

**The importance of context in engaging students large first year management
classes: A case study.**

Dr Mervyn Morris

School of Management, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

Email: mj.morris@qut.edu.au

Jane Tsakissiris

School of Management, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

Email: jane.tsakissiris@qut.edu.au

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ABSTRACT

Engaging large first year classes in tertiary education poses a number of significant challenges, most of which have been discussed by others. One area that has not received the kind of attention that it warrants is the context within which the engagement activities take place. This paper examines both the processes used to engage a large first year management class in a university and how the context of the classes shaped activities and student responses to these activities. It was recognised that students had certain types of learning styles, but given the total number of students (in excess of 1200) it was realised that it would be impossible to cater to all possibilities. A key outcome of the exercise was the explicit acknowledgement of the role of context in shaping student behaviours and thus impacting on student outcomes.

Keywords: blended learning; first year management classes; learning environment; structure and agency.h

This paper combines a number of theories into an understanding of how a richer concept of context can impact upon student engagement in large, first year management classes. The key organising theory is from Giddens (1979) and his ideas of structure and agency (understood as structuration theory). Key to understanding how this relationship works is how structure (both physical and social) can impact student behaviour. The how and why technology needs also to be taken into account. Specifically, any effort to increase the interactivity of students within a lecture space will be bound by both physical and social structures and artefacts (such as technology) as well as the nature of the students. While the impact of context on the teaching process has been implicitly examined by a number of researchers using differing contextual variables the explicit discussion of the impact of a richer concept of context seems limited. Various techniques have been examined in the learning environment such as blended learning, technology aided instruction and flipped classrooms (see Lindorff and McKeown 2013; Arbaugh, 2014; Conklin, 2012; Whetten, 2007; Miner, 1992; Arbaugh, 2010). However, there appears to be little recognition of a richer understanding of context which explicitly attempts to take into account the physical learning environment; the timing of classes

relative to day/hour; the various technologies available; the point of progression in the university career of the students and the nature of the instructional staff.

Other theories such as the nature of pedagogy; learning activities; and learning styles then need to take these factors into account. The paper will be structured in the following way: First, there will be a brief discussion of the relevance of Giddens' theory of structuration followed by a high level review of related learning theory and learning styles. A case study will be presented that identifies how context shaped student engagement providing guidance to others attempting to make student learning more active and engaging. The methodology used was a basic ethnomethodology where the observers were also the participants and the various lessons to be learned came 'out of' the lived experience of the two instructors teaching in the program (Angrosino, 2008; Strauss and Juliet, 1994)

Theory of structuration

At the core of Giddens' theory of structuration is a tension between structure and agency, with neither one nor the other being privileged. Essentially he argues that social actors are knowledgeable, purposive beings with the ability to make choices. These choices will be enabled or constrained by structures of both a social and physical nature (Giddens, 1979; Giddens, 1984). It was this idea which shaped the underlying assumptions which provided the framework guiding the case study. The theory of structuration as used in this paper incorporates disparate streams of research around teaching practice, the psychology of learning styles and the sociology of student engagement as well as the importance of place (Lefebvre, 1974; 1991 trans;) or physical space.

Learning Styles

Learning styles are functions of individual psychology. While there have been a variety of different learning styles identified for a variety of learners (for a review, see Cassidy, 2004) there is a key difficulty in translating a (potentially) diverse range of leaning styles into the teaching processes for large first year management classes. Attempts have been made to provide a degree of systematisation of learning styles (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Dunn, Griggs, Olson, Beasley, & Gorman, 1995; Boyle, Duffy, and Dunleavy, 2003) but these attempts tend to be context free. Tucker (2007) does draw attention to a key set of variables informing learning styles such as culture, socio-economic

background, gender, course of study and higher education experience. Montgomery & Groat (1998) also raise the issue of context but only in terms of modifying any particular learning style. Given the overall number of students involved a decision was made to simply accept that there would be a variety of learning styles present in the classes and rather than trying to cater to all possibilities a variety of activities were designed that might appeal to a broad range of learning styles. It was for this reason that the lecture program was divided into three separate 'categories'. Following Cassidy (2004) who alludes to structure and process based learning styles, it was hoped that such an approach would be useful.

Student Engagement

Tiberius (1986) outlines the teaching process as being divided into two main metaphors. First, there is the transmission metaphor, where students are the passive receivers of information transmitted by the instructor. In this metaphor, students play little part in the educational process, they are simply empty vessels to be filled with the knowledge, filtered, selected, and transmitted by the instructor. The second metaphor revolves more around dialogues or conversations between and among instructors and students. In theory this metaphor of engaging students in their own educative process is more effective than the transmission metaphor. It was this principal of engagement that was used to structure the learning activities that took place in the classroom, irrespective of what type of learning activity was being operationalised. It was during the operationalising of these principals when the significance of a broad range of contextual factors became glaringly obvious. Which raises the question of how it might be possible to introduce active learning principles into large first year management units by taking into account the social and physical structures of the classes, as well as the nature of the individuals which, when all taken together, represent both the context of the instruction and the processes used in attempting to make the student experience more meaningful and engaged rather than simply relying on the transmission (or empty vessels) metaphor.

CASE STUDY

Unit overview

Management is a core first year undergraduate management unit. The aim of the unit is to develop a basic and applied understanding of key concepts and theories in management. The Management syllabus for Semester 1 2015 was updated by the unit co-ordinator/lecturer to include a combination of lectures and lecture/workshops to allow for a more socially inclusive pedagogy, to facilitate the high participation rates of students from diverse backgrounds and to take into consideration the different education pathways of students (Hitch, Macfarlane, & Nihill, 2015). The changes were designed to provide students with engaging and innovative learning opportunities as first year learning experiences at university are paramount to student success and their commitment to tertiary education (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010; Johnston, 2010). The updated syllabus consisted of traditional lectures and lecture/workshops, 5 lectures (delivered 4 times per week) and 8 lecture/workshops (delivered 4 times per week). Each lecture/workshop was based on individual activities and group activities as the workplace functions around groups. The duration of the lecture and lecture/workshops was 1 hour 15 minutes.

Student demographics

The students completing the unit were enrolled in the Business School and completing a degree in accounting, advertising, marketing and PR, economics and finance, international business, journalism, management and HR, economics, media and communication or philanthropy and non-profit studies. The unit is also available for other students to complete as a major/minor in management, or as an elective. The numbers of enrolments vary, but generally they are in the order of 1100 students per semester. For Semester 1, 2015, 1280 students enrolled in the unit and the student cohort consisted predominantly of 1st semester, 1st year students between the ages of 18-25 years. Generally speaking most students had completed some form of work experience before commencing the course.

Planning

For the lecture/workshops, the unit coordinator/lecturer was responsible for creating the lecture teaching and learning resources and the facilitator was responsible for creating the workshop teaching and learning resources. The unit-coordinator/lecturer and facilitator attended a weekly meeting that was scheduled after the first lecture/workshop session to reflect the effectiveness of the teaching and learning strategies for the first session, making adjustments if necessary for the following sessions and to discuss the workshop activities planned for the following week. Reflection was an important tool which allowed the improvement of pedagogical practice and enhancement of learning outcomes (Ryan & Ryan, 2013). It was during these reflective meetings that it became apparent to us that we needed to take more contextual variables into account as catering to differing learning styles was simply not sufficient.

A workshop plan was developed by the facilitator for each topic and the aims and objectives of the workshop were aligned to the aims and objectives of the syllabus for each topic. The unit coordinator/lecturer had the responsibility of delivering the workshops on a Tuesday evening (Session 2) and Friday afternoon (Session 4) alone, therefore, a workshop plan was necessary to ensure consistency throughout all the sessions. The teaching and learning resources associated with each workshop activity were created for each of the four workshop sessions in advance of the workshops being held. Additional to the workshop plan, a workshop summary was created and uploaded to File Exchange located on BlackBoard to provide the 22 tutors with a summary of what had occurred at the workshops before the tutorials commenced. The workshop plan and workshop summary were provided to the unit coordinator/lecturer for feedback and approval before distribution.

Teaching and learning strategies

The format of the lecture/workshops involved the unit-coordinator/lecturer delivering a 30 minute lecture at the beginning of the session to discuss the relevant theory for each topic followed by a 30 minute workshop delivered by the facilitator. A summary of key points derived from the lecture/workshop was delivered by the unit co-ordinator/lecturer for the remaining 15 minutes of the lecture/workshop. Each workshop consisted of two to three varied learning activities that were highly

dynamic and interactive and allowed students the opportunity to inquire, explore and explain management theory and practice. The effective teaching strategies selected and applied for the lecture/workshops included: direct instruction, whole of class and group discussion, small-group work, student research, cooperative learning, problem solving, and case study (Killen, 2012). The conscious effort to include humour through various mediums assisted in creating a non-threatening learning environment which can be experienced by students when having to sit in large lecture theatres. Students advised that they liked the '*interaction, the slides, the jokes, its easy to pay attention*'.

The students were required to complete the recommended readings for each topic as well as reviewing lecture notes before attending a lecture/workshop to make the students accountable and responsible for their own learning. From experience it was extremely rare for students to do this preparation prior to the lecture and this was the rationale for the short lecture to introduce the topic prior to the workshop. During the workshop activities students were given the opportunity to demonstrate their mastery, receive real-time constructive feedback and reflect on their learning.

At the beginning of the semester students were informed of the changes made to the syllabus hence their feedback throughout the semester was important. An in-class questionnaire to evaluate the lecture/workshops was provided to the students through the use of GoSoapBox in the Week 7 lecture/workshop. The results of the questionnaire were discussed with the students and future workshops were adjusted to take into consideration the feedback. To ascertain the effectiveness of the lecture/workshop random reflective discussions occurred with students (individual and group) throughout the semester. The use of various and multiple forms of evaluation throughout the semester enabled the use managerial control techniques to enhance teaching practices and learning outcomes for students (Cathcart, Greer, & Neil, 2014).

Guest speakers were used to assist students with forming their professional identity as a manager and to allow students the opportunity to gain an understanding of organisational experiences that they may encounter as a manager. It was imperative that the guest speakers had management and leadership experience and were currently working in industry. The guest speakers were from Los Angeles, Sydney and Brisbane. To discuss the topic of leadership a prominent female entrepreneur

provided her achievements and experiences to the class and answered questions from the students. A female guest speaker was specifically selected for the Leadership workshop to highlight the importance of female leaders in organisations.

Learning and teaching spaces

The timeslots allocated for each session were Tuesday at 8:30 am – 9:45 am (Lecture Theatre A – Session 1), Tuesday at 6:00 pm – 7:15 pm (Lecture Theatre B – Session 2), Wednesday 11:00 am – 12:15 (Lecture Theatre C – Session 3) and Friday at 4.00pm – 5.30pm (Lecture Theatre D – Session 4). The sessions were delivered in large traditional lecture theatres. The instructors had no control over the size/nature of the teaching spaces that were allocated and the institution only had one large lecture theatre that would cater for 565 students, and demand from other first year units always meant that in some semesters not all requests for the larger theatre could be met. Therefore, four learning and teaching spaces had to be utilised to cater for an unexpectedly high number of enrolments in the unit and the availability of learning and teaching classroom spaces that had sufficient seating capacity. This was the first occurrence of having four sessions during a week for the unit. Despite each lecture theatre having a traditional lecture design, there were differences in the physical layout for each lecture theatre. For example, Lecture Theatre A had rows that had a very steep vertical elevation compared to Lecture Theatre C which had a more flat vertical elevation. The nature of these spaces shaped what was, and was not, possible in terms of engaging students in the classroom activities. As noted by Arbaugh (2014: p.799) ‘...there are numerous studies supporting the importance of learner-learner interactions in blended settings.’

The design of the large traditional lecture theatres by their very structure do not easily facilitate such interactions as students are at different levels, as they had to turn around and generally found it difficult to get physically comfortable which then inhibits learning. This impacted the effectiveness of in-class discussion and contingencies were implemented during the semester to try to prevent such disruption. This concern was also expressed by students ‘*The theatre it’s hard to get engaged and participate with other students.*’ The fixed seating also prevented students from facing each other when discussing topics and expressing their viewpoint (Ogilvie, 2008). The large physical

structure allowed students the opportunity to distance themselves from other students particularly when class attendance started to decrease. As a workaround students were asked to move out of their selected seats to participate in small group discussions and to move closer to the front during whole of class activities. The facilitator and unit coordinator/lecture walked the isles during the workshop to create a feeling of togetherness with the audience which assisted with students openly sharing their views as much as was possible given the physical limitations of the learning spaces. The ability for one instructor to walk around to each of the groups to foster and guide their in-group discussion was challenging given the large area and the fixed seating arrangement.

Another challenge to overcome was the acoustics in the lecture theatre. For example, a student who was hearing impaired raised the issue of '*there is too much noise with discussions to concentrate*' and when discussing this with the facilitator requested that she not to be asked to share her viewpoint using the microphone. There was one projector screen in the large lecture theatres. However, having two projector screens would have enhanced the interaction between the students and the facilitator. For example, GoSoapBox could have been used simultaneously with PowerPoint. This would have allowed the GoSoapBox features such as the Confusion Barometer and the Social Q & A to be displayed throughout the workshop.

Technology

Various forms of technology were incorporated into the unit to enhance content delivery, increase student engagement and influence positive learning outcomes. Empirical research has identified the importance of incorporating technology into lectures to increase student engagement (Malin, 2014; MacGeorge et al., 2008). The details for each topic were made available on Blackboard, under the headings of Overview; Preparation; During Class; After Class/Tutorial; Deepening and Extending their knowledge. The teaching and learning consultant was responsible for creating a Blackboard site to correspond with the updated syllabus. A closed Facebook site was used to encourage communication between and among students and academics throughout the semester. Approximately 80% of students joined the Facebook page which was only lightly moderated. All lectures were recorded and made available to students online. Technologies such as

GoSoapBox, Skype, YouTube and standard videos and the Internet were incorporated into the workshop activities to allow students the opportunity to interact with international and national business executives, and to foster whole of class and small group collaboration. The GoSoapBox functionality used was Real-Time Polls, Social Q & A, Confusion Barometer, Quiz and Discussion. During the Week 1 the facilitator provided a brief overview of how to use the GoSoapBox software.

To allow students the opportunity to interact with an international business executive from Los Angeles, Skype was used in the What Do Managers Do workshop. The time zone difference and the availability of the guest speaker resulted in the Skype call occurring in Session 1 and Session 3 in Week 4. The use of an electronic questionnaire from their recommended readings was first completed by the students before the Skype call and then completed by the guest speaker during the Skype call in front of the students to provide a real-time example of how an executive would answer the questionnaire. The guest speaker discussed the reasoning behind each of the answers provided. The feedback from students indicated that this activity was the most liked. The students' interest and engagement with this activity appeared to be influenced by having an opportunity to converse with a successful US business professional who had completed a postgraduate degree from a prestigious US university and was a transformational leader. This activity is also an example of how the workshop activities were structured around individual responses, rather than group discussions.

Various forms of video material were shown during the lecture/workshops to capture the attention of the students for topics such as the Employment Relationship, Planning and the Management of Diversity. Comedy skits from YouTube, for example The Office a popular television series allowed students to visually interpret and understand a range of management practices. To overcome the difficulty of organising an off campus visit for such a large group of students a video recorded interview was displayed during a workshop activity which involved the facilitator asking the guest speaker from Sydney questions about the importance of planning for managers.

Feedback

Despite there being no formal data collection of attendance figures, it was noticeable that compared to previous semesters student attendance had increased. The feedback from students indicated the introduction of the lecture/workshops were effective in engaging and supporting student learning. The effective collaboration between the unit coordinator/lecturer and the facilitator together with their different but complimentary delivery of content assisted in creating an effective learning experience for the students and assisted the efficiency of workshop planning tasks. The unit coordinator/lecturer and facilitator's qualifications, teaching and management experience was crucial for providing multiple, varied and real-world learning opportunities for the students. Figure 1 illustrates the results of the GoSoapBox questionnaire undertaken by the students ($n = 213$) during the semester for each session. Overall 60 percent (medium) of students ($n= 107$) thought that the workshops were beneficial to their learning. Feedback from this cohort indicated that *'It changed the traditional boring' lecture stereotype. It was refreshing how the class engaged with the lecturers and were learning in ways other than reading from the board. The organised skype call was an effective idea too.'* There were 22 percent (medium) of students ($n=52$) that found the workshops not to be beneficial to their learning as they preferred a more traditional lecture style and 24 percent (medium) of students ($n=54$) were unsure if the workshop was beneficial to their learning.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The feedback from the students indicated that having *'to actively think about problems'*, the *'interactive nature'*, *'video components'*, *'interaction with real managers'* resulted in the workshops being *'very relevant and highly enjoyable'* and the *'chocolate was a bonus.'* The *'lack of audience participation'* frustrated students as some students were apprehensive to share their viewpoint using a microphone despite various techniques implemented by the facilitator and unit-coordinator/lecturer to reassure students that all viewpoints they shared were beneficial to student learning. It was evident when the workshop was not recorded student participation increased. For example, the Management of Diversity workshop was not recorded and the students were informed that it wasn't recorded and this made a significant difference in the students offering their viewpoints. Other issues raised by students include: the time-slot of the lecture/workshops; relevance to assessment; beneficial if more students

attended all lecture/workshops and the lecture/workshop should be of shorter duration. Figure 2 illustrates that despite students perceiving that the workshops were beneficial to their learning there has been little change in the grades achieved by the students in comparison to previous years.

Insert Figure 2 about here

REFLECTION

As this was a single case study it is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions. However, there appears to be an argument for the theory of structuration being used as a way of incorporating both the social and the psychological into the examination of teaching practices in tertiary education. The theory of structuration provides for both structure (social and physical) as well as agency. These two key elements need to be taken into consideration in any attempt to improve the engagement levels of students in large first year management classes as it draws attention to the dynamic nature of the impact of structure and agency on the overall teaching and learning process. By explicitly taking such considerations into account when designed a blended learning experience there might be a greater chance that students will engage more in active learning of and for itself, rather than, as Lindforff & McKeown (2013) claim, first year management students preferred on line material that is related to assessment outcomes, rather than that designed for greater understanding.

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Figure 1: Questionnaire Results Students from Four Sessions

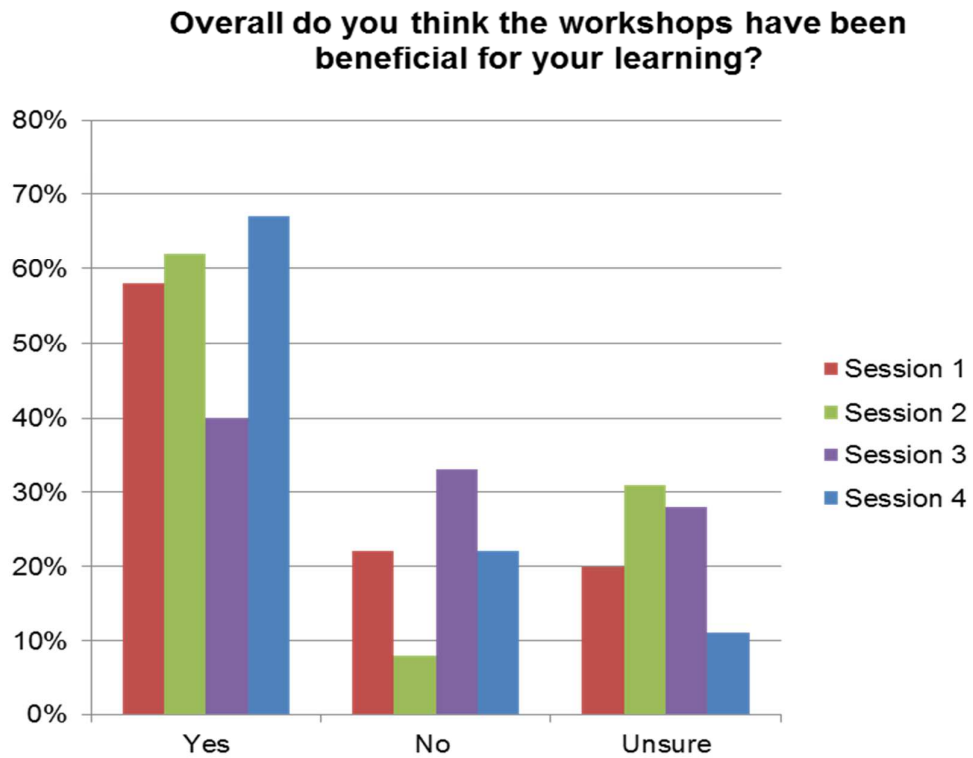


Figure 2: Management student grades pre and post lecture/workshop

