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POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dysgu 2 | Teaching Cycle 2

Managing Large Lecture Groups with Interactive Lectures

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MANAGING LARGE LECTURE GROUPS WITH INTERACTIVE LECTURES

This paper has been prepared with a view to submission to Web Journal of Current Legal Issues. The Web Journal of Current Legal Issues is published bi-monthly on the WorldWide Web. The focus of the Journal is on current legal issues in judicial decisions, law reform, legislation, legal research, policy related socio-legal research, legal information, information technology and practice. Contributions to the Articles, Comments, Case Notes, Legal Education and Information Technology sections are refereed. The Journal was associated with Blackstone Press Ltd from its inception in 1995 until 2001.

My intention is to conduct additional research into the topic of managing large lecture groups with interactive lectures. However, at this stage I hope that this paper
demonstrates evidence of competence in a number of the areas which are examined in the THE programme and also that the paper demonstrates appropriate and adequate evidence for the assessors to make their assessment of my teaching methods as a reflective teacher.
Introduction

The delivery of relevant information to students through the medium of lectures has been criticized. Two principal reasons can be cited for this. First, lectures have been observed to be less effective than other methods such as seminars, because of the fact that they fail to strengthen students cognitive skills. And second, the element of anonymity in lectures has been critiqued as leading to surface approaches to learning. This is because, they encourage an atmosphere where students remain entirely passive and merely hide out.

However, according to several authors, when conducted effectively, the lecture format can transmit new information in an efficient way, explain or clarify difficult notions, organize concepts and thinking,

31 See Frederick P. (1986) "The lively lecture-8 variations". College Teaching 34: 43-50, (writing that students' interest and attention in the traditional lecture diminish significantly after 20 minutes).
challenge beliefs, model problem solving, and foster enthusiasm and a motivation for learning. The following sections, are based on research conducted by me to test the validity of this viewpoint.

Background
I joined the Law Department in the first half of the 2005-2006 academic year. One of my immediate responsibilities on joining, was to deliver lectures to about 120 students registered for the Law of Evidence module, which is an optional module. Later on during the course of that academic year, I was responsible for lecturing on the Criminal Law module, which is a compulsory module attracting about 200 students. Whilst during the first half of the 2006-2007 academic year, which coincided with the submission of my THE portfolio, I was responsible as course

coordinator for Criminal Justice and the Penal system, for giving the majority of lectures to 120 students. The main similarity between all three modules is that they are very popular and therefore include a large cohort of students.

As stated earlier, prior to working at the Law Department, my previous experience of teaching had been acquired during my time as an adjunct lecturer / researcher at a postgraduate institution dealing exclusively with Masters and PhD law students. However, undergraduate teaching in a university is very different to postgraduate teaching in a research centre, and since my arrival at Aberystwyth, I was immediately exposed to a range of different teaching experiences. An undergraduate law degree programme typically consists of a series of lectures and seminars. In most cases, it will be normal to teach a series of lecture courses which run in parallel at fixed times each week, and may last for one or two academic terms.
Associated with each lecture course is a seminar which draws upon, analyses, illustrates or amplifies the topics presented in the lectures. Lecture classes can vary in size from 100 to 200 students, though there will be generally fewer large lecture classes after the first year, when students have more options available. Seminars and tutorials are much smaller than lecture classes and usually 6-8 students attend. Usually lectures, seminars and tutorials are one hour in length, although in my criminal justice course they can be 2 hours long. It follows from the above that the task of managing large and sometimes long lecture courses can be extremely challenging.

Finally, this paper is based on the results of feedback from both students and staff of my efforts at managing large lecture groups in the context of the law of evidence, criminal law and criminal justice and the penal system, during both the 2005/2006 and the 2006/2007 academic years.
Pre THE period

Prior to registering on the THE programme, I had conducted lectures on the law of evidence module at the Law department. The approach utilised by me was essentially, traditional. In other words, I merely read what I had prepared for each lecture and students were given a skeleton of main points to be covered in advance. There was essentially no close contact between myself and the students and the students remained largely anonymous. Evidence of this was revealed in the Law Department's 2005/2006 Module Evaluation form (see annex), in the section on lectures. Of 66 responses, only 9 found the lectures excellent, constituting about 14% of respondents. 36 respondents thought the standard of the lectures was good, constituting about 55% of respondents, whilst 18 found the standard satisfactory, constituting about 27% of

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Planned approach and underlying rationale

During the second semester of the 2005 / 2006 academic year and the 2006 / 2007 academic year, I was faced with the challenge of lecturing on the criminal law and criminal justice and the penal system modules, which comprised of large lecture groups and often were 2 hours long (as was the case in relation to the latter module). I was keen on improving on the results of the student feedback on the law of evidence module above and therefore I immediately began to think of ways in which I could effectively manage large lecture groups.
Davies and McLeod (1996) define large-class teaching from two points of view:

1. The teacher's, when the group size, about 40 students or more, prevents the use of strategies that depend on close contact.
2. The student's when the individual begins to feel anonymous.  

According to Biggs, Davies and McLeod definition implies two almost contradictory set of management strategies:

1. 'Close contact' strategies won't work, so that specific large-class strategies will need to be acquired.
2. The anonymity the student feel needs to be counteracted.  

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As a consequence of the above, in preparing my lecture plans it was necessary for me to adhere to Bigg's 5 part suggestion:

1. Preparatory- this includes planning issues such as academic structure, materials to be used, procedural rules, and questioning.
2. Starting the lecture.
3. Structuring the lecture- Bigg's gives examples of different structures such as classical, problem-centred, comparative and thesis.
4. Delivering the lecture
5. Personalizing the class.36

With time, I have learnt the relevance of all of the above suggestions. With an initially rather limited experience of how to manage large lecture groups, I have over time acquired the requisite knowledge and

experience and revised my teaching methods appropriately. I employed different initiatives in the course of lecturing during the 2005 / 2006 and 2006 / 2007 academic years and the whole process has been based to a large extent on the Kolb cycle, in which performance is evaluated through reflection and then corrected or improved. Reflective Observation is the second stage (in the usual representation) of the Kolb learning cycle. The importance of reflecting on what you are doing, as part of the learning process, has been emphasised by many investigators. The remainder of this paper goes on to describe several initiatives I eventually adopted to effectively manage large lecture groups. Collectively these initiatives can be described as interactive lecturing. Interactive lecturing, is a method that is based on the notion that when students actively participate and

become more involved in lectures, they will adopt a deep level approach to learning. Therefore key to the success of interactive lecturing is attention and motivation on the part of students. Often as will be demonstrated below from my own research, interactive lecturing involves an increased interchange between teachers, students and the lecture contents, which is evident in the level of active involvement and participation by the audience. In other words, the more interactive the lecture, the more involved the students become and the greater their knowledge and vice versa. Another aspect, of interactive lecturing which I touch upon below, is the change in my role as a lecturer. In other words, rather than merely instructing students, interactive lecturing ensures that I act more as a facilitator of discussion. This changing of roles is known to facilitate deep learning approaches.
Switching from a traditional lecture format to an interactive lecture format

Plan 1 Gapped Handouts as a framework for interactive lectures
My first attempt at switching from a traditional lecture format to an interactive lecture format began in February 2007 in the context of my criminal law lectures. I had designed gapped handouts with blank spaces. I had also included multiple choice questions in the handouts, which I expected would provoke discussion in the context of the lecture. Inspite of these efforts my lectures generally seemed far too silent (see annex). This was evident in comments to section 4 and 5 of the teaching observation sheets filled in by both my mentor and a former colleague. Section 4 of the observation sheet asks the observer to comment on the following:

Student Responses: General class atmosphere, level of participation, attention and interest. Student attitude and ability to carry out classwork.
learning problems identified and overcome? Awareness of individual needs. Attitudes to students.

Observer 1 (Prof. Christopher Hording) wrote the following in relation to this section:
"Students were quietly attentive, perhaps a little subdued on account of the rather technical subject matter of this lecture".

Whilst Section 5 of the observation sheet ask the observer to comment on the following:
Was effective communication achieved? Was there good student-teacher rapport? Were the outcomes achieved? Appropriateness of teaching/learning methods.

Observer 2 (Ms. Sue Jenkins) wrote the following in relation to this section:
...b) Outcomes were achieved for those who had printed off the lecture notes. However, those who had no lecture notes had no overall view of the structure of the lecture.

My general conclusion from both observations and from my own personal reflections was that not enough was being done to stimulate learning activity. In other words, there was a lack of active involvement on the part of my students. In this respect, educational research has shown that students who are actively involved in the learning activity will learn more than students who are passive recipients of knowledge.\textsuperscript{38}

Progress notes:

The observers comments left me with the following impressions:

1. That there was a significant lack of active involvement with the lecture material, with me as the lecturer and between the students.
2. That the students were not adequately motivated. In respect to this, studies in education have demonstrated that increased attention and motivation enhance memory. In fact, some authors have said that increased arousal and motivation are the essential ingredients for learning, and often are more important to retention than intelligence.
3. That my choice of gapped handouts as a framework for promoting interactive learning

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was flawed. Several problems can further be cited in this respect:

a. They were too mechanistic, since students were merely waiting to fill in the gaps and therefore were unable to think about what they were writing as it was hard enough for them to focus on catching the important words or phrases. This meant less time on discussion.

b. Not enough activities were built around the gapped handouts. The multiple choice questions in the handouts felt more like an oral exam than an opportunity for group discussion that would encourage deep learning approaches.

Plan 2 Power Point lecture Handouts as a framework for interactive lectures
My experience with gapped handouts, led me to devise other means of stimulating an increased interchange
between myself as the lecturer, my students and the lecture contents which I had prepared. I was interested in establishing a framework that would incorporate a number of factors such as a variety of techniques that arouse attention and provoke discussion. I also wanted a framework that would facilitate my students problem-solving skills as well as their decision-making, and communication skills. In addition, I was interested in a framework that would provide me with feedback on student needs at the beginning, middle or end of a lecture, on how the information has been assimilated, and on future learning directions.

All of the above mentioned objectives led me to design interactive power point handouts, which included gaps to be filled in and activities to be achieved in groups. All of this was backed up by both power point presentations (see annex) and video clips on crime and justice extracted from the BBC's website, and 2
videotapes. The result of the Department's 2006/2007 Module Evaluation form on criminal justice and the penal system, revealed that the majority of students rated the value of the lectures as good and equally rated the lecture programmes usefulness as a framework for studies on the course as a good (see annex). In particular when asked to mention three things they liked about the course a number of students mentioned the discussion, the use of teaching aids such as videos, power point presentation, and generally the variety of teaching techniques used in the context of the lectures. In fact when asked to note up to three suggestions for improving the module many students either asked for more lectures to be given or asked for more activities to be conducted (see annex).
a. Breaking the class into smaller groups

I mentioned above, that the lecture format has been criticized for the fact that it creates passivity and fosters anonymity on the part of students. I decided to counter this by incorporating small groups into my lectures. This proved to be beneficial in numerous ways such as promoting the discussion of ideas and concepts, enabling students to examine issues and to present alternative opinions and for fostering problem solving and communication skills.\textsuperscript{40}

Two interesting examples of the small group techniques utilised by me are 'buzz groups' where small groups were asked to discuss a limited topic for a few minutes or to consider broader issues for a longer period of time (see annex). The second example was to ask small groups to join to form larger groups to further discuss

\textsuperscript{40} Butler J.A. (1992) "Use of teaching methods within the lecture format".\textbf{Med Teacher} 14: 11-25 (Small group teaching has distinct advantages over lecturing in terms of promoting comprehension, application and problem solving).
the same topic. This was utilised by me in the context of my efforts in trying to encourage them to understand the provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights. In this respect the following steps were taken:

1. I created groups of five persons (5 minute).
2. I prepared the same number of copies of the Convention as there were groups. I then divided each copy of the Convention into 5 parts, with all copies divided in the same manner. This was done as follows: A=Articles 2-3-4 / B=5-6-7 / C=8-9-10-11 / D=12-13-14 / E=15-16-17-18.
3. Each member of the group then received one of the 5 different parts of the text. (5 minute).
4. I then asked the participants to leave their original group to join members of the other groups who had the same part of the text as they did. By doing this, they created larger "groups of experts, two for each part of the text. (5 minute).
5. As a "group of experts", the participants were expected to look at their portion of the text and to share their views with each other with the

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goal of increasing their knowledge and understanding of it. I facilitated this process by going around and supervising their understanding of the text (15 minutes).

6. While still in their "groups of experts", the same participants were expected to look for the best ways to pass on their part of the text to the other members of their original groups and to help each other to prepare this transfer of information (10 minutes).

7. I then asked the participants to go back to their original groups, and to teach their part of the text to the other members of the group, who in turn did the same. (15 minutes).

b. Brainstorming

A second technique employed by me was brainstorming. This is essentially a process in which students generate a list of issues - in response to a specific question or topic - and judgement of the response is initially suspended. Only after the list is completed are

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comments or critiques invited. I generally utilised this approach in the middle of my lectures so as to change the pace, or to regain the group's attention, or to apply certain "facts" presented so far (see annex).

c. **Use of written materials**

Much of this relates to my poster presentation on designing effective handouts (see annex), therefore to avoid repetition, I shall merely mention that I designed interactive power point handouts in order to assist my students in the organization of key concepts and to promote the retention of information. Amato & Quirt, found that handouts of slides allow students to participate more in thinking about the concepts under discussion rather than writing down every word of the lecture.  

43 My experience, shows that this is generally the case, although it is important to acknowledge that

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not all students were able to make notes and think at the same time. To rectify this I had to demonstrate to students who were in this category, how they could try to identify the relevant issues on the slide, thereby minimizing the amount of words they were writing and giving them more time to think. However, some students still complained that they were not able to take notes and think simultaneously (see annex). Therefore to address this problem I ultimately made available all the slides used so far. This was also an effective way for students who were absent for legitimate reasons to have access to the materials covered so far.

Using simulations and role plays
Simulations and role plays are useful generally because they allow students to try out a real life situation and
to receive feedback on their experiences. In the context of my criminal justice and the penal system module in the 2005/2006 academic year I conducted a role play on offence seriousness (see teaching observation, annex). This involved the following steps:

a. Dividing the class into groups of 3 or 4
b. Splitting each group into prosecutor/defence/judge
c. Having the prosecutor and the defence argue and having the judge decide punishment for the following acts which were listed in their handouts:

i. Speeding
ii. Selling Drugs
iii. Dealing Drugs
iv. Stealing a candy bar
v. Spitting on another person
vi. Calling a police officer a rude name
vii. Making faces at the President
viii. Leaving a store with excess change.
ix. Prostitution
x. Air pollution
xi. Bothering others by playing music too loud
xii. Making a product that can cause death
xiii. Intentionally killing another person

xiv. Accidentally killing another person

d. When everyone was finished, having the judges from each group explain the rationale, including which theory(ies) of punishment was implicated for each punishment imposed
e. Discussing how England and Wales punishes each of these things, if at all
f. Questions & discussion

From all accounts the role play was well received and conveyed the underlying message to the students (see teaching observation in annex).

**Using film clips and videotapes**

The value of videotapes and film clips is that they can be used as a trigger to promote discussion or to stimulate student thinking. In relation, to film clips, I utilised them mainly to 'trigger' meaningful discussion. In this respect, I showed a number of short film clips downloaded from the BBC website on relevant criminal justice issues, inorder to illustrate the real world
context of our discussion and so as to promote discussion. The fact that students for example see a short clip of members of parliament discussing criminal justice policy seemed to have a greater impact in stimulating their interests in the subject. Similarly, the videop tapes utilised by me during both the Criminal justice modules of 2005, 2006 and 2006/2007 helped to reinforce learning outcomes and to promote further inquiry or discussion (see annex).

**Progress notes:**

My experience of using interactive power point handouts left me with the following impressions:

1. That there was a significant level of active involvement with the lecture material, with me as the lecturer and between the students.
2. That the students were very motivated (Although it must also be recognized that not all
were happy with the idea of an active lecture session).

3. That my choice of interactive power point handouts as a framework for promoting interactive learning was relatively successful. Several evidence can further be cited in this respect:

a. The fact that they were backed up with power point slides made them comparatively less mechanistic, thereby allowing more time for students to think as well as more time for discussion. (It must be said that some students still found it mechanistic)

b. A number of activities were successfully built around them. Each of these activities appeared to have encouraged deep learning approaches.
Conclusions and Implications for Future Practice

The lecture format is an essential part of the Law Department's teaching strategy and will forever remain. This means that lecturers have no choice but to improve the way they are delivered. In this respect, interactive techniques and strategies are useful in inculcating deep learning. This is because the more active students are in the context of lectures, the better their understanding. In otherwords, students become more involved in the learning process, retain more information and will be more satisfied. When I compare my lectures during the 2006/2007 academic year with those of the 2005/2006 academic year it is clearly evident that interactive learning makes a world of a difference and that from the point of view of both the lecturer and students generally, lecturing becomes a pleasurable activity rather than a burden. However, some caution must be added, with a discipline such as law there needs to be a balance between
traditional lecturing and interactive lecturing since too much of either will lead to negative results.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


