

Exploring Pedagogical Strategies for Teaching Large (Merged) Classes in Values Education 1

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Abstract This study aims to explore pedagogical strategies for teaching large (merged) classes in Values Education 1, one of the general education courses in the then College of Arts and Social Sciences, Philippine Normal University. Initially, the study challenges the faculty and students in a large class exploring some pedagogical strategies that make the teaching and learning process more effective. Utilizing a qualitative-exploratory method, two classes in Values Education were merged for one semester (1st semester, Academic Year 2011-2012) to form a large class with a total of 84 students. Qualitative responses of students taken from short open-ended questionnaire, focus group and reflection papers were gathered and analysed to provide answers to the two major problems of the study: challenges in teaching a large class and identification of pedagogical strategies that students find effective in learning from a large class. Reflective journals highlighted students' learning using some pedagogical strategies.

Keywords: Large Class, Pedagogical Strategies, Teacher Education

Introduction

The Millennium Development Goal on education that targets Education for All (EFA), boys and girls alike, have increased the number of pupils in schools. Similarly, vocational training in secondary schools and expansion of higher education institutions in the countryside have hastened large classes in basic education. This trend in a number of developing countries, but industrialized countries underwent the same experience during the early stages of their development (Valerien, 1991).

In the Philippines, the young population structure and the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) contributed to a large number of children enrolled in basic education. For instance, in 2007, about 12 million pupils enrolled in elementary education, while 5 million in the secondary level. The number of teachers employed and classrooms however, does not increase proportionately to the yearly increase of enrolment. In addition, the Department of Education mandated all public schools to increase participation rate of pupils and ordered schools not to reject students. These conditions resulted in the phenomenon of large classes. Large classes are usually felt in the National Capital Region, Region IV-A or CALABARZON and the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (DepEd, Basic Education Information System Report, 2007). The increasing number of pupils/students which makes up large classes will be continuously experienced by the basic education sector for the succeeding years.

The Philippine Normal University is mandated by R.A. 9647 as the National Center for Teacher Education. As such, PNU's one responsibility is to provide recommendations as regards innovations in teaching to the Department of Education and Commission on Higher Education. As stated earlier, the increase in participation rate of pupils, as

mandated by DepEd, resulted in large classes. In response to this educational trend, pre-service teachers should necessarily be trained to teach large classes. Exploring on different pedagogical strategies that would be effective could possibly resolve the current problem of basic education. Studies show that teaching large classes is very problematic among the teachers and students (Locastro, 2001; Ward & Jenkins, 1992). For instance, one Chinese student in this study revealed the first hand experience of the same problematic situation in China. According to the student, in China, a small class is composed of almost 70-80 students for primary, middle school and high school. The teacher could not take care of every student since there are too many students in one class. Some of the students would not listen anymore; others would tend to fall asleep. The worst thing was when some students would not attend classes, instead only played games and computers outside the school. There is difficulty in monitoring students' attendance since teachers cannot memorize all the names of their students. As Ward (1992) stated "recalling student's name is quite difficult in a large class." Hence, there is a need for research to address problems on large classes to ensure the quality of teaching and learning. The merging of classes had been tried out in selected general education courses of the Philippine Normal University. One of these general courses was Values Education 1, the focus of this research. The data were gathered from two classes (merged) during the first semester of Academic year 2011-2012.

Literature Review

A large class has ceased to be a new phenomenon anymore. There is vast literature on issues related to the teaching and learning both in small and large classes (Nakabugo et al., 2008). The review focuses on the teacher's performance and students' learning, effectiveness of the teaching methods used and class size in relation to students' behavior.

Teacher's Performance and Students' Learning

There is always a debate about whether small class is better than a large one. The issue of class size and its impact on student learning has been debated in tertiary level education in that often it is held that learning occurs in proportion to class size. The smaller the class, the more students learn (Mgeni, 2013). Many researches support the idea that class size affects teachers' performance and students' learning. Blatchford, et al. (2007) aver that the number of children in a class will increase the amount of time that teachers spend in procedural matters and conversely, decrease the amount of time spent on instruction and dealing with individual children. More time is spent by the teacher to manage a large class than the ordinary class size. Some participants in the study of Cakmac (2009), for instance, held that in small classes, teachers would become less tired, more productive, and develop more positive interactions and effective communication with students. The major challenges faced by teachers in large classes include getting students to participate, getting them to pay attention, assessment challenges, and identifying weak students. These findings suggest that teachers are facing challenges that must be addressed if students have to perform well (Mgeni, 2013).

Class Size and Students' Behavior

Delivering quality and value to a large class presents unique challenges, which, according to Kennedy and Siegfried (1997), cover difficulty to control the quality of student learning, dealing with student diversity, effectively carrying out formative evaluation, maintaining attention, and getting authentic student-centered learning. Children in large classes

are more likely to be off task, particularly in terms of neither attending to the teacher nor to their work when on their own (Blatchford, et al., 2003). Pupil discipline is seen to be more difficult in large classes and more of an intrusion into the teaching and learning process. By contrast, in smaller classes, there is more time to mark work, assess pupils in terms of process as well as product, and plan work (Blatchford, et al, 2002). Also in small classes, more chance comes when pupils would be the focus of a teacher's attention. Conversely, in a large class, there is more chance that a pupil would be in "audience" mode, that is, listening to the teacher address all pupils equally or another pupil. Small classes seem to allow more individual attention while in large classes, children are more likely to be one of the crowd (Blatchford, et al, 2007).

Effective Teaching Methods in Large Classes

Inevitably, class size influences teaching styles (Capel, et al, 1995). The oldest conventional method of transferring information to a sizeable audience is very much instructor-centered and makes learning passive. The conventional method of teaching large groups has been criticized as being negative, as it encourages rote learning and reveals lack of independent learning by students (Thomas, et al, n.d.). According to Matiru, et al. (1995), in Mgeni (2013), the traditional passive view of learning involves situations where material is delivered to students using a lecture base format.

In terms of the most effective methods of teaching large classes, most teachers perceive the lecture/discussion method as the best. Teachers' comments or reasons for rating this method as the most effective seem to suggest that it involves students in active learning rather than passively listening to a lecture (Mgeni, 2013). In another study, the

lecture/discussion teaching method is the most preferred among students. Student's reason for selecting this as the most valuable method seems to suggest that they have a desire to be somewhat active learners, engaging in discussion rather than passively listening to a lecture. No student would indicate that the lecture/discussion method poses the least valuable teaching method. This finding suggests that most students enjoy a blend that includes at least some component of active learning/participation in combination with traditional lecture, and confirms the importance of including some level of discussion during the class, but also providing structure through an organized lecture (Carpenter, 2006).

Purposes of the Research Study

This research aims to explore and document pedagogical strategies in teaching large (merged) classes in Values Education 1. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges (problems encountered) by the teacher and students in teaching large (merged) classes?
2. What are the effective pedagogical strategies for large classes as perceived by students?

Research Design and Participants of the Study

The study is a qualitative exploratory research focused on merged classes in the general education courses of the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) at the PNU. In particular, it describes the merged classes in Values Education 1 (Personhood Development) exploring some effective pedagogical strategies.

Classes for merging were purposively selected by the Registrar's office from the general education courses

offered by the different departments of the CASS. In this study, two sections of first year students were selected and merged composing of 84 students in Values Education 1 during the first semester of academic year 2011-2012. The researcher of this study served a dual role in it—as a faculty teaching the course and at the same time a researcher.

Data Collection and Analysis

In the Philippine setting, each academic year in higher education is composed of two (2) semesters, equivalent to four (4) quarters. In the first quarter (June to mid-August), observing and noting down of difficulties in teaching large (merged) class were done. Students were also asked after the first quarter of their own learning difficulties in the large class through a focus group discussion.

Since the exploration of pedagogies on large classes was done in the general education courses of the CASS, the faculty members teaching merged classes, shared each other's experiences in teaching during the first quarter, and decided to be more focused on exploring more innovative strategies for the second quarter. The strategies worth exploring would possibly be discipline-based, though there could be general and innovative strategies that might possibly be effective in teaching large classes. The faculty finally decided to use and explore at least five-six strategies for the second quarter.

Participant-observation was used to gather data. The students in the Values Education 1 merged class were observed and the teaching-learning process documented while teaching the course. Specific focus centered on the innovative pedagogical content knowledge applied by the faculty- researcher in teaching the specific topic and documenting the students' learning behavior. The researcher kept a daily record (research diary) of the teaching-learning

process following the observation guide below:

Date of Teaching:
Course:
Topic:
Description of Strategy Used:
Positive Results on the Learning of Students:
Difficulties Encountered:
Observable Learning Behaviors of the Students/Class:

The faculty teaching a specific course was expected to write down the instructional process after each lesson as a means of data collection from the teacher's point of view. The faculty-researcher considered these processes in gathering the data from students in VE 1 merged classes. In addition, an assigned process observer (student teacher) tried to capture the students' behavior in the activity process. The teaching-learning process was audio taped. The faculty-researcher requested the student-teacher-process-observer to take charge of writing some field notes on the observed behavior/reactions of the students in the classroom activities.

Non-graded essays were used to elicit feedback from students regarding challenges and pedagogical strategies in teaching a merged class. They were asked to write a reflection on the process of teaching the large class identifying their learning difficulties and suggesting ways by which their learning could be maximized in large classes. Open-ended questions were given them at the middle and before the end of the semester as guides to their reflection. The focus group

discussion done before the end of the semester sought to verify the students' responses regarding their experiences in a large class.

Tallying and using thematic approach helped code the students' responses gathered from focus group, and reflection papers. The faculty researcher sorted out and classified data gathered, tallied the frequencies of responses from the open-ended questionnaire, and summarized them into a matrix.

Results and Discussion

Problems Encountered by the Teacher

During the first few weeks of teaching, some difficulties in handling the merged class were experienced by the teacher. One of the problems concerned the preparation of the room for large classes including the needed equipment such as lapel microphone, multimedia projector, or at least TV for video presentation. She had to exert double effort to teach large classes without the prepared big room and multimedia equipment. Without the lapel microphone, the teacher had to speak loudly in the large class than in the class with an ordinary class size. Aside from the extra time needed in preparing the equipment/gadgets to be used for the conduct of the lesson, she had to buy her own equipment to make the large class easy to handle.

Discipline among the students posed another problem during the first few weeks. Since first year students behaved like high school students, still full of energy, they became noisy reacting to lively activities. Too many interactions during discussion and activities delayed the topics supposed to be finished in a semester. Extra effort then was given to discuss specific topics.

Checking of attendance could not be done using a seat plan, as in the ordinary class. Giving of attendance sheet to be signed by all students would usually take time. Another strategy to check the attendance, which was perceived as effective, allowed the team leader for each group to write the names of absences in the group and give it to the teacher. To facilitate name calling and grading individual students, students had to use name tags.

Strategies to be used for large classes also proved challenging on the teacher's part. The strategies that the faculty decided to try out were multi-methodology to address the diversity of learning styles and multiple intelligences of students. Faculty members of the different disciplines were given academic freedom and encouraged to use their ingenuity to explore an appropriate strategy based on the philosophy and content of the course.

Problems Encountered By Students

Large class creates excessive noise (Nakabugo, n.d). Most of the students perceived noise as a problem during discussions and activities. Some students were uncontrollable during the time for classroom activities. As a result, some refused to listen and participate because they could not fully understand what was going on. This observation coincided with the idea that students who could not concentrate well on the topic tended to be noisy, too (Carbone, 1999).

Monitoring individual student's development was another problem in a large class. This is a valid perception because the teacher found it difficult also to monitor student's progress much less to remember students' names. Those who were active sharing their experiences could easily be remembered, but for those quiet/timid ones, it was too hard for them to be noticed in the large class.

Unhealthy competition between the two sections was also perceived by few students. Students knew it well that they belong to another section. Merging was not effective in a sense, since the two sections were not really treated as one class. Because of this perception, according to some students, they tended to compete with one another so that one Chinese student in this merged class gave her reflection on the disadvantages of having a large class:

First of all, as compared with small class, the big class has obviously more students. In a way, it is not good for teachers to teach all students. Sometimes the classroom is not so quiet anymore because of sharing too many ideas. Some students take the time to have free talking about other things. The quality of the teaching in the class decreases. Secondly, in order to give us more chances to share ideas, we lose more time to be taught by our professor. As a student, teachers are our guide, we need them. Thirdly, it is unfair for some students who are lazy—they will catch some more time to be lazy because not all of us can share opinions in a short time.

However, some students have positive perceptions toward large class – the more the merrier, so to speak.

Some students appreciated the social interaction in a large class that presented more ideas coming from its diverse composition. There could also be more chances of getting to know other students from another section, thus making more friends according to the perception of some students. One student has reflected on the advantages of being in a large class:

We experience different feelings in this big class, it seems we are in a big family. We can share different ideas to our siblings and our parent (our professor). Even in solving one small problem, we can

get all ways to solve it. That is a good way and a good situation for us to share our thoughts. We can not only improve our speaking skills, but also learn how to catch the chance. We can compare with others and find out about our shortcoming. We can make more friends in the class in sharing our studying equipment.

The table below shows the students’ responses when asked whether they found any difficulty to be in a large class.

Table 1. Students’ Responses

YES Response = 68	NO Response = 11
Difficulties encountered	Positive Reaction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • couldn’t monitor the students’ development (10) • noisy classmates (10) • too crowded (7) • misunderstanding (4) • can’t understand the topic well (4) • unhealthy Competition (4) • confusion about the reports(1) • biased reporters (1) • clashing of ideas (1) • Less participation (1) • timidity is present among students (1) • miscommunication (1) • inaudible presentation (1) • low chance of participation (1) • small area allotment (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • more ideas presented (2) • more social interaction because of the large class size (2) • more fun to learn • controlled class • more chance of getting to know other classmates from another section • there is variety of ideas because of the diverse composition of the class • better chance of having more friends

Effective Pedagogical Strategies for Large Classes

Peer/Team teaching was found to be one of the effective strategies in teaching large classes (Michaelsen, 1982; Valerien, 1991). In the research under study, students were grouped into three’s to deliver one topic in the syllabus and guided to do the presentation in a lesson plan format.

Suggested strategy was prescribed in some topics, however, students were encouraged to use their creative mind to innovate a strategy that would most likely be applicable and effective in a large class. In this approach, students were supposed to take the role of the teacher-facilitator. Most of the students appreciated this strategy, however, some did not, particularly if the student-facilitator was not good to handle the class which usually led to the use of the traditional reporting strategy. Notably, the students' perception of learning was divided. Others would like their peers to facilitate them, even if there was a problem on the behavior of their classmates, like excessive noise during interactive activities, so with classroom management while others found it inappropriate for a large class. There was one good reflection paper of the student citing this strategy:

Our class is actually composed of two sections. I would say that discussions flow smoothly. We have many opinions and knowledge to share about a certain topic. Each learning team's report was in order. I was able to develop my relationship with other classmates, especially when we are in small groups. There are also small problems in our class, there is no perfect group, anyway. Since we belong to a large class, the number of chairs is insufficient and sometimes, it's hot and noisy, particularly during group activities. Going out of the room became difficult because of the large enrollees.

Lakbay-Diwa or guided meditation used by one student facilitator was well appreciated by the students in a large class. Since this is a reflective activity, the students' ability to focus on the topic was observed. They participated well in this activity and during the discussion of the topic. The maximum participation allowed the students to listen first during the meditation process and then reflect on what they

have learned. To quote two of the students who emphasized the use of this strategy,

Understanding where we come from and where we are going led us to the core of our being makes us decipher the different emotions of a person. I also learned how to share one's character and the values associated with it. Through the guided meditation facilitated by my classmate, I learned the things that I need to value in life.

Through Values Education, I learned to take care of things that I have such as having good relationship with my classmates. I learned to be open with them, that is why we became close to each other. I also learned how to be a good student because of the activities we experience in our sessions that help us. It's easy to understand the topic through guided meditation because the students can imagine the situation they are in.

The use of **video clips** was also found to be an effective strategy in teaching a large class. The faculty-researcher provided the multi-media equipment such as LCD and sound system, while the student-facilitator had to bring his/her own laptop and present the topic using Microsoft PowerPoint. Alongside with most of the presentations was the use of video clips taken by the students from the worldwide web. Notably, students were attracted to video clips presented, especially if the content of the video clips relates to their experiences or suits their age. Since students could relate to what was presented, they had to listen to the story or watch the movie. One student said that:

The video clips presented to us were nice because they are related to the topics and the themes are "IN" to us. They caught our attention because the stories are close to our experiences as adolescents.

Interactive activities/Energizers (games and simulations, quotations) are also good strategy to start a lesson in a large class, according to some students, but the facilitator had to be controlled and presented them well. Energizers that require movement or other motor coordination tend to elicit full energy from the students and to create noise. This could be an effective strategy for motivating them to learn when handled properly by the facilitator. In one student reflection paper,

With so many topics discussed in Values Education, we both learn and enjoy our way of learning because we learn how to interact with our classmates.

Debate is another effective strategy appreciated by most of the students talking about the topic on RH Bill (Reproductive Health Bill). Most of the high average students like this strategy in particular for the reason that they could share their thoughts and position regarding the topic. Debate stimulated their minds, especially when the topic being discussed was found to be relevant to their lives. It was a stimulating strategy, suited to a merged class which showed the tendency for two sections to display competition. However, some of the students perceived the competition as unhealthy, because it often led to argumentative discussion.

The debate in our class was good. All members of the team prepared and did the research. This good strategy made us learn how to look for ways on how to argue with our opponent using our informed opinions. Students are active using this kind of discussion because all members of the class are interested in listening to each speaker. The only problem is when the class turns noisy since everyone wants to speak.

Table 2. Pedagogical Strategies

Specific Strategies Used (f)	Frequency (f)
• Peer teaching	63
• <i>Lakbay-Diwa</i> (Guided Meditation)	30
• Video clips- (22)	22
• Energizer/ Interactive activities	8
• Debate	6
• Communication activity	2
• Showing of Pictures	1
• Creative Presentation	1

The faculty-researcher in-charge of the class managed to get the attention by giving provocative questions to clarify the topic for discussion. Question and answer strategy promotes interaction and learning in large classes (Nakabugo, n.d.). The students focused on listening to the questions posted by the teacher because of being afraid to be called on without the ready answer. Probing students to think about the lesson using question and answer encourages more class participation.

Conclusions

In sum, teaching a large class was challenging. Many difficulties were encountered as well as insights gained by both the teacher and the students. The research affirms most of the literature on large classes -- more problems met rather than its benefits. However, the reality of teaching large classes in the Philippines, especially in basic education, is evident. More effective strategies must be explored, however, most of the strategies used in the Values Education class were only observed in terms of their effectiveness in handling the class to catch students' attention and motivation in the teaching learning process. Students' perception, according to their qualitative responses, suggested that peer teaching, guided meditation and the use of video clips are the strategies they

liked most in learning the content of the course in Values Education 1. There could be more unexplored strategies suitable to differentiated instruction. The conduct of a follow up research on large class to explore other effective strategies considering the abilities and diversity of the students is needed.

To ensure quality of the teaching-learning process in a large class, classroom facilities intended for a large size of students must be prepared and be made readily available such as large room with enough chairs, multimedia projector, laptop and sound system, though not the sole ingredients to ensure quality instruction. The learning style and ability of the students could also be factors. There are noted cultural differences in learning. For example in China, the teacher tells the students on how to do everything, but in the Philippines and other western countries, the teacher lets the students find the answers by themselves (based on personal reflection of a Chinese student). Learning styles, student's ability as well as cultural differences have their own advantages and disadvantages. It is not only the size of the class that truly matters to meet quality instruction. Choosing the right pedagogical strategy entails making a connection with the learning style and the students' ability in the large class.

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