Chapter 18
Enhancing Large Classes With Active Learning Pedagogical Skills

Angelina Popyeni Amushigamo
University of Namibia, Namibia

Moses Huudulu Hidengwa
University of Namibia, Namibia

Susanna Namutenya Herman
University of Namibia, Namibia

ABSTRACT

This chapter is an account of personal experiences of lecturers teaching large classes at an institution of higher learning where a lack of active learning skills among students was observed. A number of challenges for active learning were identified including lack of facilities and large classes. The lecture method was identified as the main delivery method at the institution that led to students becoming passive listeners and not active constructors of knowledge. Additionally, higher-order thinking skills were not evident during lectures in large classes as most of the tasks required low-level thinking skills. There was a rush to finish the course outlines and to make sure that the number of prescribed tasks was given to students, which compromised not only active learning but also the overall quality of teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Active learning allows students to assimilate and engage with the materials and information rather than being passive absorbers of information. In an active learning environment students work together and maximize individual learning. However, due to large numbers of students in tertiary education, of which Namibia is not an exception, active learning is compromised and the lecture method predominantly marks the teaching and learning process. This is similar to what Silverthorn (2006) refers to, that “in the traditional lecture class, students come to class, take notes on information that is given in the lecture,
and then go home to study their notes” (p. 136). The educator talks and students listen with minimal participation and contribution. The teaching and learning process does not allow for active construction of knowledge or interactive and participatory learning environment for students. Silverthorn (2006) further argues against the passivity of students in the teaching and learning process: “as teachers, [we] must recognize that our students no longer have to depend on us for the acquisition of information” (p. 135).

This chapter is an account of personal experiences of some lecturers about active learning at a university in Namibia. The chapter starts by highlighting the reform of education in Namibia after independence. It further gives an overview of the student population at the university campus and of students at the research site. Furthermore, the chapter highlights the teaching infrastructure, the learner-centred approach in the classroom with reference to techniques educators can use to promote active learning in the classroom, skills developed in learner-centred education, assessment practices in learner-centred classrooms with regard to active learning, assessment methods that enhance active learning and UNAM policies regarding assessment. Literature on active learning as well as active learning in large classes and their implications on learning is reviewed. Finally, the chapter presents the findings, followed by discussions, recommendations and conclusion.

BACKGROUND

Reform After Independence

After Namibia’s independence in 1990, the education system was reformed with the main purpose of improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in Namibian schools. Learner-centred education was therefore introduced in the Namibian education curriculum in 1991 as “a foundation policy for the new educational system of Namibia” (National Institute for Educational Development (NIED), 2003, p. 1). Within the principles of learner-centred education, students are expected to actively participate and take more responsibility of their own learning. They need to learn in an environment full of democracy, so that what they learn should be from their effort of exploring, making some judgment, being innovative and taking initiatives on the subject matter (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993, p. 42) by using available facilities such as technology.

The Ministry of Education and Culture’s development brief, “Towards Education for All”, was developed in 1993 to guide the stakeholders in education. Four major goals were set in “Towards Education for All”. Among these goals is “democracy” - that is, education should be democratically structured, which includes the democratic structuring of teaching and learning processes by the educator. The other goal is “quality”, which means that the relevance, meaningfulness and reasonableness of the teaching and learning processes, including the assessment of students are in the foreground. The curriculum, the teacher, the materials and the learning environment should all be of high standard and accord students to actively participate in the teaching and learning processes.

Student Population at University Campus

Post-independence student population in schools as well as at universities increases year by year. For example, Ihemba (cited in Iipinge, 2013) expresses that: