

Student Engagement With Experiential Learning in Large Classes

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When the *Journal of Management Education* published its call for papers for a special issue on experiential learning in large classes in 2019, our initial thoughts were bound by ideas of the physical. What constituted a “large class”? 50 students or 100 students? More? The editorial team had not imagined then that our world would be “locked down” as a result of widespread public health restrictions by the time submissions began to arrive.

The social, technological, and pedagogical forces that had long curtailed the widespread introduction and normalization of online teaching and remote learning were removed over a short period of time, and many of our assumptions about what is educationally possible were upended and reshaped in the ensuing months. Collectively, we turned our physical classrooms into virtual rooms where class size has taken a back seat to more practical considerations of keeping students engaged, and where we as educators have become co-learners in this new virtual reality.

The concerns we had as editors about the way in which experiential learning in classes with large enrolments had been de-prioritized in the scholarship of teaching and learning have not changed (Cullen et al., 2019), but are now amplified within a broader discourse on the nature of student learning and engagement in online and offline environments.

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The lockdown has unlocked new possibilities and challenges that will be explored in the postpandemic educational landscape. Any conversation about experiential learning and large classes must take place in the context of what we now know about the possibilities of blended and online learning, student engagement, and the creativity and technical abilities of teaching staff. As in-person learning slowly returns, the benefits and costs of these reimaged approaches to experiential learning for students and teachers alike will emerge.

Before commenting on the individual articles that comprise this issue, it is worth taking time to explore some of the themes linking the full suite of articles across both special issues. One noticeable theme weaving its way throughout is that of *anxiety*; for example, ongoing concerns about our value and relevance as educators in the shifting landscape of higher education, and our ability to effectively facilitate and manage high-quality experiential learning in large classes.

Now that classes can be delivered virtually, new questions have arisen about what is possible in this format. In recent times, the issue of experiential learning in large classes had to be taken seriously with a greater degree of urgency. Students have now been exposed to new learning experiences and their expectations are likely to change.

Related to this digital pivot, the essential perception of a “large class” has now altered, not only for us as teachers but also for students as learners. We began with the question of how people engage with experiential learning in large classes, against an educational backdrop largely focused on in-person teaching; the changes we have collectively lived through have added an extra, unexpected, dimension to the challenges, strategies, and successes described by the authors in their accounts, and offer us a new lens through which to view their experiences.

Experiential learning requires affective engagement from students and teachers. The teacher’s role in the process is to help students transform the emotional dynamics generated by experience into knowledge and learning (Clancy & Vince, 2019). This is often complex, tiring, and satisfying work.

In the articles we noticed concerns about increased levels of work (especially emotional work) associated with managing the large class experience. Of particular note was a concern that the high level of interpersonal interaction required could be eroded by increased class sizes alongside the move to remote learning.

Above, we have written “Special Issues” rather than “Special Issue.” We received a greater number of submissions than expected, which has been generously facilitated by Jeanie Forray.

Jeanie and Kathy Lund-Dean have been wonderful guides and supports to us through the entire process and have enabled us to present two special

issues; clearly there is significant interest in deepening understandings of experiential learning beyond the small class context.

In our call-for-papers for this special issue, we stated our goal of contributing to new understandings of how experiential learning can be used to engage students and faculty, who increasingly find themselves teaching in larger class contexts (Cullen et al., 2019).

In this first issue, we focus on student engagement with experiential learning in large classes. The articles in this issue discuss this in relation to the pedagogical approaches, methods, and resources used. They are focused on how students in large classes across the globe engaged with experiential learning activities and how learning outcomes were achieved. Some specifically address the replication of authentic or “real-world” scenarios, or the engagement of industry stakeholders, to support workplace preparation.

The following issue will shift the focus to instructors and their encounters with creating, engaging, and managing experiential learning for large classes in a range of learning environments.

The diversity of expectations, interests, and motivations to learn which exists among students in large classes has been discussed as a problem to be overcome (Cullen, 2011) rather than an opportunity to be explored, but the first article, “Experiential Learning in the Large Classroom Using Performative Pedagogy,” by Paul Donovan and Alison Hood examines how performative learning happens when more diversity is *introduced* to the body of students taking a business module. Nadine C. Page, Amanda J. Nimon-Peters, and Alexander Urqhart’s article, “Big Need Not Be Bad: A Case Study of Experiential Leadership Development in Different Sized Classes,” demonstrates that valuable forms of experiential learning happen among differently sized student enrolments. Rachel Hilliard (“Start-Up Sprint: Providing a Small Group Learning Experience in a Large Group Setting”) illustrates how the benefits of experiential learning, exemplified here as an interactive entrepreneurial exercise, do not have to be limited to small-scale engagements with students and that additional benefits may indeed accrue to learners as a result of (not despite) the large class learning context. Roisín Lyons and Karen Buckley (“Stakeholder Engagement in a Large Enterprise Class Showcase”) describe an innovative approach that allows industry stakeholders to collaborate with faculty to assess student work in a large class that both facilitates experiential learning and collaboration.

It has been heartening to receive empirical rejoinders to the sense that experiential learning can only occur in smaller classes. Noushan Memar, Angelina Sundström, and Toon Larsson (“Teaching Causation and Effectuation in the Large Classroom: A Production-Trade Game”) explore how the challenges and complexities of large classes create opportunities for learning through experiences and allows students to deepen the quality of their interactions. Stephanie

Lee Black, Sandra W. DeGrassi, and Kenneth M. Sweet (“Multisource Feedback as an Experiential Learning Enabler in Large-Format Management Classes”) report on research that not only extends Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning model but also offers practical guidance to educators in both online and in-person learning environments.


All of the articles accepted for publication in this issue clearly represent the dual focus of management educators, who seek to contribute to both practice *and* theory. Engaging with all aspects of our professional identities as teachers and researchers is vital to understanding our students, and to supporting them in their development as practitioners of management and entrepreneurship, as well as guiding their participation and engagement within the wider scholarly community. The novel theoretical perspectives introduced by the contributors to this special issue are all the more interesting because they speak to the real concerns of the community of teachers who are faced with the challenges of ensuring that the opportunity to engage with experiential learning is available to all students. We are genuinely grateful to them for submitting their work to the special issue and thank them for helping launch a new conversation in the scholarship of teaching and learning for management educators.

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