

The Perfidious Experiences of Handling Large Classes in Tertiary Institutions in South Africa with Examples Drawn From Formerly Disadvantaged Universities

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ABSTRACT In many universities, especially in the developing part of the world, with South Africa leading the pack, the phenomenon of large classes is hypothesized to affect learners' motivation, morale and throughput; while encouraging the use of traditional lecture method. The aim of the present research is to engage in debate and discourse on the perfidiousness of large classes. The study has used a desk study review methodology. Findings indicated the following perfidious state of large classes: prompts lessened control and lowered productivity of the learners; encourages the use of lecture method at the expense of interactive method; it de-motivates learners and impedes their classroom engagement; and lowers learners' mental, thought and cognitive development. The following have been suggested as strategies to cope with large classes: facilitates the division of classes and have more staff deployed so that classes are ideal; adopt or introduce learners' peer assessments; and increased use of technology in the lecture venues.

INTRODUCTION

According to Vuori's (1982) (quoted by Ovretveit 1992) assertion of the concept *quality*, the quality of a phenomenon is determined by its adequacy, effectiveness and efficiency. To this end, and experientially, the phenomenon of large classes indicates that the human resource represented by one instructor or the lecturer is inadequate especially to offer the learners individualized attention, assess the gaps which the individual learners may be experiencing; and also lack time to address the various learning concerns that individual learners may be experiencing. This could also compromise the instructor's effectiveness in terms of the fact that he/she is not able to adequately meet all the learners expected goals or learning outcomes. Each learner may only be provided with a little time for consultations (Feldman 1984; Carborne and Greenberg 1998). The quality of consultations, therefore, then becomes weak when learners are handled as a group as a way of trying to cope with the stalemate. This may leave some concerns of learners who are not bold enough to indicate their concerns in a group environment unmet or inadequately handled.

In terms of the efficiency, the phenomenon of large classes calls for more resources which

are usually not availed in many circumstances. An attempt to explain facts that may be difficult may entail making copies of some reading materials, which because of the class size, learners may have to share, with a possibility that some may not have access to the material at all. The situation is usually compounded by the fact that some learners may not be in full bursary and may be struggling to meet some costs albeit small ones such as printing costs. The situation of efficiency can be demonstrated with the use of reading materials in some libraries especially of some formerly disadvantaged universities. While some universities may face the dearth of the requisite copies of some set books in a particular domain making it only possible for a few learners to borrow a copy only on overnight basis, this may imply that in a class of 250 students, some learners may never get the opportunity to access some of these materials. If such materials were to prepare the learners to write a particular test or assignment, then some learners' performance is bound to be poor. This is a demonstration that handling large classes, therefore, cannot guarantee efficiency in pedagogy. Perhaps this could partly explain perturbing cases of failure rate, repetition, sitting of supplementary examinations and special examinations in a score of some formerly disadvantaged insti-

tutions in South Africa (FSS (Faculty of Social Science) 2012).

There is an array of reasons why institutions of higher learning have gone on with large classes. Lack of resources is a crucial factor. In resource strapped countries of especially the developing part of the world, they have a large population of learners and yet resources to expand the infrastructural space remain a glaring challenge (WHO 2002). A good example is in South Africa where universities have to train massive social workers to meet national demands. Sources in 2007 on social workers' shortage gap indicated that the country needed about 16000 social workers to cover requisite welfare services. The challenge was exacerbated by many social workers leaving their jobs to go to the western world to look for greener pastures (Earle 2008). To this end, the phenomenon of inadequate social workers for instance saw the country in 2009 declaring social work profession a scarce skills profession (SACSSP 2009). Therefore, the scenario explains why social work classes in some formerly disadvantaged universities have large classes (Kang'ethe 2013, 2015). This means that an instructor may not get an opportunity to interact with most of the learners. This may not augur well in meeting the demands of teaching. Apparently, it is only the extroverts and the bold ones that force their way to interact and engage with the instructor, while those who are shy, quiet and introverts may never have an opportunity to professionally engage with their instructors.

Of course the other factor is poor planning. This is because the same students could be divided into smaller groups and then extra staffs hired to ensure that classes are manageable. This has to do with how management conceptualizes the problem or challenge. It is apparent that many administrators in some institutions may be quality blind making them fail to relate the impact of large classes to the quality of learners' learning outcomes (South African Qualification Authority 2001 (SAQA); McKeachie 1980). However, other external factors may be pertinent. The societal and sometimes political demand for increased intake of learners is sometimes critical. To this end, some universities are caught in a dilemma of having to admit many students to meet immediate community and political demands. For example in South Africa, some institutions succumb to political pressure to admit

many social work learners especially those that are sponsored by the Department of Social Development in order to secure handsome funding. This makes the phenomenon of large classes a big challenge in such institutions. It is this researcher's contention that if the quality of learners is to be improved, then the issue of large classes has to be given serious attention in institutions that fall victim of the phenomenon of large classes. In fact, some managers in such institutions feel that their attempt to address the challenge of large classes faces arduous task as the issue of intake get influenced by both the Ministry of Education and the Department of Social Development. However, it is good to succinctly debate and form discourses surrounding the phenomenon of large classes in tertiary institutions with the hope of forming possible solutions to the quagmire.

Problem Statement

In South Africa as in well as in many other universities of the developing world, there is increasing caution that it is important for universities to produce fully baked graduates who can adequately and competently fill up the countries' labor and market. In South Africa, it is hypothesized that the phenomenon of large classes could be contributing to learners' low morale, motivation and lowered throughput. Large classes are also hypothesized to contribute to instructors using the traditional lecture method and possibly contributing to lowered quality graduates, who are uncompetitive to adequately fill both labor and market needs. This has justified a literature review guided discourse and debate to assess the extent to which the situation on the ground in some Universities in South Africa validates the hypothesized perceptions. It is hoped that validation of the embedded hypothesis could form a lobbying and an advocacy platform for possible change of policies and practices that could see resources being availed to ensure that there are enough staff to ensure classes are ideal, and adopting other interactive pedagogical approaches.

METHODOLOGY

The present study has used a desk study review methodology with lots of books on classroom environment, journals etc. and this instructor's experience with the large classes in one the previously disadvantaged institution.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The Perfidy of Teaching Large Classes

Lessened Control and Lowered Productivity of the Students

Perhaps, it is succinct to make an attempt to indicate to the readers what one has in mind when he/she conceptualizes large classes or small class size. Generally, a large class may not only be defined by the number (although, the number of learners is critical), but by the fact that the instructor is not able to control the class; the instructor is not able to give students individualized attention and he/she is not able to know the learners by their names, etc. He/she is also not able to know what is happening in one corner of the class (Kang'ethe 2013, 2015). This is very serious especially during the tests because some students could be copying directly from others. Some researchers are of the opinion that a class size of 15 is ideal and more productive than those above 15. Fisher and Grant (1983) quoted in Ellner and Narnes found that with a class of 15 or lower, the average level of thinking using Bloom's Taxonomy was that one of analysis; while with classes of 15-45 students, student discourse was characterised by a lower level of thinking. Their results were in agreement with those of other scholars that revealed a positive association between small class size and the development of higher-level thinking skills (Dunkin and Barnes 1985; McKeachie 1980).

Generally, a large class renders no motivation to the instructor and this has immense psychological impact to his/her productivity. In some of this researcher's classes in 2011/2012 that had about 250 learners, it was difficult to count the number of students who attended the class. Due to learners taking advantage of their number, some were signing the register on behalf of their absent colleagues. Even if this researcher attempted to ascertain the number in attendance from counting the learners in each row of the pews, this never corresponded with the actual number of students who would have signed the register. It was also possible that some learners would forget to sign especially if the register does not happen to come to the pew they would be sitting. Such a state of affairs could make departments unable to enforce attendance discipline in any institution with large classes. Even if some instructors try to allocate some marks to woo the learners to attend the classes, they

usually would end up giving all the students the marks after failing to detect the actual attendees and non attendees. This in a big way discourages the instructor's prowess in administering large classes and therefore negatively impacting on their pedagogies. It is demoralizing and affects the instructors' morale and motivation. This, therefore, is a serious gap that managers and administrators should work to surmount. However, it is recommended that lecture halls are fitted with detective devices in which they would recognize and identify a particular student who enters the lecture hall. The same case of detecting who leaves and have the information computerized can be a panacea to control attendance and non attendance. Otherwise, it would be very difficult to maintain student discipline and attendance if the current *laissez faire* status is not changed.

Large Classes Encourage Traditional Pedagogical Approaches of Teaching

The phenomenon of large classes defeats various attempts to make pedagogical approaches either effective or efficient. The instructors are usually overwhelmed in making any attempt to make their teaching effective. They, as a coping strategy resort in using the traditional lecture method and giving of tests that are usually easier to mark, notwithstanding the testing criterion of the questions depending on the subject's expected learning outcomes. Large classes, therefore, slacken learning discipline with students resorting to surface learning, rote learning, plagiarism and paying other specialists to write assignments for them (Beaute et al. 2008). Research on the lecture method suggests that learners' attention and concentration tend to drop off dramatically after 10-20 minutes of continuous instructor discourse. According to McKeachie (1980), instructors of large classes are likely to adopt only lecture method as opposed to interactive learning such as discussions. He further indicated that with smaller classes, interactive learning was possible with the possibility of learning and teaching achieving its intended learning outcomes. The use of lecture method to teach is also demeaned by Bligh (2000: 20) who advises that:

"use lectures to teach information. Do not rely on them to promote thought, change, attitudes, or behavioural skills if you can help it".

A score of other educational researchers also indicated that the use of lecture method (due to large sizes of classes) as opposed to interactive student-centred learning method is likely to be de-motivating to the learners (Penner 1984; Verner and Dickinson 1967). Others researchers suggest that small classes promote student-centred learning such as small peer group discussions. This increases learners' morale, interest and generally motivation to learning (McKeachie et al. 1978).

Since most of the universities in South Africa, especially those dominated by the Black learners have largely stuck with the lecture method, or lecture method constitutes the lion's share of their pedagogical approaches, perhaps this could partly explain their lowered graduate quality. The issue of quality has been a great concern in the recent years with most employers in South Africa increasingly complaining of half baked graduates who are not competitive in the job market (Kang'ethe 2013). This researcher would agree with such allegations because his experience of handling large classes has shown that assuming a significant level of effectiveness and efficiency in the class is both an arduous and an uphill task (Kang'ethe 2013, 2015). With little or no engagement with the bulk of the learners, learning becomes a slow process. This is usually exacerbated by the fact that not all the subjects have tutorial classes which could allow the learners to engage with the facilitator. Even in the event that tutorial facilitators are in place, some may not be any better than the learners themselves. Although, tutorial facilitations are usually senior and relatively sharp students, there are challenges in that some are usually picked mainly because they are locals, and not because they are good enough to facilitate the tutorials. This practice of picking tutorial facilitators needs to be changed. The tutorial fellows need to be those peers who have been proved to be good in terms of understanding the content of the material to be delivered. In fact the picking of tutorials is usually politicized and the human resource players see it fit if the positions are occupied by the South Africans not withstanding whether they are good enough to be tutorial facilitators.

Large Classes Demotivates Learners and Impedes their Intellectual Development and Learning

In the continuum of teaching and learning, class size has had a great impact in determining

the output of the results (McKeachie 1980). It is an incontrovertible fact that in very large classes, a majority of the learners can go through the whole semester without experiencing a single interactive episode with their instructors. It is therefore critical that the issue of class size is debated, discussed and brainstormed on through discourses with the hope of coming with workable class size that will ensure optimal output and outcome of teaching and learning (Kang'ethe 2013, 2014, 2015). However, the issue of a large class is two pronged. This instructor considers a large class as one with literally many learners who the instructor/teacher finds uncontrollable. However, this could be subjective because there are cases where a big population of learners may be handled well depending on the medium and infrastructure of communication.

Undeniably, the phenomenon of large classes makes both the learners and the instructors to relax in adopting learning exercises. Lack of learners' engagement and involvement does not allow their intellectual development, mastery of facts, reflection and reflexive skills development. This is because their minds are not adequately and cognitively engaged (Trevithick 2005; Piaget 1990). According to Cuseo (2007), large classes do not give learners a good opportunity to engage and interact with the instructors, learners feel unattended, are not recognized, do not get adequate feedback and are not motivated. This largely contributes to their poor performance and even dropping out of college. In a research on students' course perceptions by Feldman (1984) and Carbone and Greenberg (1998), learners in large classes reported the highest degree of dissatisfaction on course evaluation questions especially regarding the instructor and learner interaction. The fact that the instructors cannot adequately track any learner progress formatively other than relying on summative tests does not ensure tested learning. According to McKeachie (1980), large classes are not as effective as small classes for retention of knowledge, critical thinking, and attitude change.

Perhaps why large classes fail to promote cognitive and deep learning is because of less active learner involvement; reduced frequency of instructor interaction with the learners; possible reduced or no feedback; reduced depth of student thinking inside the classroom; reduced breadth and depth of course objectives; fewer

course assignments, course related learning strategies used by learners outside the classroom; reduced overall course satisfaction with the learning experience; and lowered course evaluation. In fact in many universities where large classes are a norm, instructors avoid as much as is possible to do exercises that would see them struggling for weeks to do either learner assessment or evaluation (University of Fort Hare 2008).

Therefore, in universities admitting students from poor socio-economic backgrounds and school environments that had only poorly prepared them in various aspects of learning such as literacies, it is pertinent that these students are put in an environment of smaller classes that will allow them to realize and fill in many academic gaps that their erstwhile secondary school systems did not fill. Such gaps include mastery of various aspects of illiteracies such as grammar construction, spelling improvement, reading and writing etc. Such student gaps were validated by Kang'ethe's action research results in 2012 at one of the formerly disadvantaged universities that indicated that many learners suffer poor academic literacy that impede their learning and intellectual growth (Kang'ethe 2015). The research recommended integrating reading and writing to increase learning, and improving literacy levels with a possibility of increasing throughputs. However, it is a process which requires to be incorporated within the normal class time. However, it is critical that the instructors adjust to the milieu (Kang'ethe 2013b; Lea and Street 1998; Boughey 2000; Boughey and Rensburg 1994; Lillis 2003).

Smaller class sizes may be particularly important for promoting the success of academically underprepared learners in general. This is because such learners need individualized diagnostic attention and detailed prescriptive feedback that are delivered optimally. According to Fischer and Grant (1983) quoted by Ellner and Narnes, class size significantly affects the level of cognitive skills development of the learners in any learning classroom environment.

COPING STRATEGIES WITH LARGE CLASSES

Dividing Large Classes into Smaller Ones

Although it is debatable what constitutes a smaller class, in a nut shell it is a class that is manageable in terms of controlling learners, that the instructor can easily interact and engage with

all the learners with ease, effectuate their assessment and evaluation and easily (McKeachie 1980). However, it is good to point out that large classes do not allow effective learners' learning. The instructors should advocate and lobby with their managers and administrators to allow a paradigm shift that will see the large classes be subdivided into smaller ones. This may be easily said that done. This is because this researcher cum the instructor together with one other colleague tried to effectuate the process in 2011 and it did not succeed. The issue of infrastructure in terms of available venues became a challenge. This researcher still feels that it is doable. However, instructors must be ready to handle more classes than they are scheduled to. This should also be a platform to advocate for more staff to be recruited. This could be the only way of ensuring higher quality teaching and learning in the institutions with large classes.

Subjectively, and in this lecturer/instructor's perspective, small classes are usually defined as ones with fewer learners, perhaps ideally between 15 and 20. In smaller classes, the instructor is likely to know students by their names, and students will know one another. Learners are likely to have more eye contact with the instructor and other learners. Importantly, the physical ecology of the room may be rearranged to further increase eye contact and reduce interpersonal distance (for example, changing linear rows of desks into circular or semi-circular seating). These arrangements should favour learners' engagement and interaction with their instructor/s and also with their fellow colleagues. Anonymity is reduced and can prompt learners developing a heightened sense of personal responsibility or accountability to the class because individual behavior becomes more noticeable and notable (like attendance).

In this instructor's thinking, a class size of 15 learners may also change the instructor's course objectives and delivery. For instance more may be expected from learners inside the classroom (like participation) and outside the classroom (like more writing). Instructors' feedback may become more detailed and diagnostic. The size is also likely to prompt more learners' feedback.

Increased Use of Technology in the Lecture Venues

Today, the phenomenon and quality of information technology can change the reality of

a big or a smaller class. The mode of communication may determine whether the class is big or not. This means that it is not the literal number of learners that really indicates whether a class is big or not, but there are many factors. This instructor leans or hinges his thinking of a big or a smaller class on the availability of resources. With the ample resources at the learners' disposal, with proper communication facilities in a classroom, the issue of numbers may not be very important. For instance, in a class of 30 to 40 students with well-equipped learners' microphones to talk to the instructor, or stopping him for attention, with good aeration, heating and other learner friendly infrastructure, good attractive seats, the size of the class may not be a big issue. Indeed, the physical environment forms an atmosphere conducive to learning. In such environments, the learners may then give the instructor all the attention. Such learners' number, therefore, may not constitute a big class. The very same class of 30 to 40 students elsewhere can be a large one if it is not fitted with modern and requisite communication infrastructure, the background is noisy, is not adequately aerated, the furniture is not attractive, or is not learner friendly. In this scenario, the learners may not be giving the instructor the attention he/she deserves or demands, and he/she may feel that the class is too large for him /her. In fact physical improvement of a learning venue such as the refurbishment of lecture theatres may have a positive effect in increasing learners' morale and motivation and ultimately learners' throughput. This may agree with Lawler's and Kang'ethe's contention that motivation has an impact on raising workers' or professionals' productivity (Lawler 1994; Kang'ethe 2011).

However, having a supportive physical environment, does not in any way remove the impact of the number. With 250 learners, even the number of learners that may call for the attention of the instructor could still be limited. This instructor has evidence of some departments in some formerly disadvantaged institutions with classes with about 400 plus learners, forcing the instructors to use a microphone to ensure their instructions are heard from all the corners of the class. However, the use of a microphone is naïve in that the instructor's movement is restricted to the position of the microphone. It curtails the instructors' gestural and kinesthetic dispensation in the class (Gardiner 2006, 2008).

Encourage and Introduce Peer Assessment in the Classroom

Assessment in any learning environment is deemed to influence learning (Luckett and Sutherland 2000). To this end, Kang'ethe's action research in his 2012 Personal Growth and Development (SWP 210) class in one of the formerly disadvantaged institution validated that peer assessment is a strong tool of increasing learners' learning and also filling in literacy and various learning gaps (Kang'ethe 2014; Luckett and Sutherland 2000). It is therefore recommendable that the instructors in various universities help initiate peer assessment exercises in the class. The good thing with peer assessment is that it reduces the instructor's task on the learners' work and instead gives the answers that learners use to validate, assess and correct their colleagues. The instructor then takes a few samples of the students' assessed work to validate and counter assess it. This is to ensure that peer assessment is genuinely done and learners have corrected even grammar and other literacy gaps. This, if done meticulously and consistently is a source of learning and can increase learning motivation, morale and possibly throughput (Kang'ethe 2013, 2014, 2015)

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of large classes needs to be timeously addressed in institutions of learning. Large classes affect learners' learning, cognitive development, thought development and problem solving capacities of their minds. In many universities, especially the so called disadvantaged universities, having large classes is very detrimental to learners' learning. The fact that many of the learners come from secondary schools that did not adequately prepare them, even compounds the problem of having large classes. Large classes lowers learners-instructor interaction and engagement, learner-learner engagement, sets competition for learning materials, lowers learning motivation of both the learners and the instructor' and sets in possibilities of lowering learners throughputs. Apparently in many institutions' the phenomenon of large classes could be associated with learners doing supplementary examinations, special examinations and also repeating. Generally, large classes are perfidious and responsible for grad-

uates who are not adequately prepared for further education such as taking masters degrees or other higher certificates, or being competitive in the job market. Since many employers in South Africa have been complaining of possibilities of universities generating half-baked graduates, it's critical that universities consider eliminating the phenomenon of large classes. Dividing these classes and having the instructor work more could be a significant solution, although the instructors need to be motivated or incentivized for extra load. Adopting the use of classroom peer assessment could largely help improve learning and possible throughputs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ♦ Institutions of higher learning should ensure that ideal class number of students such as 15-20 is in place
- ♦ Institutions of higher learning should ensure that learners are timeously assessed and courses are evaluated
- ♦ Institutions of higher learning should ensure that competent and experienced instructors are in place to ensure competent engagement of the instructors with the learners.
- ♦ Classes should also be physically improved to cultivate morale and motivation of the learners.
- ♦ Literacy lessons should be integrated with the normal lessons to cater for learners who may have weaker literacy capacities.

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