

Academic tribes: reflections on teaching large classes

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Abstract

All tribes have customs. Central to such customs are stories handed down by oral tradition among the clansmen. Centuries later, those stories continue to hold powerful and persuasive meanings among all members of the tribe, often assuming mythical proportions. To challenge the story is to undermine tribal custom, offend the tribe. To celebrate the story is to secure one's initiation into the tribe. This paper addresses that tribal group located in South African universities and whose identity is defined by the act of teaching and complaining about large classes with a minimum of resources.

At conferences, seminars, planning committee meetings, senate chambers, cocktails, parties, the same story is "handed down" with striking consistency: "I teach a class of 250 students. I have no teaching assistant. I am forced to lecture in order to cover (sic) the content. I cannot explore ideas or provide individual attention. I have no choice but to set multiple choice questions; essays would take forever to mark. I spend all my time marking. There is no time for research. "

These are myths. Not in the sense that they are false, but that they assume a "taken-for-grantedness" which in time blinds the tribe to the search for alternatives within existing institutional contexts.

In this spirit of searching for alternatives, I will present a reflective essay on teaching a large class of undergraduate students at the University of Durban-Westville. The class consists of 280 students in the fourth year of university

training for the teaching profession. The class comprises two groups of students: those in the fourth year of an education degree (BPaed) and those in the diploma year (HEd) following a first degree in the social (BA, BComm etc) or natural sciences (e.g. BSc). The course introduces students to principles, practices and policies associated with *Language and Learning in the Classroom* (LLC).

The reflective essay combines data from multiple sources which both inform the case and validate any single source of information. The data combines personal observations, self-administered questionnaires completed by all students as part of the course evaluation, focus group interviews with 8-10 students in five different teaching disciplines (e.g. science students), and written transcripts of student work. I now draw attention to five innovative elements of the LLC curriculum.

First, the LLC curriculum is a response to widely-observed limitations of the undergraduate degree in South African universities (Jansen 1995b) That is, the existing curriculum is heavily theoretical in orientation, teaching is bent on coverage of essential disciplinary content, and assessment is based on one-off final examinations in the form of paper-and-pencil tests. Students leave such courses having covered large amounts of content in a discipline which they "swot-up" for a high-stakes examination.

Second, the LLC curriculum begins with the identification of a limited number of core competencies as the focus of teaching, learning and assessment in the course. The competencies are made explicit at the beginning of the course and throughout the year as what the students should focus on. The "content" is brought in on a need-to-know basis i.e., primarily in the interest of giving access to the competency and not as having value in and of itself. I will refer to such content as "contingent content". The core competencies are at once simple and profound, and they include the following: writing, reading, critical thinking, evaluating, communicating, analysing, comparing, and others. The focus on

competencies comports well with policy proposals in the national qualifications framework and with the university's re-orientation towards modularisation of the curriculum.

Third, the choice of "contingent content" is not trivial. The content is carefully selected against a competency in order to satisfy four conditions: (a) the content must speak to the diversity of student backgrounds, culture and orientations present within the classroom; in this class, diversity means Muslim, Hindu, Christian and atheist; Indian, African, Coloured and White; South African and international; men and women; handicapped and gay; and other manifestations of difference; (b) the content must be directed towards a current, topical issue concerned with language and learning in the classroom; (c) the content must be provocative, controversial, contested; that is, the selected content should heighten the standards of engagement in the university classroom; and (d) the content should give optimal expression to the relevant competency. Consider the following samples of units taught within the LLC course:

- Story from *Time Magazine* about Joe Baseball, new principal of a black school with a terrible reputation for violence, crime and high drop-out statistics. With a baseball bat and loud hailer, the principal cleans out the school and academic performance skyrockets. Students write an essay in which they assess Joe Baseball's strategy and make a reasoned argument reflecting a personal position as a teacher; the pros and cons of Baseball's strategy must be outlined.

The competencies in focus are evaluation, critical thinking, expository writing. The form of assessment is an evaluative essay. The context is the familiar KwaZulu-Natal township classroom, where such schools exists in numbers. The provocative and topical issue is the banning of corporal punishment in SA schools.

- Biographical Outline of *The Ntombi who is an Nkosi* in the Mark Gevisser Profile in the Weekly Mail & Guardian. (A remarkable medical doctor who is also a traditional leader in Northern Natal.) Gevisser explores the tensions, well-articulated by Dr. Zungu, between tradition and modernity, Zulu identity and politics. Students write a concept test in which their understanding of the issues raised in the article is tested. Students take home and read the article with a simple instruction: make sure you understand what you read; then the test.

The competency in focus is reading for understanding. The form of assessment is a short test of critical concepts. The context is the political debates in Kwa-Zulu Natal about Zulu identity, tradition and politics. The provocative issue is Zulu nationalism. The content draws on issues which have meaning for most of the students e.g., Nkosi traditions.

- Conduct of research in the classroom where students would be doing their teaching practice. The students collect data on the frequency, quality, origins and treatment of questions in the classroom. Data is collected from the same class, teacher and subject over five successive periods. Students prepare a research report complete with recorded data, data analyses and research findings.

The competency in focus is doing basic research. The form of assessment is the scoring of a research report. The current and topical issue is questioning in the classroom, a policy directive in the White Paper on Education and Training which calls for critical thinking, questioning, inquiry, investigation and open-endedness in classrooms. The provocative issue is students' own tendencies to create teacher-centred classrooms as beginning teachers.

- Reading of the colourful weather chart in the *Daily News*. Students are to

read the basic weather details including dam levels, radio-broadcasting times (e.g., of surfing conditions); and the weather-related symbols represented (e.g., symbol for fire hazards). Students complete a weather chart.

The competency in focus is reading and understanding symbolic language. The form of assessment is a numeracy test. The relevant issue is common-sense knowledge of a section of a newspaper report which affects all our lives. The provocative issue is the discovery that students have difficulty reading another language even when the basics are in question e.g., interpreting pictures and graphs.

Fourth, the form of student appraisal reflects the emergence of what has been called authentic or performance assessment (Resnick & Resnick 1994; Baker 1995; Jansen 1995a). Students in the LLC course are assessed in multiple contexts: a written essay, a research study, a weather-based mathematics test, dramatic performances, a critical analysis and oral presentations in the classroom. Since we know from experience and research that not all students perform equally in the same assessment context, this diversification of contexts is more equitable especially in diverse classrooms (Rothman 1994; Baker & O'Neil 1994). But the focus on demonstrating a competency - as opposed to reciting or memorising a text for a high stakes examination - is also a more authentic representation of what students know (Linn, Baker & Dunbar 1991).

But the most controversial aspect of the assessment strategy is that students are allowed to repeat a particular assessment task as often as they wish and until such time that both the lecturer and the student agree in conference that (a) achievement on the task demonstrates satisfactory performance and that (b) learning has actually taken place. Each time the student repeats an assessment task, the nature of the task is altered slightly to limit potential for the routinisation of the task or the memorisation of performance. It was not uncommon in the LLC

course for students to re-do an assessment task 3-5 times; the standards were tough and uncompromising, even though "opportunity-to-learn" was maximised.

Fifth, the course relies principally on student communication in the classroom. A typical 40 minute lecture begins with the introduction of a controversial issue e.g.,

Should schools in the new South Africa teach homosexuality as an alternative life-style? Make a curriculum argument, not simply a moral one

Students volunteer or are selected to state a position on the question in front of the entire classroom. Students are challenged as they present. Emotional outbursts are challenged and channelled into coherent arguments; the competency is logical reasoning. At first, students were reluctant to volunteer given concerns about being embarrassed. Later on, as they realised that a supportive but challenging context was provided, most (though certainly not all) students appeared more comfortable in this role. But there was another logic to this exercise i.e., to develop personal confidence per se, and to gain confidence in the assertion of ideas. This aspect of learning was the single most important learning gain identified by students in an open-ended questionnaire assessment of the course.

Sixth, where possible, students in this course are assessed in areas where they excel. One example involved a unit on dramatic presentation as a form of communication. The drama education students decided to stage a presentation representing key historical figures in South African politics (Albert Luthuli, Amina Cachalia, Fatima Meer, Ellen Khuzwayo). The rest of the class were required to conduct an analysis of the unique qualities of dramatic presentation as a form of communication. The drama students were then assessed on their performance in lieu of another assessment task undertaken by the rest of the class. Again, the idea was to seek opportunities to assess students' strengths rather than work solely on exposing individual weaknesses.

DISCUSSION

There are several organisational features of the course which should be shared in order to understand how it is possible to teach and manage a large undergraduate class.

First, the organisation of the course required that I set aside three hours of every morning (8.00 am - 11.00 am), except Thursdays, for students to consult on a "walk-in" basis. Personal progress, problems of understanding and the meaning of a particular assessment were negotiated during these times. Students used every minute of this allotted time.

Second, the assessment-based course required a quick turn-around on the different assessment tasks completed. There were a range of ways in which I dealt with this problem. One, assessment tasks were simple and often limited to one page; this reduced the marking load and compelled students to be precise in their arguments, especially in essays. Two, not all assessment tasks were marked; the reasoning here is that not everything worth learning is worth assessing. Except students will not know what is marked or not. In this case a sample of tasks were assessed and generic feedback provided to the class. Three, assessment tasks were sometimes completed in class (something we called "classwork" e.g. viewing a video during a double-period and analysing the discourse immediately afterwards). In such cases, students exchanged their documents with colleagues in the class and conducted peer assessment against specified criteria.

Third, the organisation of the course required constant communication with students about the philosophy, goals and strategies pursued in the course. In the earlier part of the course, students expressed frustration with the lack of "notes", the unpredictability of lecture topics and structure, the absence of a "course-

pack" and the built-in controversy. In the latter part of the course, most students expressed an interest in continuing with such a programme and expanding it to other courses and degrees in the university.

There are broader lessons to be shared. The first and most critical departure in this course is that it blurred the distinction between curriculum and assessment. In practice, these two events became the same thing. The assessment tasks were part and parcel of the learning and teaching process. The assessment content was in fact the curriculum. The second departure from undergraduate curriculum convention is that the curriculum was organised around competencies rather than coverage; this does not mean the content was inconsequential. Rather, it meant that content served a competency purpose which was explicit and attainable. Moreover, the course does not start with that conventional planning question: "what is the essential content or enduring themes in a discipline?" Curriculum planning in this case poses a different question: "what should our graduates be able to do (be competent in) when they leave this university?" The third departure is that the course reached towards multiple goals in and through the same event: an assessment task not only introduced curriculum for diversity, it enabled the development of communication skills, personal confidence and the overall development of prospective teachers. It reduced the distress which accompanies (and distorts) learning which is governed by a single, high-stakes, one-format assessment i.e., the final examination. And it modelled the kinds of teaching, learning and assessment which final year students need to observe and experience if the classrooms of a democratising South Africa are to be transformed.

This reflective essay is not intended to accelerate the extinction of a vociferous and visible tribal community. After all, this form of curriculum planning, teaching and assessment is not without problems. The demands of time made on a single lecturer are real, even though such demands can be minimised as demonstrated earlier. Nor am I entirely convinced that for some students the assessment rules

are memorised in ways that minimise learning gains even in diverse tasks. And there are problems of honesty i.e., some students can adjust exemplary tasks performed by their fellow students and submit these altered assignments as entirely their own work.

The concerns of the tribe are real and should be addressed through, inter alia, the reallocation of resources for improved undergraduate teaching. I am suggesting, however, that the war-paint may be exaggerated, that the chants are too monotonous and that the tribe may simply be serving as a haven for those initiates who should not be in teaching in the first place. Under different conditions, I would consider membership.

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