

Shifting Modalities - Can We Still Establish Connectivity? Lessons Learned in First-Year Mega Psychology Classes

Topics: Professional learning, Student learning

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Abstract

It has always been challenging to manage a large class at university. In recent years, different modalities were utilised, including blended strategies to assist lecturers to better engage students in Higher Education (HE). After meeting our 2020 first years in class, the pandemic obliged us to think of teaching and learning in different ways. As a lecturer team from three different campuses in an aligned module, we collaboratively used what we have learned before the pandemic to tackle Emergency Remote Learning (ERT) as best we could, but it was not sufficient. We were forced to change modalities bringing about new challenges. We needed new skills, perspectives, approaches, and technologies to engage students in online learning; avoid students getting left behind the screens; create quality assessments; maintain effective communication and foster an ethic of care. We were concerned about not being able to establish the same level of connection with the students, especially since everyone sometimes experiences connectivity issues during online activities (O'Brien & Toms 2008). Although we were disconnected geographically, we had to establish connectivity in the online space. Using Marcel Lebrun's pragmatic learning model (Lebrun, 2007), based on Biggs' constructive alignment, we developed an online environment that offered engagement, support, scaffolding, and personalised learning, while also making provision for different learning modalities and personal circumstances. Using invaluable support from the Centre of Teaching and Learning (CTL), attending workshops, new strategies, and feedback from students, we continuously improved our approach. It was a period of learning and development for us as a lecturer team to upskill and remain relevant to the mega classes we teach.

This presentation will focus on our development of comprehensive online lessons, reflecting on the importance of communication between the lecturer team and student, engagement strategies in the online space, using student feedback for improvement and to be responsive, tracking students to offer support as well as scaffolding the work and assessments to fit into the continuous assessment model adopted during the pandemic. By fostering an ethic of care that is part of the value proposition of the NWU - we aim to show that establishing connectivity with students during the pandemic was possible, while also remaining sensitive to the fact that students struggled mentally, emotionally, physically, and financially during this time. Our experience will assist in crafting our future plans to deal with mega classes in a blended way. We are mindful of the fact that there is not a "one size fits all" approach. Having content available online will allow us to use the valuable class time optimally, by discussing relevant case studies, engaging with application activities, and making psychology relevant to the average South African student. Open class discussions can offer students the opportunity to share indigenous knowledge, facilitating reflection and personal application to their contexts.

Questions for engagement:

How do we use what we have learned in ERT for future blended, hybrid, hyflex T&L modalities?

How do we ensure that students are not left behind and are supported/engaged in an ever-changing HE context?

Keywords: online engagement, connectivity, student learning, mega classes, emergency remote learning, modality