

TITLE

Putting the S(ensational) back into sociology – developing strategies for enhancing teaching and learning for first year student teachers in large classes

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Abstract

The focus of the research was to develop a model for effective learning and teaching of sociology in a large class to promote active engagement with first year undergraduate student teachers and encourage deep learning. By seeking regular feedback from students and recording their own reflections on each lecture, the teaching team and co - researchers have sought to develop opportunities for authentic and meaningful dialogue to improve teaching and learning in a large class. What initially began as an investigation into strategies for promoting good teaching and learning in large classes has evolved into a wider discussion and exploration of the pedagogy of teaching and learning particularly in relation to teaching sociology as part of an undergraduate teacher education degree.

Introduction

The motivation for this research has evolved from our experience of co-teaching the paper Whānau, family & society, which is taught in the second semester of a first year undergraduate teacher education programme to both primary and early childhood education students. The paper was one of three selected as part of a faculty wide research project to explore different models for teaching and learning in large classes. All three papers had previously received mixed student evaluations, particularly in relation to the content knowledge. The selected papers are taught by more than one lecturer and have had significant increases in student numbers. Resourcing of the paper Whānau, family & society has changed significantly over the past five years from having an initial teaching team of four lecturers to the present teaching team of two. Alongside the staffing changes has been an increase in the number of students enrolled with class sizes; 90 in semester 1 2001; 180 in semester 2 2012; expected to reach 300 plus in 2012.

The teaching and learning model for the paper had been based on a traditional lecture followed by small group tutorials. This was possible with smaller numbers and four lecturers assigned to the paper; however, with two lecturers and a growing number of students this model was not feasible. In light of these changes the teaching team welcomed the opportunity of being involved in the Learning and Teaching project to review the paper and develop an alternative learning/teaching model.

During 2010 a literature review of existing research into teaching and learning in large classes, particularly in relation to teacher education, was compiled (Lewis, 2010). The review highlighted challenges to meet the needs of the constructivist nature of student learning and initiate a shift from surface to deeper learning. It is difficult to demonstrate from the existing literature any clear relationship between increasing class size and the effect on learning. The evidence, however, indicates that large classes can create particular challenges for teaching and learning. Some common findings from the literature review are:

- The nature of the lecture theatre space with its tiered rows and large space makes it an impersonal and intimidating environment which can result in low levels of student engagement and interaction with students exhibiting apathy and distractedness.
- Learning in large classes is perceived as impacting negatively on student learning.

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- Team teaching using mixed media and a range of teaching strategies was identified as being beneficial to learning whereas non- assessed workshops, didactic teaching, group work in large lecture theatres were less successful

Research on the theoretical and empirical rationale suggests using small group work as an adjunct to the large group/class lecture as a way of ameliorating some of the negative characteristics of large class teaching and learning.

Revised learning/teaching model

To address the emerging themes from the literature a learning/teaching model was designed to manage the challenges of teaching a large class. The first iteration of the model was delivered to a cohort of ninety students and replicated in the second semester to a cohort of one hundred and eighty students. The schedule of learning and teaching is fragmented by three weeks of students attending practicum and the two week semester break. This created particular challenges for the students to re-engage with the content of the paper. In order to address this teaching team decided to cover the content of the paper in the first six weeks of semester to enable students to make informed choices on the topics for their assignments, one of which was due after the semester break. The assignments required students to select a topic to discuss for an individual essay and group presentation. The remaining weeks of the paper was taught and facilitated through tutorial group work.

The 'content' lectures were designed to be interactive and engage students in active learning. Students worked in groups to discuss and feedback their responses to lead questions. In this way the dynamics of the 'lecture' sessions changed each week as activities were designed to instigate discussion and further critical thinking. In recognition of well documented research on 'student attention' each lecture incorporated a range of media formats including DVD and YouTube clips. The lecturers moved around the lecture theatre creating opportunities for (albeit) brief one to one time with students. Mini-lectures included theoretical perspectives linked to a particular sociological factor. The teaching and learning of sociological theory had been identified in student evaluations as an area of concern for many students. Understanding the relevance of theory to their own life experience was often relegated to the 'too hard basket' causing anguish and frustration on their part. The tutorials provided a space for students and lecturers to address this in a more supportive and inclusive environment.

Meeting learning outcomes through assessment

The assessments in the paper were conceived to create opportunities for the students to deepen their learning of complex sociological factors that can impact on individuals and society in a New Zealand context. They were also envisaged as more than a measurement of student's knowledge of content by encouraging students to engage in thinking beyond the requirements of the learning outcomes. Furthermore the assessments were strongly aligned with the learning activities and intended outcomes to support students to engage with the content of the paper and contextualise their own experience (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). To achieve this, classes included a number of learning strategies including group work, presentations, peer review and reflection. Current teaching and learning discourses emphasise student engagement as the key ingredient for academic success (Jones, 2008), therefore, by placing the student at the heart of the assignments helps them become aware of and reflect critically on their presuppositions and perceptions of, in this case, whānau family and their place in society (Mezirow, 1991, p.14). In the process of reflecting on their own reality, the students are more likely to build a foundation on which to learn about themselves and transform their learning into an attribute that will inform their professional practice. This approach supports the view that '... higher education ... provides a foundation on which a lifetime of learning in work and other social settings can be built' (Boud & Falchikov, 2006, p.399).

A further consideration when re-designing the learning/teaching model of this paper was the fact that

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the students were first year students of diverse ethnicities, gender and age range. The intention was to follow a supported independence culture; scaffolding, dialogue and data-driven engagement (Lizzio & Wilson, 2010). Dialogue with Professor Keithia Wilson (personal communication, November 2010) had a considerable influence on changes to the assessments in this paper placing the student experience in the centre of the context. This approach has been highly successful (as reflected in the assessment grades) and proved to be a motivating factor in student learning.

All of the strategies employed in this paper were mindful of the challenges highlighted in the literature and enjoyed success to varying degrees

The challenges of teaching sociology in a large class

The challenge of teaching sociology theory has been widely documented within the wider discourse of the scholarship of teaching and learning of critical theory. However there is little research on the scholarship of teaching and learning specifically relating to the discipline of sociology as part of a teacher education programme within the NZ context.

Sociology within the paper Whānau, family & society is taught at an introductory level within the wider context of the research and literature on changing families and whanau in New Zealand. The focus of the paper is to introduce students to the complex and changing nature of 'family life' while introducing topics of economics, class and gender to demonstrate the wider social factors that can interrupt and influence how families function and their role within society. The students are introduced to different theories of 'family' and asked to relate the theory of family to their own experience in the first assessment.

The teaching of social and critical theory as part of foundational knowledge within teacher education has been subject to shifts and changes and as Stephenson and Rio (2009) have recently pointed out 'over the past five years, however, we have experienced changes in our teacher education programmes which have progressively reduced student access to these (and other) foundational knowledge' (p.158).

The case for reinvigorating the teaching of sociology is effectively made by Stephenson and Reo (2009) as being consistent with the Graduating Teacher Standards (New Zealand Teachers Council [NZTC], 2008) which requires 'students to demonstrate critical engagement with contextual factors...it is no longer possible for graduating teachers to accept the advice of less critical and more sceptical colleagues to forget the theory of education' (p.158).

Much of the literature on teaching sociology is researching innovative and practical ways to introduce theory to students who may be studying sociology as a minor subject rather than their main discipline. Some of these ideas include students keeping journals, online quizzes and role play (Pederson, 2010). Other research has focused on the challenge of supporting students to think critically about social justice issues and their own values and beliefs.

More recently there has been an interest in developing teaching and learning strategies for critical pedagogy (Fobes and Kaufman, 2008), with a view to 'unsettling beliefs' that students hold in relation to aspects of social justice. A number of writers have outlined how teachers in higher education can work more constructively with student teachers to engage in some of the wider political discourses on teaching and learning in schools and early childhood settings. Often this requires teacher educators to 'help people learn new ways of seeing a familiar world' (Diem and Helfenbein 2008) which the authors concede is 'no easy task (p xii).

In keeping with other research (LeMoyné and Davis, 2011) our experience of teaching student teachers has often been frustrated by an attitude which already views the study of sociology as just

'common sense'. Our aim is to create opportunities for moving the students into a space where they are questioning/ disrupting some of their own 'taken for granted' views and dominant discourses about the world and in particular education. From our experience of teaching sociology we are aware of what is widely documented as student resistance to learning sociology theory (Diem & Helfenbein, 2008; Pedersen, 2010). In fact the resistance can be so great that it is counterproductive to learning per se and 'it becomes readily apparent that theory represents a stumbling block for many students, and this attitude toward theory can pose problems for the theory instructor' (Pederson, 2010, p197).

A concern that is documented in the reflective journal written by the lecturers/co-researchers is the 'silencing' of student voices. The challenge of creating an environment where all students could feel 'safe' enough to contribute was particularly noticeable when the class size increased to over 100 students. The strategies in the revised model that worked well with 90 students did not seem to work so well in the larger group.

From lecturer journal semester 2 2011 (week 5)

'One of the issues that I have struggled with is that there is little sense of engagement with the students. Despite giving students opportunities to feedback throughout the session there is little take up of this apart from a few vocal students in one side of the room. From the feedback I was aware that a number of students were unhappy with what they perceived as 'know it alls' who dominated the discussion. There is a sense for me that many student voices are going unheard!'

Another recurring theme in the reflective journal was the challenge of teaching 'theory' which is consistent with the findings as described above. Despite creating a wealth of resources online including YouTube clips, readings and quizzes there appeared to be a 'theory void'. Students were endlessly asking for further clarification and lecturers appeared to be trying to find evermore new and innovative ways to present theory with little apparent success:

From lecturer journal semester 2 2011

'At the end of the feedback session I reiterated that the theory they were covering was very challenging and that we were attempting to cover ideas that in other sociology papers would be discussed over several weeks. This was supposed to reassure the students but in retrospect I am not sure it had the desired effect.'

Methodology

As qualitative researchers we were interested in understanding 'how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences' (Merriam, 2009, p.5). The students' learning experiences during lectures and tutorials were evaluated using Brookfield's (1995) Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ). The CIQ is a method for finding out how students experience their learning i.e. on specific concrete 'happenings' or 'events' rather than what student's like or dislike. The CIQ was developed by Brookfield to enable him to 'see his practice through the students' eyes...and to help embed ... teaching in accurate information about students' learning that is regularly solicited and anonymously given' (p. 92). When Brookfield used the CIQ his classes were usually between 30 and 35 students and feedback was gathered weekly. Weekly data collection and analysis would be impractical in a large class and therefore the CIQ's were completed, anonymously and voluntarily, by the students on four separate occasions; twice during lectures and twice during tutorials. The questions were the same each time:

1. What moment or moments during the class did you feel most engaged with what was happening?

2. What moment or moments during the class did you feel most distracted with what was happening?
3. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took during the class did you feel most affirming or helpful?
4. What did you find most puzzling or confusing?
5. What about the class surprised you the most (This could be something about your own reactions to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that occurs to you).

The responses were analysed using content analysis (Kumar, 2005; Mutch, 2005) anticipating that a number of themes would be identified from the questionnaire feedback.

Findings

Initial analysis of the feedback indicates that student experience of the paper is diverse but there are identifiable themes which are consistent with the literature on teaching and learning large classes:

- Overall most students felt that their learning was more effectively supported in the tutorials
- Environmental factors including noise levels making it difficult to hear when people were answering and sharing opinions.
- Students using laptops was considered a distraction.
- IT management - this included problems with lecture theatre technology that delayed and disrupted classes (at the beginning of semester)
- Mixed reactions to the student's use of microphone when asked to give feedback to the plenary group.
- Difficulty of establishing student/teacher relationships – some students did not feel supported or affirmed in their contributions.

Other findings relate to the content of the paper and specifically learning theory of sociology. This will be the focus of further research.

Discussion

According to Fobes and Kaufman (2008), 'the distinguishing feature of critical pedagogy is that it is both a form of practice and a form of action' (p. 27). This definition fits well with our aspirations for teaching and learning on the paper Whānau, family & society. As teacher educators we are concerned to promote a classroom environment for the students to 'actively engage' in theory and see its relevance in their own lives and in the context of the families and whanau they will meet in the classroom or early childhood centre. The point is also made that 'joining together the process, content and outcome makes critical pedagogy uniquely problematic for both learners and teachers' (ibid, p. 27).

Fobes and Kaufman (2008) identify three aspects of challenge for teacher educators who wish to incorporate critical pedagogy in the teaching space; challenges concerning learners recovering students' voices', resistance to professors' political agendas *and* free-rider problems. In the feedback received from the students on their evaluation of the paper using the CIQ these three challenges are evident. For example a number of comments from the students referred to the difficulty of speaking or giving their opinion in the lecture particularly given the large numbers of students.

One of these challenges became particularly relevant for one of the researchers/lecturers in the teaching of gender as one of the topics in the paper. The focus of the lecture was strongly 'feminist' in its bias and resulted in some angry and agitated feedback. This experience prompted the lecturer to

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reflect on her own teaching and how this was strongly influenced by her own feminist agenda.

The problem of the 'free rider' is a common issue in group work tasks and has been evident in the feedback from students some of whom have found elements of the group assessment frustrating. However other feedback, while acknowledging the tensions in group work, also commented on the positive aspects of sharing ideas and having the support of colleagues

Emerging concerns were identified and discussed in the feedback and appropriate changes made to our teaching practice where possible and practical. Where change was deemed impractical or unrealistic opportunities were created for dialogue with the students to maximise trust and inclusivity.

Conclusion

According to Gosling (2006) 'when faculty are encouraged to engage in pedagogic inquiry, it is normally because it is assumed that both teaching and student learning will be improved as a consequence' (p. 99). Certainly in our research we were motivated by the prospect of improving both teaching and learning although always aware that this was not a predetermined outcome. The relationship between investigating and researching our own teaching to enhance student learning is complex and does not necessarily follow a linear trajectory. Gosling (2006) makes an important distinction when claiming that a particular change has had a particular impact. Ultimately, we have to make professional judgments, within parameters of uncertainty that are typical of complex social situations, about the relationship between a change in teaching and the changes in students that we think are improvements (p. 101).

By asking the students about the changes we have made to the paper we are anticipating that their feedback will inform our understanding of the complex relationships between teaching and learning and ultimately lead to enhanced practice. To make claims beyond this is problematic and we are aware of the limitations inherent in much investigative research. Despite this we believe that it is important to share our practitioner led inquiry with others so as to encourage 'engaged pedagogyperhaps most important, it generates debate and discussion about what constitutes improvement in learning' (Gosling, 2006, p. 106).

As educators, we strive for our students to become critical thinkers and to move from a place of passive resistance to active engagement and inquiry based learning. In seeking to give the students regular opportunities to dialogue with us about their experience of teaching and learning on the paper we hope to support the students to 'do' sociology' rather than simply acquiring knowledge and memorising 'facts' about theory, issues and research.

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