

AN OBSERVATION INTO LARGE GROUP TEACHING

Leela Cejnar

Australian School of Business
University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

Abstract

This article is based on our personal reflections of our teaching practices as the convenor of a large introductory business law course. The challenges is that teaching this course presents can be attributed as much to its size as to the fact that the students are not law students but rather, are from a business discipline. For most of them, this is one of their first university courses and almost certainly, the first law course to which they are exposed. In terms of size, this course can be considered as a “large course” with typically around 500 to 700 students in each cohort, annually. This article investigates some of the challenges faced by a large group of teachers, including by comparing our own approach to teach and our teaching rationale with those adopted by other “large group” teachers, through a review of educational literature.

Keywords

Large group teaching; law to non-law students; teaching rationale; teaching approach; reflective teaching practice.

INTRODUCTION

The course, which is the subject of this article and of reflections relating to our teaching rationale and approach, is a large introductory business law course. The purpose of this course (and of our teaching) is to give these business students a solid understanding of the law as it relates to various business and commercial activities. They do not need, nor are they seeking, a thorough and detailed knowledge of the law itself: they are not studying to become lawyers but to enter the business world with a sound understanding of the importance of the law to what they will do. As such, our teaching rationale is based on several assumptions about these students.

Firstly, as they are not law students, we expect that they do not like, or feel uncomfortable with, legal jargon. Secondly, we assume not all of the students want to do this course but are required to do so for accreditation purposes and so may feel they just need to “get through it” – they may see the course as just being about obtaining a final mark and not about the learning experience. Thirdly, we assume that they do not like reading and especially have an aversion to reading “heavy” legal texts and legal cases. Fourthly, we approach our classes on the basis that students like to feel the lecturer is talking TO them and not AT them but by the same time, not all of them want to actively participate in any kind of discussion with the lecturer and particular not before a large group of peers.

The “dual” approach and how it is implemented

In light of the above, our primary focus is to ensure the learning journey is one of discovery; that it whets the student’s appetite for learning and pushes them to seek to know about the particular discipline, so the student walks away feeling uplifted and not disheartened and importantly, wants to press on with learning more about exactly where and how the law becomes one with the world of commerce and business.

As such, we adopt what might be termed a “dual” approach to teaching. That is, while we use the traditional lecture-style approach to get across the more important and salient points of a lecture, we encourage students to learn by asking questions and openly discussing issues during the lecture (through a more interactive “question and answer” (Q&A) in-lecture session) and after the lecture. We believe the two approaches complement each other and particularly in large group teaching, one approach cannot necessarily be used to the exclusion of the other if the learning experience is to be “student-centred” (rather than just “teaching-centred”).

Further, we also adopt the approach that learning does not begin and end with a lecture. It is only by encouraging students to be curious, to ask questions both within and outside the lecture theatre, that the student’s will develop their interest, desire and the will to learn. There will always be exceptions of course, but based on this approach, the aim of our current teaching practice is to encourage through engagement and participation.

This is by the reason that the more engaged students are, the more interested they become in their learning and the more willing they are to take ownership of their learning. In addition, encouragement and engagement promote confidence in students by pushing them to explore their knowledge. For example, when they have a query, instead of just providing an answer, our response is to ask them a question in return. In this way, we teach them through learning. That is, by encouraging these Q&A sessions, students learn not just from the teacher, but also from the questions and answers of other students. These Q&A sessions also make the lectures less “impersonal” because students do not see the teacher as just a face or a voice at the front of the lecture theatre who is removed and distant, but rather as someone who is in their midst and willing and able to respond to them on their terms.

Importantly, the teacher becomes a facilitator – between the student and the apparent gap in his/her knowledge. That is, as the “facilitator/teacher”, we encourage students to embark on a journey of discovery whereby using this Q&A style approach to teaching, we push the students to higher levels of learning. We make them work out their answers for themselves by digging deeper, by learning through questioning. These Q&A sessions also make the large lectures more “lively” and more “meaningful” to the students.

Critically, this approach also measures how well the teacher has deliver the message to the students. It serves as a barometer through which the teacher can gauge what has not been understood, what has been misunderstood or simply, what has not been covered as well as needed. The reverse is also true: this approach equips students with the adoption of a more robust attitude of learning – learning is about pushing the boundaries, it is not about sitting back and waiting for “the answer”.

Another way to encourage learning, even in a large group teaching, is to focus on the practical by using plain English to explain legal concepts and “real life” examples to illustrate points. Again, for example, the teacher need to remind continuously the students about the link between the law and business and particularly between the law and our own daily lives creates incentives for them to remain focused. If they can be made to see the “relevance” of what they are learning to their own personal situation in particular, they become more interested in what would otherwise be “just another course”.

Similarly, preparing user-friendly powerpoints that are easy to read and carefully selecting and identifying texts that are written for business (not law) students (as these are usually written in a less “legalistic” manner), it is also possible to remove the fear or the apathy some (business) students have about reading legal texts.

Providing and circulating lecture and tutorial materials to students, including weekly powerpoint slides that include an overview of each week’s lecture and a weekly checklist of all the key issues that students are required to know and understand following each lecture, also

helps to provide students with a roadmap – some clear guidance and understanding of where they are going each week and what they are expected to know following each lecture.

“Learning” our own materials, so that instead of focusing on standing in front of the lectern and reading from the slides or from the textbook, we talk “unassisted” to the students and therefore, am able to successfully generate discussion, even within a large group, also encourages participation and engages the cohort more effectively.

Finally, being able to relate the lecture to actual commercial settings and discussing “live” cases that we actually worked on in legal practice (ie: actual problems involving well-known companies and people), rather than just citing cases out of the textbook makes the lecture more relevant, the students more interested and the learning experience becomes more “real”.

Reflective teaching and learning

A review of the educational literature has provided both opportunities to reflect on different approaches and rationales to teaching, as well as insights and interesting comparisons into some other approaches to the teaching of large classes.

By way of example, in Hsu and Jackson (2010) conducted a study which investigated student engagement from the teacher’s perspective (through semi-structured interviews with six course coordinators). Exeter et al. (2010) define a “large class” as a class comprising between 150 and 500 students, because much of the evidence for active learning/student engagement in large classes is based on classes of this size. They suggest that teaching techniques commonly associated with small-class teaching can be used to engage students in very large classes. The problem is that their viewpoint has not been investigated or tested from the student’s perspective. However, from our own teaching practice, we would agree that many of the techniques, strategies and ideas used in a smaller teaching environment (such as how to motivate students and create a stimulating learning environment) are “transferable” into the larger teaching environment. How this is done and how well it is done depends on the skill, teaching ability, “creativity” and commitment of the individual teacher.

Exeter et al.(2010) found that because there are limited opportunities for interaction in a large class, it is difficult to ensure students are engaged with the course content, do not feel anonymous and do not suffer from low levels of motivation and satisfaction. They posed the question: “*How can student engagement be achieved in very large classes?*”.

One way is to shift the balance from a “teacher-centred course”, which involves the transmission of required concepts or knowledge from the lecturer to the class, with few or no opportunities for student interaction, to a “student-centred” mode of teaching which focuses on active and problem-based learning, using activities such as workshops, case studies or experiments within the large lecture setting (Exeter et al., 2010).

Exeter et al.(2010) teach in the School of Population Health at the University of Auckland – their course is science-based and so, the type of “problem-based learning” they suggest within the large lecture setting is both possible and beneficial to their students.

The study of (business) law is different. The interactive tasks that a lecturer can focus on in a large lecture are limited. The “problem-based” learning activities suggested by Exeter et al. (2010), are either not used in the teaching of law or are more appropriate for the accompanying (smaller group) tutorials that students are also required to attend.

Exeter et al. (2010) also suggest by using small-group discussion activities (such as in-class quizzes, small group discussion exercises or Q&A sessions to improve and encourage interaction in the large class. They make an interesting observation that recent advances in mobile phone technology allow for short message service or SMS-based learning, so students can reply to a question from the lecturer by sending a text message from their mobile phones, with the results being immediately displayed on the screen. While this is one method of

introducing an interactive activity into a large lecture we are not a fan of this method because our focus is on improving the personal interaction and communication between the lecturer and the student. The use of this type of technology further removes any opportunity for personal interaction, introduces another avenue for distraction and dangerously shifts the focus of the lecture from being “learning-centred” or “student-centred” to potentially being “game-centred” or “gimmick-centred”.

Bristol (1989) discussed the importance of providing students with useful notes, telling them what assessment activities they are expected to undertake and engaging them in thinking rather than note-taking. This will give students a clear understanding of “...*how the lecture links to and supports subsequent learning activities and what they should be doing...*”. Gibbs and Habeshaw (1989) also state that it is important to be aware about what your students are doing during your lecture.

Students in our lectures are provided with a full set of our powerpoint slides prior to the lecture so that they know what to expect from the lecture in advance. We also keep eye contact with them so that we can see if they are looking uncertain, confused or even bored! At the appropriate time, we either ask a question to return the focus to the lecture or, if appropriate, we suggest a short break to short-circuit any potential problems with distraction or uncertainty.

Gibbs and Habeshaw (1989) also suggest using good signposts. We call these “overviews” or “summaries” and for every topic we summarise what are coming next and what have just been completed. We also provide students with a “checklist” of key points they need to know for each topic.

Gibbs and Habeshaw (1989) also recommend asking for “5-minute” feedback from the students. They recommend using this technique to “...*ask students to write down, either from memory or by allowing them to look through their notes, the three most important things from the lecture*”. The lecturer then projects his/her three important things and this gives both the lecturer and the student some idea as to what points were understood, what was missed and what needs further clarification or reinforcement, following each lecture.

The other approach is to consider asking students to write down three questions they wish to be answered at the start of the next lecture by bringing their questions up to the front of the lecture room at the end of the lecture. Gibbs and Habeshaw (1989) suggest that such an approach would give students the opportunity to formulate their questions and will also allow students to ask their question without appearing “silly”.

Gibbs and Habeshaw (1989) also suggest using “buzz groups”, “syndicate groups” and “pyramids” or “snowball groups” – each of which is designed to generate small-group discussion with the idea that “a rapporteur”, appointed from within each group, will report back on the group’s discussion. However, the problems we have with this approach are in relation to time constraints, crowd control and “equity”. In relation to time constraints and crowd control, in a large lecture setting if these activities were not supervised or monitored appropriately, they could result in the lecturer losing control of the room and this in turn will also create a stressful environment for both the lecturer and the students alike. In relation to “equity” issues, the “rapporteur” will almost always be the same individual or group of individuals who like to speak up and who have no qualms about doing so – the quieter, shy, less confident or less interested student will still remain in the background and in reality, this is the student that the lecturer needs to “capture”.

Gibbs and Habeshaw (1989) also introduce the concept of the lecturer using a “self-diagnostic checklist” or “instant questionnaire”. Another approach is that of using a “reflective journal” over the teaching semester, which will allow for “metacognition” (Downing et al., 2007), about what works and what does not, with a particular teaching approach or rationale.

Jenkins (1992) also discusses the difficulties students encounter with asking questions in lectures and the difficulty for lecturers in answering the questions of a large class. They bemoan the fact that the lecture is just a means of recording content for most students. They suggest the best approach is to lecture in short bursts, using brief learning tasks before or after each “burst” to encourage discussion. Like Gibbs and Habeshaw (1989), Jenkins also suggests that course materials should be made available to students outside the lecture.

Biggs (2003) points out that in a large class, there is virtually no contact between the lecturer and the teacher, the students remain largely anonymous and that specific large class strategies are required to counteract the student’s feelings of anonymity. Davis and McLeod (1996) defined a “large class” as the teacher’s point of view, a group of 40 or more students because, they suggest, groups of this size do not permit “close contact”. From the student’s point of view, Davis and McLeod (1996) consider a class is a “large class” when the students begin to feel anonymous.

Exeter et al. (2010) and Gibbs and Habeshaw (1989) also suggest “brainstorming” or breaking the class into smaller discussion or “buzz” groups, in which students are asked to consider or generate a list of specific issues. A representative from the group is asked to share the group’s “findings” from their discussion with the rest of the cohort. The same concerns, we previously raised in relation to time constraints, crowd control and “equity” would also apply here.

Ewang (2008), cites Gower (1950) who observes that “... *the point of lectures is not to display the teacher’s learning but to encourage students to learn.*” Like Ewang, Allen (2007) says the point of lectures is to form a dialogue between the lecturer and the student, not to simply regurgitate (at times, difficult and complex) information or to display the lecturer’s knowledge.

Willcoxson (1998) suggests that lecturers need to understand what students are taking away from the lectures and to create a safe learning space, in which questioning regularly occurs and the expression of ignorance or uncertainty is seen as a step forward rather than a step backward on the road to understanding.

Reflections on the implications of the literature review

One significant implication the literature has is that teachers need to discover what students are actually taking away from their lectures (Willcoxson, 1998), which may be best done by the use of “metacognition” techniques (such as a reflective journal: Downing et al., 2007).

Similarly, rather than waiting until the end of a semester to obtain feedback from students through the formal evaluation process, using Gibbs and Habeshaw’s (1989) suggestion of obtaining “5-minute feedback” at the end of every lecture will allow teachers to track how student’s are going while they are still enrolled in the course, rather than after they have moved on. In this way, students can actually benefit from any improvements that might come from their own feedback.

That said, the “5-minute feedback” approach will only be useful if it is a constructive use of time and does not become a “whinge” session. It would also need to be used consistently across different streams and that teachers will have to actually act on any questions or suggestions. Importantly, teachers should ensure that they give students feedback about what changes or improvements have been made as a result of their input. The best way of working out whether any change is beneficial will be by asking for more feedback – either informally from the students or through other “5-minute” feedback sessions or formally through the evaluation process.

CONCLUSION

Adopting the practice of reflection, both of our own suggested teaching approach and rationale, as well as those suggested from the literature review, the following issues still remain for further investigation (and perhaps as the subject of a future article). These include:

- (a) how to deal with those students whose first language is not the language of instruction;
- (b) how to deal with naturally shy students who are afraid to speak up or who may be intimidated by a large lecture theatre setting, no matter what teaching practice or rationale is adopted;
- (c) how to deal with students who may have learning difficulties or other special needs or “equity” issues;
- (d) how to inspire the tutoring staff and to ensure that they are able to adopt and practice the lecturer’s own teaching approach/rationale.

The way forward: how to monitor what’s going on?

There are several suggestions, derived from our own reflective teaching as well as from the above literature review, as to how teachers can monitor what is or is not working with their teaching approach and practice.

One possibility is to obtain feedback from “focus groups”. The “focus group” would be a student-led discussion forum, for students to freely discuss the course with the teacher outside the constraints of the lecture and in a more informal manner than the formal evaluation process permits.

Another suggestion is for the teacher to conduct brainstorming sessions. The purpose of these sessions would be to give students the opportunity to discuss “key cases” or a short question, allowing for more interaction in the lecture but also creating a situation where the teacher can gauge whether the students are following what is going on or whether they are “lost”.

Using feedback exercises at end of each lecture, which would be a short exercise at the end of each lecture either asking students to identify 3 key points they learned from the lecture or to ask 3 questions arising from the lecture or to suggest 3 ways the lecture could be improved, would also provide an opportunity to keep the “finger on the pulse” and monitor what is working and what is not.

Finally, reflective teaching, so the use of a reflective journal as a quality-assurance tool will help to improve the teaching practices through self-review and self-monitoring. Using the journal will also measure if there is constructive alignment between the expected learning outcomes for the course, no matter its size, and what the students are being taught/asked to do.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen V. 2007. *A critical reflection on the methodology of teaching law to non-law students* Web Journal of Current Legal Issues 4 Wed JCLI
<http://webjcli.ncl.ac.uk/2007/issue 4/allen4.html>
- Amato D and Quirt T. 1990. *Lecture handouts of projected slides in a medical course* Medical Teacher 12: 291-296
- Biggs J. 2003. *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* The Society for Research into Higher Education Open University Press (2nd edn)
- Davis G and McLeod N. 1996. *Teaching Large Classes: the silver lining* HERDSA News 18(1): 3-5, 20
- Downing K, Ho R, Shin K, Vrijmoed L and Wong E. 2007. *Metacognitive developments and moving away* Educational Studies, 33(1): 1-13
- Downing K, Kwong T, Chan SW, Lam TF and Downing WK . 2009. *Problem-based learning and the development of metacognition* Higher Education, 57: 609-621
- Exeter DJ, Ameratunga S, Ratima M, Morton S, Dickson M, Hsu D and Jackson R. 2010. *Student engagement in very large classes: the teachers' perspective*. Studies in Higher Education, 35(7): 761-775
- Ewang, F. 2008. *Teaching Law to Accounting and Business Students: A Cumulative Dual Model* Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice Volume 5/2, 16-38
- Felder RM. 1997. *Beating the Numbers Game: Effective Teaching in Large Classes* ASEE Annual Conference, Milwaukee, WI, June
<http://www4.ncsu.edu/unity/lockers/users/f/felder/public/Papers/Largeclasses.htm>
- Felder RM. 1992. *How About a Quick One?* Chemical Engineering Education. 26(1): 18-19
- Gibbs G and Habeshaw T. 1989. *Preparing to teach: an introduction to effective teaching in higher education* Bristol, Technical and Education.
- James R, McInnis C and Devlin M (2002) *Assessing Learning in Australian Universities* Centre for the study of Higher Education
<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/03/large.html>
- Jenkins A. 1992. *Encouraging active learning in structured lectures* Bristol, Technical and Education.
- Norman GR. 2004. *What's the active ingredient in active learning?* Advances in Physiology Education. 9: 1-3
- Teaching and Educational Development Institute, Australian Universities Teaching Committee. 2003. *Teaching Large Classes Project 2001 – Final Report*

Waugh G and Waugh R, 1999. *The value of lectures in teacher education: the group perspective* Australian Journal of Teacher Education 24: 35-47

Willcoxson L, 1998. *The impact of academic's learning and teaching preferences on their teaching practices: a pilot study*. Studies in Higher Education. 23(1): 59-70.