

Teaching Perspectives on Experiential Learning in Large Classes

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Higher education places an ever-growing value on innovative teaching practices that facilitate learning among students, who will then proceed to integrate it into their professional practices. At the same time, student enrolments continue to grow, and many have drawn attention to complaints that this “massification” equates to a lower-quality learning experience for students (Ahmed, 2016; Hornsby & Osman, 2014). It has also been suggested that experiential learning cannot be effectively accomplished in large classes. We sought to question this assumption and were delighted when our proposal for a Special Issue on experiential learning in large classes was accepted by the *Journal of Management Education*. We received so many responses to our initial call that it provided an opportunity to edit two separate Special Issues on the topic. The first issue (Clancy et al., 2021) focused on contributions which addressed student engagement with experiential learning in large classes. It showcased a variety of contributions which variously examined how student engagement in large classes can be enhanced through increasing participant diversity (Donovan & Hood, 2021), inviting industry experts to collaborate with faculty on assessment (Lyons & Buckley, 2021), designing unique events that mirror the intensity of an entrepreneurial start-up (Hilliard, 2021) or using multiple sources of feedback that could improve learning outcomes (Black et al., 2021). Other articles demonstrated how the very nature of classes with larger student enrolments could facilitate opportunities for

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experiential learning that are not replicable in smaller classes (Memar et al., 2021; Page et al., 2021).

In our editorial to this first issue we noted two significant themes. One of these was perhaps unsurprising, given that the developmental stage of the issue transversed the timespan of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent public health measures and lockdowns that were typical of this period. As the articles were being revised for publication, faculty across the globe were “pivoting” to new forms of online teaching and asking which elements of these changes would become normalized. The community of educators had themselves undergone a large-scale experiment with experiential learning. We observed concerns about increased levels of work and an intensification of interpersonal interactions and emotional labor. The second discernible theme related to anxiety among management educators, particularly in relation to their value and relevance in the new post-pandemic world that would emerge. In this second Special Issue, we turn our focus from the students’ experience, to that of the teachers, lecturers, tutors and faculty, who incorporate experiential learning into their teaching practice with large classes.

The papers in this Special Issue have been written chiefly from the instructor’s perspective.

The authors do not shy away from the challenges and barriers experienced in this context; rather they focus on techniques and approaches for creatively managing experiential learning in large-class settings.

Marine Agogué and Melanie A. Robinson’s, “‘It does not do to dwell on teaching notes and forget to live’: Instructor perspectives on integrating and adapting existing experiential exercises in large classes” discusses the implementation of experiential exercises from the perspective of the instructors who adopt and implement them in their classrooms. Experiential classroom exercises are often presented primarily from the perspective of those who design and create them, but Agogué and Robinson’s interviewees offer an insight into the creative work undertaken by instructors who adapt them for use in different experiential learning scenarios.

In “Networked teaching: overcoming the barriers to teaching experiential learning in large classes,” Lilia Mantai and Elaine Huber also explore how the introduction of experiential elements to large classes impacts instructors. “Networked teaching” notes that the locus of control of learning can switch to the student, but this can prove disorienting for the faculty member tasked with ensuring the learning outcomes for a large class are met. It suggests that the role of the teacher grows to encompass the role of a “coordinator” of learning and suggests a number of recommendations for institutions and teachers to enable them to complete this important role transition.

The role of the teacher as a manager and coordinator of learning also arises in Christina O'Connor, Kenneth Mullane and Denis Luethge's "The Management and Coordination of Virtual Teams in Large Classes: Facilitating Experiential Learning." The "twist" on this interesting approach is not solely that this "born virtual" program is technology-led but is also geographically dispersed across two continents. The student learners are not just part of a large, virtual class; a key part of their experiential learning is not based on the work they do as virtual team members, but as virtual team communicators. Articles on experiential learning and large classes often contain honest admissions of instructors grappling with the problems they encounter. The authors highlight that their focus on content-development during the early years of their collaborative venture led them to realize the importance of communication in the process. This tilts the emphasis from virtual teamwork toward virtual team communication and is likely to impact a mode of instruction which has the potential to grow in importance in the post-pandemic world of higher education.

In the paper "In Favour of Large Classes: A Social Networks Perspective on Experiential Learning," Alexander K. Kofinas and Crystal Han-Huei Tsay offer a conceptual paper (appropriately supported by experiential vignettes) which unpacks how the intentional design of large classes can produce learning, which is social, as well as individual. This is important because experiential learning is often presented as something which happens at the level of the individual student, rather than at a group, organizational, or even societal level. Large classes incorporate greater degrees of student diversity and the authors propose ways in which instructors and teachers can use the opportunity they provide to offer a sociologically based, socially oriented form of experiential learning.

As experienced educators, *JME*'s community are highly conscious of the importance of space in allowing learning to happen. However, our sense of learning space has changed and altered over the course of the global pandemic. Our students remain our students, but the space in which we engage with them is different, and this has doubtlessly impacted on the form of learning they have received in both positive and negative ways. "Appreciating Large Classes: Using Appreciative Inquiry to Foster a Hospitable Learning Space for Experiential Learning" by Mai P. Trinh, Chantal van Esch, Hector A. Martinez, and Tracey Messer dives into the challenge of the learning space and the strong role that it has to play in experiential learning theory. Kolb's (1984) model saw experiential learning as something that evolved as a result of interactions between a learner and their environment, and his later work addressed the importance of creating hospitable learning spaces (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) for experiential learning. Large classes are problematic in this

regard, and the authors demonstrate how Appreciative Inquiry can help address these challenges.

The articles above all contain recommendations for practice for both Business School administrators and for individual faculty members, but the areas of most interest to us in the *Journal of Management Education* community are the research questions and under-explored areas that are highlighted in the articles contained in this issue. Large classes have been the reality of the teaching lives of many educators, but they have received little attention in terms of research and theorizing. And yet we have seen from the articles in both issues on experiential learning that class size does make a difference both in terms of the demands and challenges it presents to instructors, and to the full range of student experiences. Our hope is this important trend in management education receives much more attention in the research literature in the future, and we hope that both of these Special Issues on experiential learning and large classes go some way toward energizing more activity amongst teachers and researchers alike.

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