is the opportunity for discrepancy. Therefore, marking schedules are as detailed as possible. A marker's meeting is held for each task and immediate consultation by telephone is available to any marker who 'strikes trouble.' In addition, we moderate the work of each marker by 'random sampling.'

Because of our concern for quality feedback and our large numbers, procedures have been developed to facilitate reassessment of either assignments or examinations. If students have queries about their marked assignments, the Introductory Booklet first directs them to the question and the task, to consider if they have fulfilled the specific requirements of each. If they still feel that the marking is unclear or unjust, then they are welcome to discuss these during consultation times or to return the work with a covering letter. If clarity is the problem, we will address it immediately. If the claim is for a higher score, then the letter is 'shelved' until the final marks are being it immediately. If the claim is for a higher score, then the letter is 'shelved' until the final marks are being considered. No reassessment occurs unless there is a chance that a change will affect the final score.

A balance is always sought between the value of our limited time and the chance of kneejerk, meaningless or even vexatious requests. We are also conscious that an unplanned system of reassessment may well result in a 'floodgate' syndrome. Any student who has not been successful in a examination is welcome to make an appointment to discuss the specific elements of the paper. As it takes time for us to recover and reassess a paper, an appointment is always necessary.

Administration

We consider that CML is inappropriate in this particular setting, largely because of the nature of the subject. However, we have genetically manipulated those ideas to suit our needs and have produced a new strain, the CMA - Computer Managed Administration. This is one more step in our endeavour to rehumanise a system whose size requires activity levels which are reminiscent of an ant nest. We are determined that our students will not feel like inmates of such an organisation.

At the beginning of the course, each student is supplied with three self-adhesive bar code labels, one for the cover of each assignment. Examination papers are similarly individually labelled. Each time an assignment or exam paper passes through the central office, the bar code is 'read' and recorded and the date noted by the computer. Thus, the location of any of the 12,000 pieces of assessment that we process annually can be determined immediately. An assignment is logged in, then later logged out to an identified marker. Its return is recorded as well as the date and mark. It is then logged out to its author. If the bar codes are mislaid, all is not lost but the process is slower.

Areas with set procedures

Reflecting our need to prevent 'burn out,' we encourage students to restrict their requests to specified and posted consultation times or else 'put them in writing.'

Consultation times are not designed as private tutorials for those students who could not quite crawl out of bed for their scheduled tutorial, neither are they opportunities for students to persuade us to premark their work. Another potential problem is the development of overdependence by regular attenders at these times. As a 'rule of thumb,' 10 minutes per student is usually sufficient.

Phone calls from external students are usually filtered through the University Distance Education Centre, so if they occur when we are busy, we return the call. Meetings and negotiations with the other faculties are time-consuming and sometimes frustrating, but as presenters of a service course, we must consider our 'clients,' whether they are students, other faculties or employers.

Security

With increasing enrolments, the need for awareness of security increases as does the perception by some students that they can 'get away with' less than honest activities.

While we are not police officers, we feel an obligation to protect the great majority of honest students from the nefarious activities of others. The complexity of our tasks limits our efforts to passive, mostly administrative approaches, but we feel that at least these demonstrate our attitude to academic honesty.

Some years back, assignment tasks were not changed each semester. Predictably and certainly aided by the proliferation of word processors, a 'trade' developed in successful assignments. In addition, highly scoring assignments were stolen from the 'public space' shelves which were used to return work to students. While the computer could always supply the final mark to a high achieving student, it was most distressing to lose one's work. Assignment topics are now changed each semester, and assignments are returned to internal students in tutorials. This personalises the process and allows for discussion, but does consume precious tutorial time.

We also struggle with problems associated with plagiarism. All internal students are supplied with printed 'assignment covers' which include a declaration, for signature, that the enclosed work is original. Any student work submitted, for any reason, more than two weeks after the date due, is to be accompanied by a statutory declaration.

Supervision of examinations where 1,000 students are present also presents problems for security.

Some weaknesses in our system

A system of guest lecturers would be a useful addition to our program, especially if employers could be included. A major disadvantage of large enrolments surfaces immediately. While a speaker may be happy to present one guest lecture, an invitation to present four 'identical' lectures is a different proposal. While the audience in any lecture will be predominantly from one group, it is never entirely so, thus to invite a specialist in each professional area would not solve the problem.

To date, we have been unable to identify all students at risk early enough in any one semester to be useful. The involvement we seek in tutorials usually exposes those students who are 'not coping,' but not all students attend tutorials. First year students commonly encounter difficulties estimating required standards and the amount of work needed to reach those standards. Because of this, we 'weigh against' the first written assignment, that is, we allow students time to 'find their feet' without extreme consequences if they 'get it wrong' the first time. Our experience is that a low score in this assignment is not a good indicator of genuine academic problems. The second assignment provides much more reliable evidence of a student at risk. Yet, because of the magnitude of the task of marking this assignment, this information often emerges too late in the semester for the available support systems to be effective.

A third and major area of difficulty is our own need to keep this job within manageable limits.

Doing more with less

The most obvious advantage of large classes is economic. There is an economy of scale relative to the efficient use of the time and skill of academics as well as the cost of the associated infrastructure.

While it may not be a personal preference to teach large classes, we consider that effective teaching and learning can occur within that environment, as long as strategies are carefully chosen and appropriate procedures are developed. Whenever possible, large classes should be divided and subdivided into more manageable units to personalise the process. That is, whenever possible reduce large classes into functioning small classes. We feel that with dedication and commitment, teaching large numbers offers a unique and rewarding experience.

References

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