Chapter XI

Teaching Large Groups: Implementation of a Mixed Model

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Abstract

This chapter describes the experiences of the authors as lecturers in the development of a new approach to teaching large groups of first-year undergraduate students in psychology. Drawing on constructivist and instructivist approaches, our mixed model incorporates both face-to-face and online components, capitalising on the relative strengths of each. Online material, with a strong emphasis on active engagement, is used to introduce students to the content before undertaking a more detailed reading of the key theoretical and research issues in the textbook. With this introduction to the material, lectures function as a “Review and Discussion” session rather than a didactic monologue. Outcomes of the mixed method suggest no adverse effects on student performance, and staff and students evaluate the new approach favourably. The mixed model approach to teaching large groups is one that might be adapted for a range of disciplines and content.
Introduction

Large group teaching is a reality for academics in a wide range of disciplines. Large lectures offer obvious economies of scale attractive to administrators. But it is not just administrators who appreciate the efficiencies of large groups. Instructors also acknowledge that large lectures help ensure consistency in the presentation of material and provide opportunities to conserve their time (Crull & Collins, 2004). Despite these putative advantages of large groups, they nevertheless present dilemmas for the staff that teach them. In a large group, where students may feel relatively anonymous, how can students best be engaged? How can lecturers working with large groups encourage active interaction? What kind of learning might we reasonably expect to take place in such a context?

Large group lectures have long been critiqued as problematic. Students comment that they often spend their time copying information, without understanding. However, devising a cost-efficient alternative has not been easy. Given reductions in funding to university departments and an increasing emphasis on economic rationalism, large group teaching appears to be an inevitable part of tertiary education. One of our challenges as educators is to develop pedagogical models that meet the needs of both students and staff engaged in large groupwork.

In this chapter, we describe the way we teach large groups (of between 150 to 350 students) in our first-year undergraduate psychology courses using a mixed method that combines online material with face-to-face (FTF) lectures and tutorials. In the late 1990s, we managed a group of content experts and Web designers and together we developed a new way of teaching our large first-year classes. The chapter examines the impetus for changing our traditional teaching methods and the factors underlying our decision to integrate online approaches. We also explore some of the difficulties we have encountered along the way and ways we have found to deal with the problems that have arisen. We begin with a description of the pedagogical theories that underpin our model.

Issues and Controversies:
The Instructivist versus Constructivist Divide in Contemporary Academic Thought

The traditional two-hour “Sage on the Stage” lecture format has formed the basis of much of our teaching in the Division of Psychology at RMIT University, as it does in many universities around the world. The origins of the traditional lecture lie in the instructivist approach. Also referred to as direct instruction or explicit teaching, instructivism has been described as one-way communication from lecturer to student. The course content, typically specified through learning objectives, is determined by the teacher, who is in
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