Shaping Higher Education with Students

Tong, Vincent C. H., Standen, Alex, Sotiriou, Mina

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Harry Begg

Department of Political Science, UCL

• Student–staff partnerships in research-based education can take many forms, and Preeti emphasises how each class and course will require a bespoke approach from course convenors. Teaching no longer takes place solely in lectures or tutorials; rather, partnerships are formed through a variety of staff–student interactions, including tutorials, seminars and lectures. The quality of such partnerships does not simply come down to student-to-teacher ratios, and such a statistic may mask the reality of the quality of teaching and learning. Research-based education in the context of large class sizes can result in a spirit of critical enquiry, and large classes should not necessarily be seen as a negative.

• Large class sizes are difficult settings for teachers, and experiences of these partnerships may push their teaching skills to the limits. For example, there is a challenge in staff being able to pick up on non-verbal cues from students (e.g. lack of understanding), which may be easier in a tutorial setting. Feedback is also a problem, and individual feedback is nearly impossible. The further problem that this creates is that students may become passive recipients of knowledge rather than active learners.

However, if conducted effectively, these partnerships in large class sizes have considerable potential. Students can be positioned as problem-solvers and innovators if they are given tasks to complete in small groups; this develops soft skills such as teamwork, and it promotes active learning. With the mass of information available to students via the Internet, staff can fulfil the role of ‘knowledge curators’, complementing and if necessary redirecting
their students in the learning experience. Large group classes provide the possibility of non-linear learning if the traditional start-middle-end lecture is reformulated. While traditional assessment changes with large group sizes, new forms of assessment like quizzes and peer-to-peer feedback can take its place. Finally, there is a demographic benefit to large group learning, where students interact with multiple peers from diverse backgrounds to triangulate their understandings.

• This chapter offers a model for large-group learning which challenges the traditional linear-style lecture. In my opinion, it would also be important to consider how didactic lectures can and should be an important part of the learning experience. Some of my most memorable learning experiences have been where teachers have espoused their most passionate and heartfelt beliefs. There is a lot of information ‘out there’ for students to absorb, but argumentation (particularly in the liberal arts) is a key aspect of the teaching and learning experience. A diverse student environment in a large group can highlight areas of both agreement and difference. Debates and didactic discussion points can help invigorate the learning experience and bring out the passion of students.