

Planning and Delivering Instruction with Increasing Class Sizes in Educational Administration Program Coursework: Modeling Leadership Skills for New Professors Transitioning from K–12 Administration

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Increased class sizes and advising responsibilities are the new realities in California's graduate programs of Educational Administration. In order to effectively meet new challenges, professors must make adjustments in venue, plan meticulously, utilize technology, distribute leadership, and implement alternative grading systems. This is a particular challenge to new professors, many who are former K–12 public school administrators. Adult instructional practices such as peer reviews, working meals, continuous movement and breaks, guest presenters, and alternative assignments must be implemented. Finally, alternative grading and assessment practices such as student/professor performance agreements can leverage a large class human resource component. By modeling effective leadership with large classes while utilizing sound principles of adult learning, professors can effectively impart the skills and dispositions vital for new school leaders in the current educational environment.

Making the Shift from School Administration to University Instruction and Scholarship

Many of the current professors in educational administration programs have transitioned from K–12 administrative roles and positions. This can be a real challenge as they must make adjustments from their previous role as practitioner/administrator to that of a scholar (Coleman, et al, 2006). For many, this is a career change much later in their professional journey (Bora, 2001). They must shift from their experiences of pedagogy or the art of the teaching of children (often teacher-centered), to andragogy (learner-centered) or the art of helping adults learn (Knowles, 1984). The adult graduate students who come into educational administration classes, bring with them a wide-ranging amount of school-related experiences and dispositions. The qualities of these adult students are much different than those of the K–12 learners in the previous school systems in which many professors spent their formative years. Rachel (2002) offered criteria for effective

andragogy that will be reflected in this author's methods and examples. These include but are not limited to voluntary participation and internal motivation, performance evaluations, learner satisfaction, and learning environments that are psychologically and physically comfortable. Christian (1982) found that learners who scored low on pedagogy and high on andragogy wanted to direct their own learning but needed support. Finally, as adult learners, graduate students in educational administration programs need to know why they are learning the content before they learn it. As such, former practitioner/administrators who understand and have experience in school systems can be very effective if they can adapt from the instruction of children to the instruction of adults while at the same time transitioning into the role of a scholar in higher education systems (Bain, 2004). What follows are a set of ideas based upon these principles.

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One thing all educators can agree upon is that effective leadership is absolutely essential for school improvement. At the same time, it is no secret that the instructional landscape related to graduate programs in educational administration and school leadership preparation is undergoing much needed change. Pressure for school reforms and the implications for a new type of instructional leader in an era of declining resources are converging themes faced by both K–12 school systems as well as graduate school leadership preparation programs. The current and foreseeable economic climate in California will only serve to exacerbate an already tenuous infrastructure resource in our schools of higher education. Additionally, educational administration programs are under increased scrutiny and pressure to improve the quality of school leader preparation (Levine, 2005) and should be assuming substantial reforms (Kowalski, 2004).

The need for high-quality leadership in both our K–12 schools and higher education has never been greater. As professors, we may feel that our academic freedom and creativity are becoming constrained. However, we must remember that we can manage, control and influence within the scope of our coursework, even though our concern system-wide may be far greater (Covey, 1989). As we tell our students, challenges also present opportunities. Thus, the questions that require answering are: What are some of the resources, human and otherwise, that we can call upon to add to our instructional repartee? How might our respective roles as professors change in the same way we are asking our school leaders to move from managers, and into instructional leadership coaching roles?

One result of the current higher education climate is the dramatic increase in the ratio of students to professors. Pressure to fill course sections, decreased professor teaming arrangements, and increased student numbers

in advising assignments will certainly be a part of the new reality of educational leadership instruction. A professor's span of control and responsibility has and will continue to increase; not unlike the same K–12 school environment facing the future school leaders enrolled in leadership programs. As such, we must adjust our instruction to be effective with larger groups. Therefore, professors must model and demonstrate effective leadership skills and dispositions that will likewise be an expected and essential part of the necessary qualifications of our graduate students.

Professors must apply the principles of distributed leadership (Bennell et al, 2003), develop new and “hidden” resources, and make the necessary instructional adjustments instrumental to the format and delivery required for working with large groups. The culture of collaboration, inquiry, and innovation expected of future school leaders must start on the professional level, beginning with the design of our coursework. Like our graduate students working in school environments, addressing larger classes and supervising a greater number of individuals are considerations that must be tackled. Let us creatively use this certainty as an opportunity to make effective changes in our class instruction. As we consider these challenges and related necessary changes in pedagogy, we must keep in mind the principles of adult learning. Some of these strategies are motivational in nature while others cognitively appropriate for graduate educational leadership students. Adult learning dynamics can contribute greatly towards large group student success. What follows are some components for your consideration. After all, children will still be coming to our schools, teachers will be teaching, and school leaders will be in place, doing the best they can in this new educational environment.

Class Venue

Large classes often demand alternative venues for adult learners. The typical university classroom or lecture hall is often not the optimal physical learning environment for adult learners (Knowles, 1990). Although there are some times when they are appropriate, large lecture halls are not conducive for many of the following best practices that will be discussed. If possible, lecture halls should be used in conjunction with smaller, more intimate spaces in order to maximize best practices. If you are teaching on-campus courses, seek possible alternative venues located at the facility.

It is important that you look for and actively pursue other environments receptive to large class numbers. Your students can often be a direct connection to alternative real estate suitable for classes. Class meetings at school locations can be very effective with large groups. Classrooms provide adequate break-out space and there is always something to be gained from educators visiting other school sites. In addition, there are often a variety of community-based resources available. Banks, corporations, and other business can be helpful by offering the use of their community facil-

ity space. Churches can be of assistance as well. Many times, connections to these resources come through your students; just ask. Frequently, these spaces have technological resources that can be very helpful. However, it is important to have your own traveling technology kit including projection and sound equipment. Developing a bring your own technology (BYOT) expectation with your students should be an essential part of managing large classes. I have even used the out of doors as a venue for leadership coursework, weather permitting. Parks, outdoor education sites, museums, and recreation centers can also be accommodating to large groups. Each and every one of us has a preferred environmental teaching venue. Ask yourself what is yours and go for it!

An example highlighting the aforementioned involves a leadership class I organized. We gathered at the Santa Cruz Aikido Dojo, where Sensei Glen Kimoto and his students introduced my leadership students to the principles of aikido as a means of facing challenge and adversity. This is an example of an activity with a high motivational component. Venue always makes a big difference in the climate of the class. Of course, considerations related to seating, food, scheduling, and liability issues should be ongoing. Organize your college or university's insurance paperwork ahead of time and be ready to go with the process. Arrange your class and divide responsibilities for addressing custodial and operational needs. Finally, always leave any facility in a better condition than you found it.

Before Your First Class: Effective Planning Tips

The key to effective instruction with larges classes is meticulous attention to detail. This includes planning and initial communication. All eyes will be upon you from the very beginning. The degree of success related to the first class will set the tone for the rest of the semester, as it is all about student perception. Make and continually update a list of every detail needed for an effective class, then decide what is not necessarily your direct responsibility. Delegation is an important skill, so model it always. Begin this process by taking the initiative to reach out to your students with a thorough introduction. Let them know who you are, your experiences, your idiosyncrasies, as well as your dispositions and assumptions about one another (Desrochers, 2009). Then ask your students to do the same. One of your first considerations should be an inventory of their individual and collective experiences, skills, and key dispositions. After you have shared with them, they will be more likely to provide you with the details of their rich and varied life experiences. From this information you can develop a detailed database of "experts." You can then use this human resource bank to provide a networking resource among the class members and yourself. I see my role as a connector in these situations (Gladwell, 2002) as I link together a web of human resources necessary for our effective professional learning community (Dufour, 1998). The business of education is a very small world, as the degrees of separation are small.

Using a distributed leadership model (Spillane et al, 2001), the next step should be the enlisting of a team of students to assist with class management and facilitation. After an initial welcome and introduction, indicate to your class that you will be looking for and expecting assistance in the operation of the class. Using a combined process of volunteerism and gentle persuasion, develop a class leadership team and perhaps an advisory group. Typical roles I have developed include small group facilitators, operations managers, time keepers, food and snack coordinators, technology experts, process observers and recorders, assessment monitors (plus-delta feedback coordinator, etc.), a “Google® jockey” to access information quickly when needed, clerical assistants and other roles. When you distribute class agendas ahead of time (a must), send edited agendas to designated class leaders with specific notes and expectations. As the class forms an identity over progressive meetings, allow students to shift roles, take on new responsibilities, and provide you with ongoing feedback. Always continue to model the emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2006) that will likewise be expected of them in their future leadership roles.

Additional Best Practices for Consideration

Much has been written on graduate level instruction (Bain, 2004). What is particularly unique about students in graduate programs of educational administration is that typically, they are very motivated teachers and teacher-leaders that demonstrate the initiative required for moving into leadership roles. As such, they can be a demanding and challenging group, especially when instructional methods fall short. This is as it should be because as professors, we should be modeling principles of good instruction through a variety of shared leadership opportunities. This is particularly true during difficult times. For your consideration are some teaching practices that I have found to be particularly effective in a time of dwindling resources and increased class sizes.

Peer Reviews and Evaluations

Large groups can be broken down into manageable sub-groups, facilitated by students, in order to critically review and analyze written work. Care must be taken to provide clear direction, including but not limited to, constraints, outcomes, and how the activity meets course objectives. Rotating student facilitators assume leadership roles while students provide feedback to their peers through the use of professor developed rubrics, forms, and other methods of accountability to each other and the professor. A culminating activity for this process may include journal reflection or self-evaluation. Learning from and with peers in small groups can be a very powerful experience that gives students a first-hand understanding of an effective small learning community as the social dynamics of learning come in to play (DuFour, 2004).

Working Meals

A great deal of educational leadership and administration coursework are held in the evenings or on weekends. Students come to class after previously completing a day or a week of teaching and engaging in related activities at their respective school sites. As such, the energy dynamics must be fluid. Opportunities for collegial conversation and simple social interaction not typically found during the school day are quickly seized upon. As any professor in this business knows, centering the class can be a challenge. At the same time, energy intake in the form of snacks, lunch, and dinners cannot be ignored even though restarting a class after a dinner break can be a recipe for frustration if expectations are not clear and consistent.

Working meals and “dinner/lunch with a movie” is one method of keeping groups focused, on location, and on task with class objectives while at the same time supporting energy renewal. The expectation that all meal and snack breaks will be held within the confines of the class venue is important and should be established at the onset of a session. Shared responsibilities for snacks and food can be handled through delegation. If there is a video to present, make sure it is ready to go during the dinner or lunch session. Objectives for the working meal should be outlined clearly and a method of recording, debriefing, and establishing closure should be instituted as a part of the very first class. “Breaking bread” with colleagues is another social-motivational activity often influenced by the unique culture and collective life experiences of the group.

Guest Presenters

Students appreciate qualified practitioners and other guest speakers as part of their coursework. When enlisting the services of visiting superintendents, business managers, parent advocates, and others in this process, consider the following points.

1. Assist your guests in the process of engaging students. Try to avoid the “stand and talk for an hour syndrome.”
2. Be clear about their role in meeting your class objectives.
3. Allow time for interaction and dialogue.
4. Keep them on schedule
5. Follow-up with communication that acknowledges them for their time and expertise.

Guest speakers and presenters can add depth and variety to coursework. Their visits can serve to strengthen connections between the university and the school districts, bring up-to-date information into the discussions, and offer students contrasting points of view. Students will watch and learn from the observable behaviors between the guests and their professor, as it is a part of leadership form and style. Ultimately, it is the professor who sets the tone and focus of the course as reflected in the expertise brought forth by such resources.

Walk and Talk

Encourage students to take a brief walk to discuss key points, address problems and situations, or otherwise engage in a dialogue. This allows for large groups to move about in a structured format with a change in environment. These walks can be indoors, outdoors (weather permitting), or wherever space allows. Again, expectations must be clear regarding this process, for the effective professor is one who follows the most basic of valuable classroom management procedures known to all good teachers (Wong, 2005).

Student Demonstrations

Student demonstrations (by small groups or individuals) to their peers can be an effective method when following a few simple guidelines:

1. Avoid ongoing demonstrations to large groups over a long period of time. Instead, break into smaller groups for shorter periods, each facilitated by a student. It is better to present to a small group for a shorter amount of time, thereby allowing time for serious dialogue.
2. Have a process for students to provide “critical friend” feedback. Simple “plus—delta” evaluation and comment forms or more detailed rubrics should be developed and used in the process.
3. Avoid over-utilized Power Point presentations, as they can even put insomniacs to sleep. As a professor, take some time to model and explain the points of any presentation, utilizing technology (Reynolds, 2008).

Rotating Labs or Breakouts

One method of effectively working with large groups is the implementation of rotating labs. Each “lab” or session can be held in a separate room or space. At an agreed upon time, the groups rotate to a new session. Also, the classic “breakout” method used in conferences has a place in classroom instruction. These can either be pre-determined, or students may be allowed some sort of choice. For example, the expectation might be that they must attend three of five sessions. Guest presenters can be scheduled based upon expertise. It is not unreasonable to ask guests to repeat their presentation activities to smaller groups. With such processes, careful orchestration is important and it is often useful to end with a large group activity that involves everyone. Students should be encouraged to utilize their particular preferred learning styles and articulate this in their work.

Classes on Their Own

More class leverage may be obtained through the careful planning of out-of-class assignments and activities. The possibilities are of course endless. Interviewing school officials, job shadowing of school leaders, participation in hearings, and board meetings are just a few of the many possibilities for gaining knowledge and meeting the course objectives. Students should be encouraged to utilize their own particular preferred style and articulate this in their work. You may need to review with them principles of metacognition.

One class assignment that I have found to be particularly meaningful for students is that of “swapping jobs” with another classmate for a day. The expectation is that the students will exchange roles with someone in a different school, grade level, or community. Of course, permission must be obtained and support from site leaders secured. Clear guidelines for the “assignment” are expected, as debriefing and sharing in class can be enlightening for all. The resulting empathy development is a skill necessary for all effective leaders.

Other Small Group Techniques

It is important to utilize a variety of small group techniques. Jig saw methods effectively break a large group into manageable and workable sub-groups. This way, students have the opportunity for meaningful exchange. The aforementioned method requires careful planning in order to result in effective implementation. This facilitates a respect for the establishment of clear expectations as well as the follow-through necessary for success. Simple procedural predictability such as starting and ending class on the agreed upon times can go a long way towards promoting effective class management, especially with large groups.

Grading and Reading Student Work

Large classes can certainly place a burden on the lead professor in terms of the time required for reading papers, student work, and grading. Again, delegation along with several of the “best practices” tips mentioned previously, should be considered to help cut down on the time required for the review of student work. At the same time, it is important to provide feedback that is specific and timely.

Student Performance Agreements

Professors with large class sizes should consider a paradigm shift that includes a coaching model based upon mutual goal setting and evaluation. The development of a student performance agreement based upon the principles outlined by Stephen Covey (Covey, 1992) can be a very effective tool for shifting the responsibility for “earning” a grade directly, to each individual student. When using this model, one of the first topics in any course is a lesson in the development of a performance agreement.

Since this is a new concept for most students, I provide sample agreements for students to review. You may even want to have a former student talk about this, as we know that peers are a most credible source of information. The students then use this agreement as a guiding document for course accountability. A key part of a performance agreement is the self-evaluation process in which a grade is determined by the student, with approval of the professor. Careful use of professor-developed forms and rubrics are essential in guiding students towards what becomes “their” grade. Students are often uneasy with this process at first, but once they understand the

shift, they generally take greater ownership in their learning and accountability. Of course, it goes without saying that these procedures must be clearly outlined in the course syllabus. This type of agreement is a good example of an intrinsic motivational system of accountability. Ultimately, the performance agreement philosophy has direct transferability to school leadership, directly pertaining to supervision and evaluation.

Record Keeping

A timely and accurate record keeping process is a must with large classes. Electronic assignment management systems must be developed. Clear expectations regarding the electronic format for papers, such as labeling files with last name first, should be considered. Gone are the days of collecting reams of paperwork. The technology is available for keeping accurate records as well as processing large quantities of student work in electronic files. In this way, questions about accountability, professor comments and evaluation, and date of receipt can be easily accessed with a computer. Of course, it goes without saying that back-up systems must be in place to avoid compromising data.

Other Considerations Including Communication Tips with Large Classes

Although this could be a subject of another article, I offer a few ideas on class communication. Electronic mail is important but it must be used in light of a few caveats. It should not be a substitute for dialogue. Three or more e-mail transmissions on the same subject should prompt a phone call. Developing an appropriate e-mail protocol for your class and students should be one of your first assignments. In addition, expectations on use of file attachments and acceptable formats should be part of your syllabus.

Rapid phone and text messaging systems have been developed for communicating with large numbers. Many schools use these systems as part of a parent notification process. I make use of the School Messenger system which allows me to contact my entire class by phone and/or text messaging with just one phone call. This becomes important for such situations as important reminders and last minute changes in class times, locations, or cancellations.

It is important to develop a faculty web page. In this way you can post information for student reference and access. Documents such as class syllabi, assignments, calendars, and anchor papers, along with important links and forms, should all be included in order to have an effective faculty web page. I have my class note-taker send me a class summary, and after editing, post it for student review and as a resource for students who miss class. Remember that web pages must be current to be effectively utilized.

The Human Touch

Becoming adept at delegation, facilitation, and letting go of time-honored traditional roles does not mean losing the human touch. Developing a climate of relational trust (Byrk and Schneider, 2003) in the age of educational austerity is one of the most important single factors for an effective class; once established it must be maintained. This process should begin before your first class and should be added to every class and interaction throughout the course. It is a very small world in educational leadership.

Simple things like taking digital pictures of your students and producing a photo album for the class and yourself will go a long way towards cementing connections. This activity is easily delegated. When communicating with your students by phone or e-mail, look at their pictures and you will be surprised how your level of presence is enhanced. There is no excuse for not knowing every student by name. Simple management procedures such as asking students to provide their preferred name on a 5×7 card, folded into a “tent”, will assist you with the memorization process. This is also very important to their peers as the class undergoes a process of forming their group identity and culture.

I like to visit my students at their school sites. I secure their permission ahead of time, as often these short visits are unannounced and in a spirit of wanting to know “their world” or what I like to call “habitat.” I make careful mental notes and always follow up with positive feedback. I also make a point to introduce myself to my students, co-workers, and supervisors. It is just as important to follow up with positive communication.

I have found that my students love to show me their “habitats.” This simple act of connecting goes a long way towards establishing professional relationships as well as providing an effective network, both of which facilitate ongoing connections. The social learning component of such visits on the part of the professor demonstrate the strong dispositions necessary for servant leadership. The following quote by Maya Angelou (2003) highlights this point: “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

Student Feedback

Ongoing formative assessment by way of student feedback is an important indicator of instructional effectiveness in large classes. It is important to assess student perceptions frequently. As mentioned previously, an ongoing evaluation process must be a part of each class. In addition, careful analysis of every course, through established data collection, is also essential. Most schools of higher education use a formal process for obtaining student feedback. At San Jose State University, the Student Evaluation of Teaching Effectiveness (SOTE) is completed anonymously. Data from the SOTE include a variety of categories regarding the individual courses and

professors. Student perceptions and information pertaining to overall teaching effectiveness, as well as specific focus areas such as feedback on written work, are made available to the individual professors. Included in this student feedback process is a format to document anecdotal student comments that provide additional details. A cursory review of SOTE data in our Educational Leadership Department indicates the following markers in relation to increasing class size:

1. Instructors must make use of various modalities in instructional delivery.
2. Feedback is critical. It must be timely and specific.
3. Guest presenters are appreciated and respected but must be carefully scheduled to match course material.
4. It is absolutely vital to maintain a personal connection with students irrespective of large class sizes. In other words, large numbers are no excuse for not knowing one's students.
5. Professor preparedness is crucial. Detailed lesson planning, with the ability to fluidly revert to "back up" plans when needed, should be part of the planning process.
6. Continual assessment of group needs in light of a clear focus on course objectives is important and ongoing.
7. Flexibility, approachability, humor, and a personable nature are dispositions that add to connectedness.
8. Change of venue is important.
9. Modeling shared and situational leadership is an important factor in positive student perceptions, especially in a large classroom setting.
10. Presentation skills are a must. Due to the inherent visibility of the professor, audience engagement is important as it will determine learning outcomes.
11. Commanding respect is just as important as personable connections.
12. Emotional intelligence is even more critical with larger classes.

In short, good instruction and professor efficacy are even more important with large classes. Develop systems to keep in touch, provide accurate and timely feedback, and pay particular attention to planning and detail.

Final Comments

Our responsibilities as leadership professors must change with large classes, especially during the age of limited resources. However, it is essential that we keep the mission and vision of our institutions in place. Our new roles as class directors, coaches, and facilitators are not unlike that of a wedding planner or events coordinator. At the same time, we must constantly keep in mind the key principles of adult learning. As we redesign our instruction, fundamentals of group dynamics, sound andragogy, and

factors contributing to adult student learning and motivation must be constantly assessed and evaluated. In making the journey from practitioner into the world of higher education scholarship, former school administrators can serve as good instructional models while at the same time improving their teaching and coaching skills. As always, practice must be grounded in sound acceptable theory. As such, here are a few final thoughts.

Planning and implementing a program for a large group of educators is always a challenge, as individuals will often be traveling from wide-ranging geographical locations; larger groups always take longer to settle into the process. Verbally greet participants as they arrive, or at the very least, establish your greeting with eye contact and a nod. Set an opening time and stick to it, but arrive early and be prepared, with backup systems in place, for issues such as technology. Utilize good “bell work” or “sponge” transitional activities such as completing forms, writing in journals, and asking students to write any questions they have about the agenda on 3 × 5 cards. At the end of class, ask them to cross out the questions addressed and hand in the cards. Look for themes and go over any unanswered questions. Avoid lengthy announcements at the beginning of class and do not solicit questions from large groups for extended periods of time, especially at the end of a session. Make sure time is spent assessing the class using a plus-delta format. I suggest you have a student assistant facilitate in this process so you can observe and prepare for your role in a final activity. Make sure you incorporate feedback into future instruction. Finally, have a closing procedure or ritual for each class. It may be as simple as posting yourself at the door and shaking each hand (physical contact) while handing them important materials.

Modeling successful leadership techniques with large classes is one of the most effective processes to best impart the leadership skills required by your students in their current and future roles. Adjust to the conditions and leap upon the “teachable moments” when you sense them. Check in frequently with your class. Simple statements such as, “How is this for you?” or “How are you all doing about now?”, demonstrate compassionate leadership. I will never forget the words a wise mentor once told me: “In the scheme of eternity, does it matter? Declare victory and move on.”

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