

## **“Is this going to be on the test?!”: Seeking Authentic Engagement in a Large Undergraduate Course**

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*In spite of growing research attention to structural innovations for large university courses, the actual practice of supervising such a course remains extremely challenging. Against a backdrop of similar efforts, this paper reports our own attempt over two years to develop a large-course structure cultivating greater freedom and authentic exploration for students. While more empowering teaching obviously entails meaningful shifts in practice itself, we also found ourselves interrogating fundamental assumption about teaching and learning to a surprising degree. Consequently, we begin by reviewing competing interpretive frameworks or “problem definitions” that we propose as partially constituting distinct educational practices. We then turn to an evaluation of our own practical efforts at promoting greater democracy and dialogue within a large course. These efforts ranged from particular note-taking formats, to unique attendance and evaluation policies, to whole class poster sessions. By inviting more collective interrogation of the basic interpretive framework and practice of large class supervision, we hope to encourage other university teachers to further consider more empowering and transformative course formats.*

In spite of long-standing research attention to innovative possibilities in large university classes (Weimer, 1987), the experience of actually supervising such a course typically remains extremely difficult. From limited interaction to the sheer grading burden, a mass undergraduate class presents particular challenge to even the best of teachers. Hu and Kuh (2002) cite their own analyses a decade earlier indicating that a substantial fraction of 50,000 students at 128 American colleges were “not engaged at meaningful levels in educationally purposeful activities,” with a solid 18% qualifying as “disengaged” (p. 556). Similar concerns have been raised in other countries (e.g., Blunden, 2002; Francis & Byrne, 1999).

Over recent decades, a growing “scholarship of teaching” movement has begun to shed light on innovations that may address such challenges in large courses (Hutchings & Shulman, 1999; Kreber, 2001). In spite of these efforts, many instructors, unfortunately remain unaware of alternatives to the factory or “banking” (Freire, 1993) model as a viable approach to large courses. This emphasis on teachers efficiently transmitting information in mass lectures is often assumed to be the inevitable format for such a course. After

reviewing ways to cultivate greater student engagement, for instance, O’Sullivan (1997) notes that such innovations

[call for] course sections involv[ing] no more than 15 students. Greater numbers of students limit class interaction. . . . On the other hand, the class size can be much larger if the pedagogy primarily consists of lectures, papers, and student class presentations/projects (p. 9).

The purpose of this manuscript is to explore and illustrate the surprising possibilities of large university courses. Scholars in community psychology have had a natural interest over the years in finding ways of structuring the class “community” in empowering ways (Dalton, 2007; Moos 1979; Sarason, 1997). While the majority of this article analyzes teaching innovations within our own community psychology course, we have also aimed for the presentation to be more broadly helpful by referencing throughout the paper exemplary large-course research from diverse fields. Specific to community psychology, we offer it as an extension and continuation of previous thoughtful explorations on undergraduate teaching in the discipline (e.g., McLean, Johnson, & Eblen, 1977; O’Sullivan,

1997; Rossi, 1975). In discussing the limited exposure of students to community psychology, Ferrari and O'Donnell (1997) proposed that "the development of additional undergraduate courses in community psychology is one of the most important topics in the field" (p. 1), a sentiment we share.

While centering on our own empirical explorations of teaching innovations, we wish to avoid portraying meaningful teaching change as primarily a matter of technique or method. When students are categorically assumed to be passive and unmotivated, even the most creative teaching technique becomes yet another manipulation tactic. For this reason, we preface our practice evaluation with a classic community psychology exercise: exploring competing "problem definitions" of large courses—in particular, explanations of the problem of student passivity (Seidman & Rappaport, 1986). (For purposes of this paper, "apathy," "passivity" and "disengagement" are used interchangeably, in reference to limited or insincere student participation in a large course). At its heart, the systematic analysis of problem definition reflects the larger philosophical turn towards serious examination of interpretation and language within academia (Hess, 2005), with more rigorous research attention being paid generally to the way *distinct ways of thinking* can partially "constitute" *particular ways of being* (Taylor, 1985). At the paper's conclusion, we explore several larger meta-questions relevant to the theory and practice of quality university teaching. Overall, by juxtaposing analyses of varied teaching practice and distinct interpretive frameworks, we hope to make salient the abundant possibilities found in any course, on any subject, and of any size.

**Problem definition analysis: "How do we make sense of student apathy?"**

While the brute, objective challenge of student passivity or disengagement is evident, as with any social problem, there are multiple ways of framing and explaining it. In this case, we propose two "modal explanations" evident across scholarly and popular discourse. While actual practice reflects these portrayals in varying hybrids and intensities, we propose the formal distinctions as a helpful backdrop for further investigation of the problem and its appropriate

solutions.

*First portrayal: Students as primary explanations for their own passivity*

One prevailing way of making sense of disengagement attends to students themselves as primarily responsible for the problem. While acknowledging institutional context, passivity is largely explained based on the nature of individual students—specifically, their general lack of motivation to learn.

*Course structure.*

Given this view, instrumental structure and reinforcement is naturally seen as critical for teaching success. These mechanisms vary in intensity, from random quizzes to required attendance. The structure also typically extends to the learning process itself, with clear indications to students of what is important to know, when they should know it, and how they should demonstrate their knowledge. Particularly in large courses, this level of structure and control is assumed to be critical in effectively managing students and ensuring their participation.

*Class roles*

Within such an approach, the role of a teacher is focused primarily on managing the structure to ensure participation and learning, i.e., recording attendance, delivering information through lectures, laying out assignments with explicit deadlines and administering examinations. Evidence of passivity may be taken as indicating a need for additional structural reinforcements. In turn, the role of a student becomes following the teacher's instructions in receiving class material and ultimately demonstrating this knowledge in a particular time and way.

In contexts requiring the efficient transmission of information, this kind of approach may be very beneficial. In other settings, however, doubts have been raised as to the nature of the ensuing learning engagement. Duckett (2002), for instance, argues that within highly structured courses, typically "students occupy a disempowered position . . . reflected in the passivity of their prescribed role in a learning environment dominated by didactic teaching and rote learning" (p. 98; see also Raffini, 1993). In light of such concerns, we turn towards an examination of alternative structural

arrangements by first considering a wholly different way of understanding student disengagement.

*Second portrayal: Context as primary explanation for student passivity*

A second explanation for student disengagement attends more centrally to relationships between students and their surrounding contexts. While acknowledging students' responsibility for their own education, individuals themselves are not taken to be primary explanations for passivity. Instead, long years of socialization in educational systems are seen as impacting students' own intrinsic motivation. Since students are here understood to be active participants in their contexts, this view is not to be confused with a third portrayal that blames systems entirely, which would be as problematic as the one largely blaming students.

*Course structure*

From this view instrumental reinforcements are seen as potentially harmful to student motivation. Structural revisions may range from eliminating attendance manipulation to altering the nature of final examinations. This "loosening" may extend to the learning itself, with expectations of what, when and how to learn becoming more malleable and a different structure set up which encourages exploration in more flexible and personalized ways.

*Class roles*

Within such an approach, teachers are no longer expected to *ensure* learning by directly eliciting participation and "getting students involved." Instead, teachers indirectly *facilitate* student engagement by altering conditions in a way that provides greater opportunities for students to exercise their own motivation. In this way, like ethical research participation, genuine student involvement is "invited" and maintained free of pressure and force. While tests, assignments, lectures and attendance are still important, they may function here in very different ways. Students, who are seen as ultimately possessing inherent motivation to learn, share the responsibility for education with the teacher and thus have a role that extends beyond simple receipt of knowledge.

The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) argues for the transformative power of any event where participants come together with

a genuine intent of "putting themselves into play." When both teacher and student authentically contribute to the exchange, a "fusion of horizons" may occur where understanding on all sides becomes different.

While this kind of a "dialogic" educational model has increasingly been taken up within small classes, its potential has typically been presumed to be necessarily linked to class size. Large courses have thus been assumed to require more instrumental structural reinforcements, as described above. The impetus for our own exploration was questioning whether a fundamentally different model of education was indeed necessary simply because of larger class size. More positively, we were inspired by the possibilities of setting up larger courses with more authentic space and freedom.

What follows is a review of key practical lessons learned during our two year attempt towards dialogic ideals in a 200-level, semester-long elective class. Our students evenly spanned from freshman to senior years, with a majority female (76% over the final year). Over the course of four semesters we tested multiple structural innovations addressing the challenge of student disengagement. Each semester began with what we understood as the best structure possible for nurturing genuine participation and ended with gathering feedback towards further shifts for the next semester. As our teaching practices evolved, we documented emerging lessons and monitored the effects of new structural changes. During the final semester, we obtained IRB approval to use student feedback as research data. Our outcome assessment draws on comments from midterm and final evaluations from that last semester, as well as correspondence with students who dropped the course.

### **Practice evaluation: "How can we partner with students in authentic learning?"**

In making the attempt, we experimented with multiple aspects of the classroom environment, from note-taking, assignments, and reading to presentations, attendance and grades. Since a language of "methods, techniques and tools" can imply objects which are static and passive, we prefer to speak of varying aspects of an approach or "way of being" as a teacher. Below, we present our 10 main efforts, organized

across three broad, interrelated areas: (A) facilitating students' personal ownership, critical exploration, and active engagement; (B) fostering authentic connection and exchange within the classroom community; and (C) maintaining effective accountability while avoiding manipulation.

For each aspect, we illustrate our own efforts alongside similar initiatives, with outcome evidence reviewed for both. We conclude this practice section with feedback on the overall course atmosphere, drawing on both standard university evaluations and our own survey of students, including many students who had dropped the course. This feedback was reviewed for salient themes, with selected quotes illustrative of these themes. Reported percentages come from both university evaluations and a count of several free-response questions in our own survey.

#### *A. Facilitating personal ownership, critical exploration and active engagement*

This thrust of our initiative comprises structural efforts to reinforce exploration based on students' own passions and perspectives.

(1) *"Your community issue": Centering class structure around student interests.* One of our most successful course aspects was an attempt to bring course material "to life" in a way that mattered to students. Early in the semester, we invited students to select a community issue of personal importance around which to center their semester's learning. Issues ranged from homelessness, racism and domestic violence to eating disorders, sex education and college drinking. Writing assignments, thought papers and exam questions subsequently referred to and revolved around their particular issue (e.g., "What does primary prevention look like for your issue?")

Other instructors have reported similar efforts to allow student choice of what to study and how to study it (Burkill, 1997; Gonzales & Semken, 2006) and create more "person-centered" (Barkham & Elender, 1995) or "learning/student centered classrooms" (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Scott, Buchanan, & Haigh, 1997). Duckett (2002) calls on teachers to "redress the unequal distribution of power between [teachers] and students through carving open spaces for students to occupy empowering roles in the

educational process" (p. 96). "Democratic learning" (MacBeath & Moos, 2004) and "finding freedom in the classroom" (Hinchey, 1998) are themes of broader educational efforts towards greater control and exploratory space for students.

Emphases on student interests and choice have been linked to decreased apathy and deeper learning engagement generally (DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005; Stanier, 1997; Teixeira-Dias et al, 2005). After reviewing positive implications of self-determination, Raffini (1993) cites a study by deCharms reporting that a "major characteristic of teachers who were able to motivate students towards academic achievement was their skill at carefully nurturing students' ability to make choices within the classroom" (p. 91).

The large majority of our own students (96%) also had positive things to say about the opportunity to center learning around a chosen issue. Students spoke of being able to "work on things they care about" and "focus on an interest by choice not by force." They commented that it added meaning to class material and "made the class more personal" and "a lot more class-member focused than just a professor talking at a class." Other students, however, spoke of difficulty in connecting concepts to the same issue and recommended more space for a variety of topics.

(2) *Sketchpads, portfolios and final gallery display: Formally valuing students' own reflections.* Even where course content reflects more freedom to connect with personal interests, the process of actual study in a large class may continue to reinforce largely unilateral, passive learning. An overarching structure of lectures, reading and note-taking may subtly reinforce in students a primary role in receiving and retaining knowledge. To the degree that students are accustomed to sit back and wait to learn, freedom to explore within the class may be less meaningful, if not bothersome. Given this, we sought ways to facilitate a learning process centered around student exploration as well.

Our primary intervention towards this end focused on note-taking. Rather than simply write what was said in class, students were encouraged to explore their own reflections in a thought journal or "sketchpad." Barkham and Elender

(1995) asked students to maintain similar “dossier” notebooks in their own large course structure. In both cases, like exploring artists, students were invited to sketch personal reflections, musings, concerns and questions throughout class discussion and readings. To encourage this exploration, we combated the notion of an introductory course as leading to comprehensive and detailed knowledge of the field. Instead, we encouraged students to have fun getting to know or “flirting with” many areas of the field, and referred to the course as a “first date” with community psychology. Our accountability structure supported this space as well, from open-ended response papers on a particular theme to examinations centered on “broad brush strokes” of the field. Overall, rather than telling students what was “important to focus on,” we primarily encouraged their focus on what they found most exciting, critical or troubling. When questions arose in class we asked students to simultaneously suggest their own *best answer* to their inquiry. By reinforcing in concrete ways the value of their own reflections, we sought to counterbalance student habits of over-reliance on external determinants of how to think and to better reinforce “putting into play” their own energies and ideas. Ultimately, we found these approaches prompting many students to relate with us more as advisors or mentors, rather than simply instructors (see Jacobi, 1991).

With the success of student sketchpads, we leveraged the art metaphor further by naming their compilation of more polished course writing a “portfolio.” While some used a basic word processing document, most took the option of creating their own web-log (“blog”). Since the opportunity to personally share in class was limited, writing was framed as the primary and most important way to “participate” during class. As the final artistic phase, the class poster session doubled as a final “gallery” presentation and allowed a broader sharing of student ideas (see details below).

(3) *Interpretive teaching approach: Presenting material in a way that invites critical reflection.* While a focus on students’ engagement was paramount, we considered carefully how to present actual community psychology content as well. Although standard

lecturing can clearly be beneficial at times (Benjamin, 1991), attention has been given to how lecturing may go beyond giving information to better cultivate critical thinking (e.g., Barkham & Elender, 1995; Brooks, 1984). Our primary inspiration for presenting material in an engaging way came from two past master teachers, Drs. Tom Schwandt (UIUC) and Brent Slife (BYU). Rather than telling students “the right way to think,” each professor focuses energy on articulating a set of key issues in their fields, accompanied by distinct stances and ensuing implications of the same. In this way, students are allowed space to evaluate and decide for themselves what to think. In our case, we organized discussion around contested issues at the heart of community psychology: the relationship of values and science, the scope of analysis (individual vs. systems), the nature of analysis (strength vs. deficit thinking), the nature of interventions (prevention, empowerment, etc.), etc. On each issue, we outlined multiple ways of approaching the question and discussed respective consequences.

(4) *Student problem definition analyses: Inviting personal practice with interpretive exploration.* In addition to exploring multiple problem definitions in class discussion, we sought ways for students to “practice” the same exercise more concretely. Consequently, we challenged students to conduct a “problem definition analysis” of their own community issue. After reviewing popular discourse relevant to their issue (e.g., internet/newspapers/friends), students identified different “modal ways of thinking,” each illustrated by verbatim text they had gathered. These problem definition analyses were ultimately presented next to “super-initiatives” for the same issues in the final class poster session (see below). Overall, this exercise turned out to be challenging for students, especially grasping the distinction between a more typical objective analysis of brute problems (“*problem analyses*”) and an analysis of the way problems are differentially interpreted and narrated across communities (“*problem definition analyses*”). In spite of this, we believe difficulties with the exercise largely reflected healthy growing pains in the positive practice of critically analyzing multiple positions on an issue.

(5) *Hypothetical community “super-initiatives”*: *Cultivating action orientation in spite of size*. A final aspect of fostering personal exploration aimed to go beyond standard investigations towards an exploration of community action. From field placements (O’Sullivan 1997; Gonzales & Semken, 2006) to action research training (Keys, et al, 1999), active class components have been shown to be helpful. While large classes are often assumed to preclude such efforts, we experimented with an alternative way of nurturing a class “action-orientation.”

After clustering students with common interests, small groups were charged to craft a community “super-initiative”: an omnibus “dream intervention” created over the course of the semester that reflected all the potential solutions and best answers discovered for their chosen community problem. Specifically, as basic community psychology approaches were reviewed (prevention, empowerment and alternative settings), groups were challenged to brainstorm creative ways of applying them to their community issues in the ongoing development of their own “super-initiatives.” We referred to subsequent semester work as a mini “apprenticeship” in the field, revolving around both community psychology analyses of their chosen problem and development of a hypothetical action plan for that same problem (see O’Sullivan, 1997 for a similar initiative). Final proposals were shared with classmates during poster sessions in the final week of class (see #6 below).

The most positive theme of student evaluation referred to the combined effect of these initial aspects (1-5). Students reported that the course “encouraged me to develop my ideas and approaches to problems” (72%) and “encouraged me to think for myself” (73%). Two students commented that “[the class has] taught me to look at an issue and not just look at one side, but to draw up both sides of an issue and really interpret them.” “I really liked that the focus was on all perspectives rather than one; I feel that’s what made this class really unique.” Other students noted that “the sketchpad helped me to discover my ideas in greater depth” and “I appreciated the freedom given me to form my own ideas,” with 64%

recommending we keep the sketchpad. Students spoke of these super-initiative projects as “grounding” concepts and teaching the “application of concepts of class in a real way.”

Other students had difficulty with these aspects. For the sketchpad, some struggled with moving beyond verbatim notes to explore their own reflections, while others who were capable, disliked being asked to do so. Barkham and Elender (1995) also reported divided student evaluations on their “dossiers,” with half the class relishing the opportunity to think more for themselves and half anxious about the looseness of expectations. A vocal handful of our own students strongly resisted the fundamental class approach, with one student criticizing the class as a “community philosophy” course rather than “one centered on solid psychological findings.” This important posting to our anonymous course message board prompted a class discussion on values and interpretation within social science (see the elaborated exploration of these questions in the *AJCP* special issue on community psychology and science, including those of the first author and a mentor, Rappaport, 2005 & Hess, 2005).

#### *B. Fostering authentic connection and exchange within the classroom community*

Another classic difficulty of large classes is lack of engagement with a “live” person, prompting attention over the years as to how to foster more interaction within such a course (e.g., Benjamin, 1991; Cooper, 1995). This second thrust of our initiative comprises attempts to maximize actual exchange within the class.

(6) *Research-action teams and class poster sessions: Preserving live exchange between students*. As noted previously, students focusing on similar community issues were organized in small groups we called “research action teams.” To extend class-time exchange, discussion boards were created for each team on the class website; these were also made available to the larger class as well, with encouragement to “sit in” on other team discussions and offer your “consultation” on other issues of interest. These teams functioned as supportive containers to facilitate mutual exploration of an issue and eventually collaborate on associated super-initiatives. Group problem-solving (Lehman, 1997), “cooperative group work” (Raffini, 1988) and



*Intro to Community Psychology Class Poster Session, University of Illinois, Spring 2006*

“collaborative learning” (Cooper, 1995; Rinehart, 1999) have each been proposed as particularly effective ways to prompt student engagement, especially when centered around issues of real-world significance (Hevern, 1996). Most of our own students (88%) reported positively on their experience with the research action team: “The environment in this class definitely felt like a smaller class . . . splitting the class into groups based on interests made the class seem personalized for each student.” “I loved the active participation aspect of the course. I learned so much from others and was given the ability to share about myself,” “I felt like I could openly share my views in class.” “There is no sharing in my other large classes, no discussion only lecture.” In addition to learning from multiple viewpoints within their own team, students commented specifically that small group interaction facilitated deeper learning about the field and prompted more friendship and connection within the class community. Other students felt differently and either called for more in-class discussion or suggested the nature of a large classroom necessitated a more traditional format: “Large classes work better when it is just lecture. That’s just the way it is.”

While there were generally limitations to verbal participation within whole-class discussions, we found two notable exceptions. The first was “community wisdom” sharing (see below), and the second was class poster sessions held during the last week of class in the atrium of our psychology building. Over two days, student groups took turns presenting conclusions from

semester-long problem definition analyses and “super-initiatives” for their community issues, giving them a final chance to put everything they learned about their issue relative to community psychology together in one presentation. Complete with professional attire and hors d’oeuvres, this was a fun way for students to share what had been learned with their other classmates. 85% of students responded favorably to the poster session—many enthusiastically: “Exciting end to semester. . . Fun, more expression and freedom than say a boring paper!” Students commented on the chance to see other classmates ideas: “I loved it! It was great to see other people’s work. . . It’s neat to see what everyone else has been doing all semester. . .” One student noted that sharing individual ideas “helped me to realize that my ideas are possible.”

In spite of these successes, our primary expectation for student participation, as previously noted, remained individual’s own writing. We emphasize this point because of the subtle, but significant effect we believe it had on overall engagement across students. “Class participation” is often assumed by students to mean verbal sharing in class. Given this definition, students in a large course may logically assume their participation will be necessarily constrained since in-class sharing (even in small groups) is so naturally limited. In contrast, by emphasizing personal exploration as primary, we attempted to shift the focus of student expectations towards a broadened definition of “participation,” one arguably more fitting to a large course. In this way, even when

not able to directly share a great deal during class, we believe students may come to feel themselves genuine and full participants in and through their own personal exploration.

(7) *“Community wisdom” sharing:*

*Preserving personal connection within a large class.* Second to the small groups, our most effective attempt to facilitate in-class connections was inspired by community psychology’s traditional focus on the ‘expertise’ of normal citizens. While the course clearly offered new insights in the study of communities, we began the semester with an acknowledgment that each student already brought a background with long years of their own experience in communities. In order to tap into this collective “community wisdom” of the class, we consequently challenged each student to choose a story from past community experience that could be shared in class. “Community wisdom” came to be a fixture of each week, with stories ranging from the positive and uplifting to the painful and difficult, as well as light-hearted humorous experiences. 85% of student evaluations showed positive feedback for community wisdom: “Community stories ROCK!”, “I LOVED this!”, “Best part of class,” “DEFINITELY KEEP, this was awesome.” Students spoke of the sharing as a great way to both put themselves into the class personally and connect with each other on a more personal level. Students spoke of this activity as making the atmosphere “feel so much more personal,” as stories “[brought] us all closer.”

C. *Maintaining effective accountability while avoiding manipulation*

While the foregoing aspects helped facilitate personal engagement and collective connection, a final major challenge involved how to approach class accountability. Indeed, while the potential of efforts described above seemed clear, we believed their impact would depend on students actually having enough freedom and space to explore within the class. Raffini (1993) cites Lepper’s minimal-sufficiency principle to argue for “minimally sufficient control” in a classroom, with the amount of external reinforcement as small as possible. In light of this, we experimented with various ways of ensuring course accountability without coercion and unnecessary limits on freedom; we did so, in particular, by revising course aspects typically

used to mandate participation, including required attendance (8), deadlines (9) and heavy exams (10). By decreasing the extent of structural constraints associated with assignments, attendance, and evaluation, we aimed to permit students more flexibility to make their own choices.

(8) *Noticing student presence: Finding a non-mandatory, but effective attendance policy.* Over the four semesters, attendance policies varied widely as we struggled to find a system that did not feel manipulative of our students. After trying out participation points, we experimented with omitting these from the grading process in varying degrees. While not requiring attendance, we emphasized that as a college course, our expectation was that students attend class. Rather than omitting attendance altogether, however, we still took roll each day by having students “sign in” on alphabetized rolls at the back of class as they entered. This was done, as we explained, to assist us in tracking how each student was doing in the course individually, and was unattached to any formal evaluation. In subsequent teacher planning meetings, these records proved extremely helpful in flagging students who had not been attending for several weeks. This allowed us to focus energies checking in on the students who potentially needed it the most.

While general tracking was our primary motivation for keeping attendance, the act of signing in to class also conveyed to students that their presence/absence was important and noticed by us. We believe this attendance policy contributed in a subtle, but significant way, to a more open and comfortable atmosphere than is typically possible in a gathering mandated by reward or threat of penalty.

Indeed, rather than “forcing students to come,” we found this attendance policy forced *us* as teachers to better prepare discussion/activities which would nurture implicit motivation to attend. Overall, student feedback suggested that this approach succeeded in reinforcing the importance of class without manipulating attendance and while treating individuals with the dignity of adult relationships: “I liked it. I didn’t feel

compelled to come to class, but I liked being able to come on my own.” “I came to class because I wanted to, not because I had to.” Students commented on their capacity to appreciate natural consequences and manage themselves: “if you miss class, you miss info and that is your penalty” “I felt that we were responsible for ourselves... and I liked that.”

(9) *“Implicit deadlines”*: *Testing alternative timetables for assignments*. A second standard way of structuring student participation is deadlines. We experimented with both successful and unsuccessful ways of removing the forced feel of deadlines. Our most successful attempt came in the final semester. With the exception of two major explicit deadlines—midterm and final evaluations—we did not require that written work be completed at a specific time point. In the meantime, we encouraged students to keep up their work, aiming for completion in the time that made sense in the flow of the course. We called these “implicit deadlines.”

Surprisingly, students were split in their evaluations, with both strongly positive and negative responses. A good number of students found the freedom and flexibility helpful: “Lack of structure was beneficial because I was not scolded like a child to get assignments done, but expected as an adult to get them done at my discretion.” Others noted, “They treated us as adults, as equals”; “I felt the flexible due dates were an advantage because it let me work around my schedule”; and “[They allowed me to] put my best work in at the best time for me.”

Other students, however, found the freedom unhelpful and frustrating in different ways: “because of fairly lenient assignment deadlines it was easy to let other things take up my time”; “Since there were no deadlines and no ‘turning in’ it was hard for me to get motivated to do them”; “[It was] a bit frustrating, I won’t do work unless I have a deadline.” Overall, the mixed feedback would suggest additional revisions to this aspect of structural change. Some suggested, for instance, retaining more generalized due date “ranges” to help students keep pace, while still keeping specific deadlines flexible.

(10) *Alternative accountability structure: Restructuring evaluation (without killing the*

*teachers!)*. A final contribution to greater space in our classroom involved the structural aspect perhaps most typically responsible for compulsion in courses: the evaluation system. While clearly an essential part of an effective class, we aimed to avoid “using” the evaluations as a way to manipulate behavior (and distract from learning). Instead, over the two years, one of our most intensive explorations was seeking ways to structure course accountability in a way that directly promoted and extended learning.

As a start, we consistently reinforced the “law of the harvest” message that any student doing their very best to meet class expectations will do well in class. By making it clear that theoretically “everyone could get an A,” we sought to address both the collective sense of competition and the personal impulse to obsess over grades. Given our emphasis on open exploration, examinations likewise centered on student reflection in a flexible way, with students challenged to focus on understanding the ‘broad brushstrokes’ of the field. For instance, one of the final exam questions read:

Imagine yourself in a future professional intervention role (doctor, case-manager, social worker, teacher) addressing a community issue of your choice. In this scenario, illustrate what an empowering intervention would look like as compared to an intervention that wouldn’t necessary facilitate empowerment. As you do so, make sure to use specific examples of actions that reflect your understanding of the distinctions between empowering versus more traditional ways of intervening as a professional.

Students were typically satisfied with the nature of the final exam, which appeared to legitimately differentiate students based on their respective effort. Those students who had not seriously engaged in the class reflected this in their exams and vice versa.

Our use of qualitative evaluation across both assignments and examinations raises a subtle, but significant issue which threatened

to derail our attempts in serious ways: *time*. Any conscientious teacher can testify to the way any class can soak up time “like a black hole.” We quickly learned how grading could demand the bulk of our time—especially in a course of 120 students with writing as our primary medium of accountability. In early semesters, as we sought to give frequent individual feedback, the burden was especially heavy and we had little time to invest in other areas.

Initially out of literal weariness, we first began to question whether grading itself *should be* the main focus of our teaching time. Considering the well-being of our students, was grading truly the most effective use of the time we had available for our class? As we began questioning the dominance of grading in our role, we were led to other questions. While individual feedback on papers could clearly be helpful, from our own experience as graduate students we also knew that powerful learning often came from the writing process itself. Was it necessary for teachers to respond to everything students had written? While still attempting to read student work, we began to experiment with supplemental evaluation formats.

First, we began to leverage the natural accountability of the class community itself by inviting students to share their work with members of their research-action teams through online discussion boards. “Publishing” writing to one’s group and offering feedback to classmates became a formal part of individual writing assignments. In order to supervise and support the process, we divided the 20 research-action teams and each began “sitting in” on discussion board exchanges. While sometimes chiming in with reflections and further questions, we just as often watched the groups do this by themselves. This allowed us to begin shifting our time investment from evaluative individual feedback to the facilitation of group learning.

As teachers, we enjoyed the way this shift prompted more of an advisory and mentoring role on our part in students’ own explorations (see Jacobi, 1991). In their similar large course format changes, Barkham and Elender (1995) also spoke of redirecting time away from typical class preparations towards the active support of individual students. In addition to reinforcing more control over their learning, this shift invited

students to rely less exclusively on our own evaluations of work and increasingly look to others’ feedback as well—both classmates and their own. The benefits of peer group feedback and assessment have been recognized in the literature, including increased levels of empowerment, self-reliance, genuine exploration of the material, complex thinking, and critical analysis (Burkill, 1997; Stanier, 1997; Strachan & Wilcox, 1996; White, 2002)

Beyond peer input, we experimented with a second layer of supplemental evaluation by leveraging students’ own self-assessments as one component of course accountability. On different occasions, we would ask students to rate and describe their own effort and performance in a variety of domains. While frequently used in graduate school as a helpful contribution to a more comprehensive evaluation, the use of self-evaluation among undergraduates is less common. Self-evaluation has been noted as particularly helpful for the way it increases active participation and autonomy among undergraduates (Jenkins, 1994; Taras, 2002).

A key concern across settings, of course, is to what degree individuals may be trusted to honestly self-evaluate. Our overall assumption was that undergraduates were not inherently less capable than graduate students in productive and honest self-evaluation. However, we sought to face the validity issue in several ways. In presenting the exercise, we emphasized that a) self-ratings were *one part* of our overall evaluation and b) we reserved the right to adjust them. To enable this, students temporarily turned in other actual class material (sketchpad/portfolio) with their self-evaluations, providing a rough gauge of their overall accuracy and a viable ‘audit’ of general honesty. Where self-report ratings corresponded to the general quality of their sketchpad, we accepted these judgments. In the cases, however, where ratings were in obvious contrast to either shoddy or outstanding writing, we gave more intensive investigation, leading in some cases to an adjustment of some kind (both up and down). Based on these audits, we found that a large majority of students offered fair reflections of their own performance. The willingness of

individuals to rate themselves down was at times surprising, e.g., “I really don’t deserve more than a B based on my work so far.”

Like peer-evaluation, self-assessments became a helpful supplement to our evaluation efforts and helped decrease the overall grading burden. Encouraging students to look to their own judgments in defining the quality of their work reinforced their role as a meaningful part of their own accountability system. Most students commented on the process as generally fair and personally helpful in their ongoing learning in the course, with 79% reporting favorably on the overall grading process in final student evaluations and 83% recommending keeping self-evaluation as one component of grading. Other students, however, had strong negative reactions to the idea of evaluating themselves and saw it as “too subjective” or an unnecessary waste of time, even a “cop-out” by teachers on their exclusive responsibility.

Across these efforts, we saw a cumulative effect of grading decisions no longer occupying the bulk of our time as teachers. This led to one of the most significant benefits of the course structure. Namely, rather than be preoccupied and consumed with evaluation, we found plentiful time to “learn with” the students, from discussion board participation to personal meetings with individuals and groups. Especially rewarding was finding the time to connect with our students having the most difficulty. With the help of attendance records, we targeted struggling students for personal e-mail contact in which we asked how we could be supportive and invited one-on-one meetings. Across the semesters, we were able to be responsive to a variety of personal difficulties interfering with class, including ongoing family struggles and recent deaths. These students frequently expressed surprise and gratitude for the personal attention. Freeing up time to focus on those needing us the most became an enormous benefit of the evaluation shift in particular, and one of the highlights of the whole course.

*Overall evaluations of learning atmosphere:  
Variable experiences of course flexibility*

After reviewing specific outcomes of efforts to facilitate student choice, thinking and sharing in earlier sections, this section explores feedback on both the foregoing accountability

revisions and the overall atmosphere of the class. While we received a range of feedback, as with other areas, comments in these reports were sharply divergent.

On one hand, a majority of students reported that the “atmosphere was conducive to learning,” with the environment consistently described as “low-stress, relaxed, self-paced, not focused on grades” etc. The specific approach to deadlines and evaluations was reported by many as having a positive effect on the environment, with grading resituated as secondary to learning itself. While our grade distribution admittedly disobeyed the bell curve (consistent with assumptions reviewed previously), we believe the real possibility of good grades for all had a tangible, positive impact on competition and overall sense of community in the class. Even so, a number of students still avoided the effort necessary for an A.

On the other hand, a segment of students expressed concerns with the atmosphere. We found that those who disliked the course format generally expressed strong feelings and even open hostility about different aspects. Some wanted to be given more “facts” about communities, rather than exploring different views and writing about their own. Others felt offended by being asked to participate in the evaluation process. The most consistent comment from across students, however, was a request for more structure. In contrast to those who felt refreshed by more space, these students reported uncertainty about expectations and a feeling of disorganization: “sometimes hard to understand exactly what was being asked for”; “I often got stressed because I wasn’t sure what was expected.” For these students, our approach to deadlines and evaluations seemed to prompt more, rather than less stress in their experience.

Making sense of this divergence proved to be a major challenge of our evaluation especially since different students appeared to be experiencing the same course aspect in diverging ways (see discussion section). What was received as refreshing “flexibility” by some students was experienced by others as an uncomfortable “lack of structure.” Two

students reported experiencing the freedom as both “helpful and frustrating (at times).” “It was both, at times good and others difficult.”

In order to deepen our evaluation in the final semester, we investigated the reasons why students dropped the course. Out of 196 students signed up for the class at one time or another, 130 stayed in the course and 67 dropped at some point. At the end of the semester, we e-mailed all students who had dropped and received ten responses. Four of the ten students reported dropping the course before the semester began due to schedule changes. Three other students mentioned the early hour of the class making it difficult to attend. Four students, however, spoke of concerns that the class would be “way more involved than I was accustomed to ... definitely not what I was expecting.” Dissonance with expectations of creativity, self-exploration and group collaboration in the course were all specifically mentioned, alongside some concern that it would be busy-work. Four students reported expecting a lighter class, especially during busy senior years. “I did not want to have any further responsibilities than a few tests and quizzes.” While for any given course there are typically many students who drop for different reasons, we believe these kinds of concerns contributed to a higher than normal drop rate in our own course.

#### **Discussion: Ongoing questions and challenges**

In the end, we propose that there is reason to be optimistic at the potential of large courses to become more empowering, dialogic spaces. While different in meaningful ways from smaller courses, it appears they need not be *fundamentally different* in their overall atmosphere. In a variety of ways, teachers of large courses may craft class structures that nurture critical thought and active engagement, while preserving both learning accountability and space to explore. We offer this as additional evidence for the benefits of making the undergraduate experience more similar to graduate education (Jacobi, 1991; González, 2001), suggesting that principles of self-directed learning and self-evaluation, which are acknowledged as critical for advanced community psychology training (Lykes & Hellstedt, 1987), may be potentially relevant for all students.

While the possibilities within large courses seem evident, we have remained puzzled with the striking variation in student feedback. Others experimenting with class structural changes have also experienced student resistance to greater control and freedom, in particular (e.g., Barkham & Elender, 1995; Burkill, 1997; White, 2002) and to major class innovations generally (Scott, Buchanan, & Haigh, 1997). The most obvious explanation, of course, is that our own teaching practice can continue to improve, a fact we acknowledge in welcoming additional insight and growth within future teaching roles. Since large numbers of students responded enthusiastically, however, we have also explored several other issues potentially relevant to conflicting evaluations.

#### *The setting of the setting: Constraints of larger institutional environments*

As recognized in the community psychology literature, however “alternative” a new setting may be, it is still subject to the larger surrounding context (Cherniss & Deegan, 2000). In our case, students left the course to attend multiple other classes with differing expectations (many likely demanding their efforts in more compulsory ways). Similar to children in a conflicted household, students are thus required to negotiate clashing expectations. In such a situation, the natural tendency would seem to be responding to those reinforcements that are most inflexible and urgent. Indeed, we found students commonly remarking that “because of lenient deadlines it was easy to let other things take up my time.” Especially given the perpetually over-committed lifestyle typical of college students, each obligation makes separate demands on finite time already in scarce supply. In such a context, even those students particularly attracted to a class format of greater space and freedom remain beholden to many other obligations.

At a minimum, acknowledging the press of these surrounding expectations may help teachers be aware of natural limits to the “alternativeness” of one’s own classroom setting, bounded as they invariably are within only one location and time period in students’ lived experience. Attending more explicitly to

this interface between alternative and dominant settings, however, may also prompt better ways of interacting with these larger contexts and preserving a particular atmosphere within the alternative setting itself.

*The socialization of a setting: Constraints of internalized student expectations*

Beyond direct influence on immediate student experience, larger structures may be relevant through a more subtle, indirect influence over time as well: meta-lessons and socialization within dominant educational systems. For instance, habits of reliance on external reinforcement, competition with other students and expectation of teachers to deliver the answers may all be internalized by students over the years (e.g., White, 2002). As these expectations come to dominate, self-motivation may naturally become dormant and largely inaccessible. Ironically, these same disinterested students may subsequently be taken as evidence for the need of additional structural reinforcements (see Ryan, 1971).

Naturally, the degree to which this kind of past socialization has occurred is influential in how future settings are experienced. Students comfortable with more instrumental structures, for instance, may naturally be confused by a more flexible structure with fewer explicit deadlines and guidelines. Alternatively, a more open setting may be refreshing to students generally resistant from past experience, to more unilateral structures.

On one level, this points to a potential need of improving the match or “person-environment fit” (Lewin, 1951) between individuals and their class context. While this seems attractive on its surface, problems arise with specific instances. Should unmotivated students, for instance, be automatically matched with instrumental structures? Might there be benefits, at times, to a “mismatch” between person and environment?

*The good news: Ongoing socialization and the potential of student growth*

An alternative way of responding to varying student expectations comes from a simple recognition of the *ongoing nature* of socialization. Any given individual comes into a class setting not only with particular current habits and preferences, but also with the potential

and capacity to develop further. For this reason, we propose that it may sometimes be detrimental to wholly conform teaching practice to the immediate state of students. While certainly remaining responsive to current student needs and perceptions, teachers may also be deliberately mindful of their potential trajectory of change.

The foregoing suggests that it may be justified to provide alternative reinforcements in a class setting, *even if* they may be experienced as a clear mismatch. With students accustomed to and comfortable with traditional classroom settings, for instance, the experience of being invited to stretch in a new educational context may be uncomfortable, but ultimately positive. One student noted, “remember that even though we may like (or love) the freedom and democracy of this class, we might not necessarily be used to it.” Other students commented that an early frustration with the class atmosphere eventually dissipated once they “got the hang of it” and “got used to it.”

In their own assessment of conflicted student evaluations of freedom, Barkham and Elender (1995) propose that “some students had not yet come to terms with developing their own authority” (p. 193) and point to a socialized dependency among some students for teachers to tell them what to think which prevents the “development of their own locus of evaluation.” They go on to cite Gibbs as proposing genuine learning as “involving a degree of disorientation and personal threat and requiring personal autonomy and responsibility from the learner” (p. 195)

While still giving careful attention to reports of discomfort, instructors may thus understand some degree of resistance as expected and even desirable at times (White, 2002)—similar to “growing pains” associated with any healthy new experience. Instructors, may consequently better appreciate that in spite of past socialization (and current inclinations) towards passivity, students may presently choose *otherwise* if given the opportunity—with greater openness to the possibility of tangible change experienced by such students over the course of one bounded class. With this realization, teachers may

deliberately format aspects of a course to facilitate a kind of reverse socialization, prompting over time more intrinsic motivation and active engagement in the learning process.

At a minimum, mindfulness of these issues may help teachers navigate the turbulence of alternative teaching approaches, avoiding quick interpretation of negative feedback and building-in realistic anticipations of natural challenges experienced by students in new learning environments. For any teacher considering this kind of a model, several additional questions may arise, including two common misconceptions and a major issue we highlight in closing.

First, it is tempting to assume such efforts are only effective for senior level students. This position acknowledges the value of educational alternatives, while largely delimiting their potential to a privileged few: advanced college students (in small courses). Based on our experience, we propose that dialogic teaching events are not inherently linked to either small courses or advanced students. Indeed, with sufficient advisement, similar efforts have been shown to work well for students across levels, including primary and secondary grades (Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006).

A second misconception is that these innovations require enormous time investments. As reviewed above, we actually found this kind of a structure decreased our time burden in tangible ways. While the sheer time investment seemed to be roughly equivalent, spreading out the responsibility of knowledge engagement and evaluation allowed us to focus our own resources on advising, mentoring, and facilitating. In turn, we found these activities to be inherently more energizing and less draining!

*Towards greater deliberation on collective interpretation*

In closing, we return full circle to earlier problem definition analyses, in proposing that the greatest challenge of empowering courses remains pervasive and influential interpretive frameworks. From explanations for student passivity, to models of how learning takes place, these ways of thinking can exert a tangible influence over teaching practice, even beneath collective awareness. Laying aside the structural and logistical barriers to upgrading large courses,

our own experience reaffirms interpretation itself as a barrier deserving direct and sustained attention.

For this reason, we close by inviting a more thoughtful collective deliberation on fundamental assumptions associated with higher education. As roles and structures within large courses are examined critically, individual instructors may come to their own distinct alternatives in teaching practice. Slife and Williams (1995) note that for such critical thinking to be genuine, awareness of a viable alternative is necessary. By fleshing out teaching models and practices distinct from dominant approaches, we hope the foregoing exploration may be beneficial to others' critical exploration of teaching. Ultimately, we believe learning in any context can be an exciting and transformative encounter and hope our own insights may be helpful towards this end.

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