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The Joyful Noise of Learning: Active Learning Strategies for Large Classes

Abstract

We couldn’t stand the crossed arms and blank faces of the students in our large first year course any longer so we completely revised the course to highlight experiential learning opportunities and boy are we glad because it turned out really well. We designed a new course to centre on a Sociology Workbook that is similar in style to a hands-on science lab manual. Students buy the workbook with their texts, engage in active in-class learning projects outlined in the workbook, and then record their results to be handed in at the end of each class. In addition, the course now includes real-world case studies and activities that engage students in practical and applied examples of the theoretical issues addressed in the course material. We also included analyses of contemporary best-selling books that address relevant social issues so that students have the opportunity to participate in current debates about issues of social importance. A research assignment was developed reflecting the traditional methodologies of our discipline, which provides the students with the opportunity to conduct primary research and develop valuable research and analysis skills.

The Problem

During any brainstorming session to develop new pedagogical solutions, there is inevitably one wag who stops the discussion by asking “what exactly is the problem that this is a solution for?” So we shall start our discussion of new solutions by reviewing the problems we face in teaching large classes. Our large class consists of 160 students in a one-term first year course that we team-teach with two (and sometimes three) faculty members. This course is taught twice each year and makes up two fifths of each of our teaching duties. On occasion we have access to 100 hours of a Teaching Assistant’s time but we are often responsible for all the marking on our own.

We face the usual list of problems associated with teaching large classes such as management of the paperwork: handing out, collecting, and recording tests and
other assignments, make-up work; management of distractions: talking, late arrivals, early departures; perceived anonymity of the students: difficulty of learning names, of taking attendance, of getting students to come to class, of getting students to participate in class, of getting students to do assignments in a timely manner; lack of flexibility in class activities: difficulty in varying activities, in doing group work, in enhancing critical thinking and writing skill; and diverse background and preparation of the students. In addition, the students in large classes are also experiencing significant challenges to their learning, especially if they are new to the college experience. These include: not knowing what is relevant or important information; hesitation in asking questions or in other ways indicating a lack of knowledge; hesitation in appearing “smart” to their peers; lack of experience with time management, studying, or other skills necessary for success in college; perceived anonymity which allows them to challenge authority and to push boundaries.\(^1\)

In addition we have identified the “Bart Simpson” factor as especially challenging. Bart Simpson is a cartoon character from the long running FOX TV animated series \textit{The Simpsons}. He is trouble-making ten year old with a bad attitude towards to school – he begins each show writing detention lines on the blackboard. A best selling Bart Simpson’s T-shirt sports the phrase “Underachiever – and proud of it”. His sister Lisa is our ideal student – an eight-year old intellectual and saxophone player with a social conscience and aspirations to become President. A popular Lisa quote from the show is “Relax? I can't relax! Nor can I yield, relent, or... Only two synonyms? Oh my God, I'm losing my perspicacity! Aaaaa!” While it is a joy to teach the Lisa Simpsons in our classrooms, we also have to contend with increasing numbers of Bart-influenced students. (The show began in 1987 and its influence on today’s youth is becoming apparent in our classrooms). The Barts sit in the back row of the class with their arms crossed over their chests, unwilling to engage in any discussions or activities. In addition they create a silencing effect on the


would-be Lisa’s of our classroom by sneering at others who participate and disrupt class discussion with their private chatter. One recent example occurred when we recruited a tall student to assist us in pulling down the projector screen. The female student volunteer had her back turned to the class and was reaching up for the tangled cord when one of the Barts wolf-whistled at her. We immediately chastized the action but the culprit remained anonymous due to the large class size.²

As we puzzled over solutions for this course, we realized that we may have been self-selecting for passive students in the way in which we had structured the course. Because of the lack of consistent funds for Teaching Assistants we have often had to primarily evaluate this course through multiple-choice exams. The students who could stomach this style, or even excelled at it, were not necessarily suited for the active engagement that was expected in the upper-year courses in our department. We were concerned that we were doing a disservice to our students when we were only able to offer a lecture-based first year introduction to our discipline that was so far removed from the actual skills and expectations of the rest of the program. We believe the students are not only bored by and uninterested in a first year class of this type, but we also found that the students arrived in the second year without the necessary skills to succeed in the discipline at our school or elsewhere.

A final aspect to our problem is connected to our discipline. In Sociology we introduce students to an analysis of the power relations and inequality structures of their own society. They are often resistant to examining social systems that they have become accustomed to accepting as “normal” and are not always eager to accept a critical analysis of their “taken-for-granted” assumptions. This resistance may not be as common in courses that teach material that is less familiar to the student and for which they have no prior assumptions. Their discomfort with examining the precepts of their own society seemed to be exacerbated by a lecture-style pedagogy in which the professor instructed them that the world didn’t necessarily operate in the manner that they thought it did.

² While some have associated Bart and Lisa with gendered behaviour of young men and women, our experience is that Bart and Lisa-like behaviour comes from both sexes.
Solutions Tried (and Failed)

In order to solve many of the above problems with the course, we instituted a variety of solutions culled from STLHE publications, Teaching Showcase articles, the *American Sociological Association Teaching Resource* manuals, from the *Teaching Sociology* journal and online discussion list as well as from our own imaginations. First of all, we decided to team-teach the course so that depending on the number of faculty involved, we would only be responsible for 4-6 weeks of the course. This allows us to put more energy into the course but for a limited time period. Historically, Introduction to Sociology had no tutorial assistants and was evaluated by machine marked multiple choice exams.

In each of our sections, we introduced a variety of activities and group work to better reflect our upper level courses. We sought to bring in the techniques we use in our other classes that make us popular teachers. In Intro, we stressed to the students that all activities, not just the lectures, would be evaluated by questions on the multiple choice exam associated with the section. For example, in Judith Doyle’s class on the Sociology of Work and Occupations, she played the students two songs with work related themes. To emphasize the work themes, the lyrics were shown on the screen. She then asked the students to get into groups and asked each group to select a concept from a hat. (The concepts were taken from the chapter they were to have read for that class). Each group then had to create one stanza/verse of a song addressing that concept. Their songs were then written down onto acetates which the students presented and had to explain how their song related to the concept they had selected. Although this was a popular activity, it was marred by some individuals leaving the room once the activity was introduced. In each of the three times this activity was done, a small portion of between 10-20 students would simply pack up and leave the classroom once it was clear that the lecture portion of the class was concluded.

Erin Steuter also found that students would leave the classroom during films or talk throughout the films. These films were on engaging topics such as the influence of Disney films or the global protest movement. The leaving occurred despite introducing the film with comments about it being testable on the exams and having activities associated with the film afterwards. It certainly seemed that
we had a significant minority who felt that if there was not a lecture, then they would leave the classroom. Erin also worked on improving the multiple choice questions to make them of a higher order. Higher order multiple choice questions go beyond recall of the textbook or lecture and instead focus on synthesis, analysis, and application of the course material.

Rather than punishing those who did not attend, we sought to reward those who did. We continued to try and make the classroom a rewarding place to learn and to reflect classroom activities and lectures in the exams. Judith Doyle introduced sign-in sheets and would release on WebCT the overhead/PowerPoint slides only to those who had attended class. However, an analysis of the exam answers compared to attendance showed that even those who had not attended specific classes were able to answer correctly multiple choice questions that had specifically referred to an overhead/PowerPoint slide. We could only conclude that they were sharing the overhead/PowerPoint slides.

Although we felt that our changes had made the classroom a better learning environment, we knew there was a minority who held the firm belief that attending classes was optional, another group seemed to think that attending was good enough and they did not need to participate in group work or activities and another group who wanted to be evaluated by some other means than multiple choice exams. It seemed we needed another solution that continued our emphasis on providing a diversity of learning experiences, that rewarded those who came to class and engaged with the material, and that sought to provide a diversity of evaluation techniques.

**Solutions: A New Experiential Approach**

In the summer of 2005, we had a chance to redesign our Introduction to Sociology course. It was decided that it would now be split between two faculty members and supported by some student markers. We thought long and hard about our objectives for the course and decided that we wanted to increase the engagement of the students taking the class, vary assessment beyond multiple choice questions, provide primary research and critical thinking opportunities to the students in the course, and provide relevant pedagogical training to senior
student teaching and research assistants. Above all, we would emphasize a more experiential or discovery based model of learning.

We consulted with members of the Physics department who first pioneered this experiential learning system at our university. With their advice and balancing our objectives with the money available for student teaching assistants, we decided to introduce a workbook, a book analysis, and a research assignment.

**The Workbook**

The new course design centres on the Sociology Workbook. It is similar in style to a hands-on science lab manual. Students buy the workbook with their texts and it comes hole-punched in a binder. The workbook consists of an introduction, details of assignments, in-class activities, and the Sociology Department Handbook. The introduction section includes the syllabus, the submission policy and procedures for the in-class activity worksheets, the evaluation rubric by which all of their assignments are marked, and finally, a learning styles quiz in order for them to better understand how they learn and suggestions on how to maximize their learning based on that quiz. The assignment section of the workbook includes details on the book analysis, research assignment, and bonus assignments. The Sociology Department Handbook provides program details and study, writing, and researching tips. The heart of the workbook is the in-class activities.

**In-class Activities**

It is important to us that students engage in active in-class learning projects. In order to encourage that engagement and to reward it, we have designed the in-class activities worksheets. On these worksheets, we explain the activity and provide space for the students to record their answers. The worksheets are handed in at the end of each class. They are marked in two batches of ten and returned to the students before the exams for those sections. The in-class activities worksheets include: writing reflections (a Quickwrite) on videos; analyzing gender role socialization through toys; and considering the relationship between structure and interaction in the classroom through the idea of ‘haunting by ghosts of social structure.’
Making Paper Planes

One of the most popular activities involved making paper airplanes as a way in which to convey theories of social inequality. The core theory which we were addressing that day in class involved the argument that social inequality is largely a result of inadequate access to resources. Erin Steuter started class without a prior lecture on the topic and instead directed the students to their workbooks which contained instructions to make an elaborate paper plane. The class was divided into three large units, each of which was given varying amounts of supplies with which to construct the airplanes. When the time-limit was concluded, each student was asked to successfully sail their plane down to the instructor. Those who had access to the proper supplies (paperclips to weight the plane, proper quality of paper, a sample of a completed plane etc.) could tangibly see their success in the clear flight of their plane. Those whose planes didn’t sail complained loudly that the assignment was unfair because not everyone had the same opportunities to succeed. This then served as the introduction to a lively and engaged discussion of theories of inequality which the students then thoughtfully wrote out in their worksheets.

In December 2005, we conducted a survey of the class to ascertain the affect of our changes to the course. Students said the following about the worksheets and in-class activities.

“The workbook assignments helped understand and apply what we were discussing and reading about and the projects were actually interesting and fun to do.”

“I liked the workbook sheets. They drove home the point of the lecture by making us write in our own words, and broke up the monotony [sic] of a long lecture.”

“My favourite part of the course was the worksheet activities because I was able to hear what other students had to say. It was beneficial to my understanding [sic] of the course material.”
“I particularly enjoyed the paper airplane activity as it further helped me to understand the concept, as well as to help me recall it more accurately in my mind.”

“I really enjoyed the topic of socialization. I have an interest in children and am planning to go into teaching, therefore I found primary and secondary socialization held my attention. Also, I found the "Ghosts" in-class assignment interesting for the same reasons.”

“My favorite aspects of the course were the interactive activities that we did in groups like the day we made the paper airplanes or the day we chose the toys and analyzed the packaging.”

**Book Analysis**

One of things that we decided to introduce was an assignment that analyzed contemporary best-selling books that address relevant social issues so that students would have the opportunity to participate in current debates about issues of social importance. To date we have had the students read Joel Bakan’s *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* and Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber’s *Trust Us We’re Experts: How Industry Manipulates Science and Gamble with Your Future*. Next year we plan to included Ben Bagdikian’s *The New Media Monopoly* and John De Graaf, David Wann, Thomas H. Naylor’s *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*. Members of the American Sociology Associations’ Teaching Sociology listserv report success with *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things* by Barry Glassner. In this assignment we ask the students to read the book and submit written answers to a series of questions that we have outlined for them. The questions tend to seek knowledge of detailed understanding of the book’s core argument and examples to ensure that the students have read it! In addition, we include questions that ask the students to apply course concepts and theories to the book content to test their ability to connect the course material to the new examples and insights in the text. The students have been very positive about this exercise.
“I really liked the assignment on The Corporation by far, it's interesting to see the workings and ethics of commerce and the effect it has on our society.”

“The analysis of The Corporation and the study of capitalism was my favourite because it furthered my already partial distrust in our system and made me want to fight for change, or at least steer my life in a different direction than supporting capitalism and inequality among humans.”

“I enjoyed the book analysis part of the course because it broadened my spectrum on the realities of the business world.”

“The book analysis was best because it was extremely informative and yet creative enough to remain interesting.”

Research Assignment

The final project that we introduced was a research assignment which reflected the traditional methodologies of our discipline, and provided the students with the opportunity to conduct primary research and develop valuable research and analysis skills. To date the research activities have involved media content analysis in which students examine the media to identify the representations of various groups in society. In one of the assignments the students were asked to follow the media coverage of the 2006 Winter Olympics which were taking place during the term. They conducted original data collection from media articles and then compared the way any two groups are represented in the media coverage. Topics included: male and female athletes (hockey teams and snowboarders in particular!), white and visible minority athletes, straight and gay and/or lesbian athletes, able-bodies and disabled athletes, and athletes from particular countries etc. They needed to prepare a code sheet, document their results, and explain the meaning of their findings using sociological concepts. We had slated a period of class time near the end of term to have a class discussion of their research findings. However as that day approached we were concerned that asking 160 of them to share their results with the rest of the class would result in blank stares and a dearth of volunteers. As panic is the mother of
invention, we came up with a very successful idea in which we asked each one of them to choose one significant statistic from their data which uses a number from 1-100. Then they were asked to write out what that statistic meant. For example 80 = the percentage of time that the media attributed the success of the women’s hockey team to external factors such as coaches and supportive family members. Then we would call out the numbers from 1-100 numerically and whichever student had that number as their significant statistic would stand up and read out their results and tell us something interesting about their research project.

We didn’t have the opportunity to survey the students about this project because it was due after the last day of classes. However, informal feedback from them was very positive. Many students were eager to talk about the particular results that they discovered in their research. This was particularly helpful as a way of connecting with the students outside of class, so that if we would meet one of them on the campus and they would stop and tell us that they enjoyed the course, we would often ask them what topic they had done their research project on then we would have a starting point for an academic discussion which wasn’t often the case without a project of this type.

**Reflecting on Our Changes**

Overall, we are very excited by the changes we have made. The experience of teaching is much improved for us and, as the quotes from the students attest, for the students too. Indeed, each of us wanted to thank the students after our sections, a feeling neither of us had had before. Since one of our goals in introducing these changes into this course was to better select for sociology majors, we are looking for indicators of that change. So far, the 46 per cent increase in enrolment in our required second year course encourages us. We are also encouraged that we are selecting for active learners who relish research, critical thinking, and have a better understanding of both what sociology is and how it is done in our department.

Another consequence of our changes is that we have reduced the number of Bart-like students and increased the number of Lisa-like students. We have
noticed that about 10-20 students drop the course after the first day when they realize the amount of work and participation required in the course. We suspect that these students were looking for a ‘clap-for-credit’ course and may have been some of our Bart-like students in previous years. More importantly, the Lisa-like students now feel that there is something for them in the course. They are thrilled to have a chance to show how bright they are through the in-class activities, the book analysis, and the research report. Additionally, the in-class activities worksheets seem to move some students from the Bart camp to the Lisa camp. We have noticed that some students who put little effort into the worksheets for one batch and as a consequence received a low or failing grade on them, make an effort in their second batch of in-class activities worksheets. This experience of making the effort seems to have the effect of further engaging them in the material.

The paper airplane activity was one example where we really saw the difference that moving away from a strictly lecture-format could have an impact on the way in which the material was received by the students. Prior to these innovations, a lecture on the structural aspects of social inequality and differential access to resources would have raised a lot of skeptical looks from the class. The process of competing with their classmates to make successful airplanes with unequal access to resources, however, made for a powerful personal understanding of how that theory plays out in real life.

However, we have learnt a few things from these changes. One of them is an insight into the student culture of sharing. As they shared access to overheads/PowerPoint slides previously, it seems they also share answers and research findings. This was particularly true for the book analyses and research reports. Some students came to complain about their mark for the book analysis which they felt was lower than for the person whom they had helped who had not read the book. When it was suggested that perhaps they should not share their work with others, many retorted that it was a person they could not say no to. It was not that the person was threatening them but rather that social obligations meant they had to share their work. Another student explained that part of student residence culture required her to share her work, especially for first year courses. If she did not, she would not be considered a good residence citizen.
Organizing the course in this manner requires more than one marker to cope with all the assignments which has some implications for catching plagiarism. When multiple faculty members or teaching assistants are sharing the evaluation duties, it can be a challenge to identify situations in which students are submitting similar or even identical work. We had an experience with this in the past year in which two students handed in the identical research paper. The identical papers were placed on top of each other as they were submitted for marking and were not separated in our distribution of papers to the markers. The plagiarism was spotted and prosecuted. This incident has given us some concern about how to prevent student cheaters from handing the work of their peers from the current class or even recycling assignments from the previous years.

Changing the book assignments and research topics from year to year is doable, though it is often hard to drop a great book such as *The Corporation*, which the student’s loved. The in-class activities that are part of the workbooks are much harder to transform on an annual basis because they often very novel activities which take a great deal of preparation. As a consequence of this new insight into student culture, we have limited the number of student assistants we have as any duplicated work is more likely to be caught by one student marking half the assignments than one student marking a quarter. We have also alerted our student assistants to be aware of shared work.

Teaching large classes remains a challenge that many of us have to face. We are very excited about the changes that we introduced and feel that they have re-vitalized the first-year experience of our students. As teachers there is nothing like stepping back and watching the animated faces of the students busily working together on their in-class activities and emanating a joyful noise of learning.