

The Upper Limit: The Issues for Faculty in Setting Class Size in Online Courses

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Introduction

A primary concern in education today is designing an efficient system. What is the right balance between the economic issues of online instruction and the quality of the education experience for the asynchronous online student? Faculty can face pressures from administration to “maximize” class sizes in online courses to make them more efficient or profitable. Instructors in online courses must not only safeguard demands on their own time but also the quality of the educational experience for the students. In this paper the authors will explore the issues surrounding class sizes in online courses, and discuss some of the research on class size. Also discussed are size v. quality issues (what gets sacrificed as class size increases), negotiated solutions or limits on class size, and alternatives to class size limits, such as increases in FTE status, graders and assistants, and release time.

Discussion

Class size for online courses varies, anecdotally and from survey data, from one to one hundred to many hundreds. Some fairly recent surveys of distance education in higher education are informative on the issue of class size. A report commissioned by the National Education Association (NEA) from June 2000 contains survey data which notes that 31% of distance learning courses have 1-20 students, 33% have 21-40 students, 17% have 41-700 students, and 19% were not sure of the total students in the class. [1] In

another report on distance education, The Guidelines for Good Practice of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) state that class size for distance education courses should be set through normal faculty channels. [2] In arriving at this guideline, the report notes that based on its survey data, about a third of the respondents to its survey on distance education taught classes of fewer than twenty; over half taught classes of twenty-fifty; less than a tenth taught classes with more than fifty, and only a few taught classes of more than one hundred. [2] Anecdotally, class size limits often vary from department to department within a university, as well as between higher education institutions. Often there is no set standard within an institution on class size limits for online courses.

Any discussion of class size in online courses should examine the optimum class size for quality education. Palloff and Pratt, who discuss the quality of the online course experience, report that online learning takes place in the collaborative environment of “learning communities”, which are generally groups of fifteen to twenty students, or groups recommended to be no larger than twenty-five. [3] Too few students usually have difficulty generating meaningful discussions, and too many create an excessive number of messages which may cause frustration for group members who cannot keep up. [3] The group size must be sufficiently large to encourage activity, but not so large that the sense of group connectedness is lost. This presumes that communication is occurring not just between the instructor and the students, but among the students as well. Typically, online courses make use of discussion boards, email, and sometimes synchronous chat to engage in communication with this instructor and with each other, and to engage in collaborative learning.

This, however, is not the end of the discussion, for any group of online students could be divided into smaller subsections of the recommended size to accommodate the need for building collaborative online learning communities.

A survey of some recent literature suggests that teachers of online courses find that smaller numbers are the recommended class size for online courses. For example, one author suggests that the maximum number of students for online courses is really very low—in the range of twelve to twenty students, depending on the level of instruction. [4] That author recommends starting small with a class size of ten-fourteen students for a fully online course. [4] She notes that graduate courses often have twelve-fifteen students as a maximum, and undergraduate courses may have as many as twenty students. [4] Another author recommends that class size in most online courses should be around twenty. [5] Another author reports a class size of fifteen to twenty-five students is ideal for online learning (on continuing professional education for teachers). [6]

Why do these authors, and many teachers of online courses, set course sizes for online courses in the ranges of fifteen to twenty students? For most, it is an acknowledgement at least in part of the time it takes to teach on online course. The NEA report referenced above notes that teaching a distance learning course does, in fact, require more time than teaching a traditional course. [1] The AFT report also referenced above notes that class size must be seen in light of the need for extensive preparation time and the fact that most distance education courses require more time for personal interaction. [2] Faculty reported in the AFT report that preparation time for distance learning courses is much greater than for a classroom-based course, with some estimates

ranging from 66% to 500% greater. It also takes considerably more time to communicate with students, and faculty must keep up to some degree with the odd hours of online students. [2]

The authors personally note that their experiences with online courses have been that they require both much more development time and much more interaction time to manage than do traditional courses.

It has been said that many institutions of higher education see distance education as a way to increase enrollments, decrease costs, become more efficient, and may even be seen to help save on classroom and parking space. [7] However, the high degree of interactivity required in online courses increases professor workload. [7] What is missed in calculations on savings in “brick and mortar” offerings are the hours professors spend in one-to-one interactions in online courses. At present, says author William Klemm, distance education is not cost-efficient. [7] Another article reports that online courses may be seen as a “cash cow” by administration. [6] As universities increasingly move to a business model of management, administrators may ask faculty for more: more “efficiency”, more quality, more control of cost structures. [8] Distance learning courses are under the same pressures as traditional classes to become more cost efficient and productive.

Can universities milk this perceived cash cow? It is the authors’ opinion that this is an opportunity for profit only at the expense of professors or at the expense of educational quality. Administrators may not take into account the unseen costs in increased faculty hours for online courses, since most administrators have no experience in preparing or conducting online courses. The hidden costs to faculty may be especially

hard on untenured faculty who must meet administrators' demands and engage in quality scholarship.

Pedagogically, the research suggests that fifteen to twenty students is an optimal online class size for most classes (though in some courses it could be smaller), due to the amount of communication online courses require. Of course, small class size is also an issue for traditional classes. It seems highly likely then that increasing class size sacrifices the type and quantity of one-to-one interactions between professors and students, resulting in a sacrifice in education quality, or requires that professors spend inordinate amounts of time to maintain educational standards.

Although it is recommended that professors receive some form of relief or compensation for the additional workload of online courses, very few professors do so. In the NEA report, 84% of faculty who teach web-based courses get no course-reduction. [1] In other words, distance learning takes more time and energy from faculty, but seldom has rewards. In the NEA report distance learning faculty tell that two of their top three concerns were that distance learning would result in more work for the same amount of pay, and that faculty would not be compensated fairly for their intellectual property. [1] The AFT report recommends that additional compensation be provided to faculty to meet the extensive time commitments of distance education. [2] Compensation could take a variety of forms, such as credit toward load assignment. [2] Also of concern are whether the additional requirements of distance learning courses are considered in merit pay, tenure, and promotion decisions.

Some concern has been expressed that the instructor of record may not be teaching the class: the course may actually be staffed by graduate students or graduate

assistants or teachers with no experience. [6] It has also been suggested that some distance learning courses have been entirely automated. [6] Unless the student has specifically signed up for this type of experience, it seems certain that the quality of the educational experience will suffer. These are strategies which have been suggested by some administrators in order to make the online courses more cost-efficient.

The consensus of online teachers seems to be that professors who teach larger online sections either have assistance or have sacrificed some level of communication to maintain the large class size numbers. In some instances, the authors know of online instructors who have the help of a full time instructional designer as well as one to two graduate assistants to manage grading, email, and other student communication. This amount of support may make the larger sections possible, without a sacrifice in quality, but it does not necessarily provide the “cost-efficiency” that administrators desire. Supplementing a full time faculty member with two to three more full time people does not necessarily reduce the costs for a large online class.

Additional or supplementary help with online courses seems to be the exception rather than the rule for most online teachers. Many online faculty still do all course development as well as all course management, and do it without release time or additional compensation, despite the increased workload. Most do it to develop professionally for the good of their programs, their departments, and their schools.

Some costing of the development of online courses has been done, but it can be very difficult to pin down the exact costs. For faculty, before the developments in text book offerings and course management systems, the development of an online course was estimated at 18 hours per hour of instruction (or about 810 hours for a 15 week three

credit hour class) [9]. A more current estimate is about 10 hours per hour of instruction, or about 450 hours. [10] The lower number demonstrates progress in current campus infrastructure, personal knowledge tools, and the availability of digital content. [10] Developing simulations, animations and sophisticated learning objects take additional time not included in the 10 hours per hour of instruction estimate of faculty time. [10] It also does not include time for other support personnel, such as instructional designers. [10]

Given the burden on faculty of developing online courses, and managing online courses for a quality educational experience, what can we recommend?

- Presumptive maximum course size should be twenty students for undergraduate courses, and eight-fifteen for graduate courses. Upper level undergraduate courses may need to be smaller, depending on course content and structure. Courses which require a substantial number of lengthy written assignments may need to be smaller to minimize instructor burden.
- Courses with more than twenty students should be divided into smaller groups, if possible, to foster the building of learning communities, keeping in mind that groups which are too small may not be active enough.
- Faculty who develop and manage online courses should be compensated for the additional burdens of development of course materials, either with release time or additional compensation, or by counting distance learning courses as more than one course for purposes of computing full time employment. It should be noted that release time is often insufficient to compensate for the number of hours required to develop online courses.
- Larger online sections should be staffed by faculty who are assisted by graders, graduate assistants and/or instructional designers to help them manage the burden.

Given the constraints mentioned above, it seems highly unlikely that distance learning courses can become the panacea that some administrators may desire. However, the push for flexibility in education means that distance learning and hybrid courses must be understood and utilized. Faculty will have to be vigilant and make sure their

voices are heard in decisions affecting class size and educational quality in online courses.

References

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