

## **STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH BEHAVIOURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES OF TEACHING LARGE CLASSES IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper titled, "Strategies for coping with behavioral and environmental challenges of teaching large classes in public universities in Nigeria" suggested strategies that lecturers of universities in Nigeria could use to enable students of large classes maximize learning. The paper began by pointing out the components that work collaboratively in a school system to bring about desired achievement of learning goals or objectives. Included in these components are the learners (students), the teachers (lecturers) and the learning environments among others. These three distinct but related concepts were further explained and the impact that they could make on learning were emphasized. In addition, the paper explained the concept of large classes and how they could possibly inhibit learning. The paper also examined the anti-learning behaviors such as truancy, late coming to class, chatting and noise making as well as napping, dosing or sleeping among others, that students of large classes are susceptible to. In addition, the physical conditions of large classes in public universities in Nigeria and how they could retard learning if not professionally managed were highlighted. In bringing the paper to a close, strategies that could promote effective learning in such large classes were put forward to include among others, taking of periodic attendance randomly, informing students of tests that could come up anytime during the lecture, diversifying the teaching methods and not sticking to one method all through the period, learning names of students though large and calling such ones by their names as well as discouraging students who discourage their classmates from answering and asking questions or making contributions to learning.*

**Keywords:** Student, lecturer, large class, behavior, environment, learning, public universities

### **Introduction**

Effective teaching and learning in schools are a function of many related variables. For instance, it is needful that there are teachers as well as learners for teaching and learning to take place in a formal setting. The entry behaviors or characteristics of the learners also matter very significantly as they could impede or promote teaching and learning. It is therefore, a well-known fact to educational psychologists that learners are individually and characteristically different. For instance, in a typical classroom in Nigeria, and everywhere in the world, there are some students that are in the categories of the extroverts while some are introverts.

Again the classrooms are conglomerations of the sanguine, the choleric, melancholy and phlegmatic. Still within the same classroom, there are the slow and fast learners, slow and fast note-takers, the physically challenged and those that are not. It is interesting to note that while some of these diversities are biological or natural others are environmental or sociological and they all impact on learning relatively differently.

The teachers, who are facilitators of learning in the classrooms, equally differ characteristically outside their professional or competency training. The personality of a teacher is significant to how he could manage learning activities in the classroom to achieve desired results. It is therefore, not an understatement to say that the behaviors of the learners as well as those of the teachers are significant factors to consider in classroom proceedings.

Apart from the teachers and the learners, the physical environment of the school is another important collaborative factor that influences teaching and learning in all the nations of the world. The conditions of the natural and the physical environments of schools could as well make or mar learning.

University is the highest level of education in Nigeria. And being the highest citadel of learning, admissions are highly competitive as is the most preferred to other institutions of higher learning by admission seekers. In fact, many Nigerians have decried the numerical inadequacies of the numbers of existing universities currently and their capacities to absorb prospective admission seekers. Characteristically, most public universities in Nigeria admit students beyond their ideal carrying capacities. The institutions and lecture halls are severely overcrowded, understaffed and the student-teacher ratios have skyrocketed (Pollock, 2013). The situation is worse in education courses as well as in general courses where students compulsorily take courses irrespective of their disciplines.

Teaching and learning in these large groups or classes could be in-effective because they are amenable to behavioral and environmental challenges. Teachers of such large classes would require some levels of preparations and expositions beyond their intellectual competence to be able to promote effective learning in students. Therefore, the desire to effectively promote teaching and learning in large classes gave rise to this paper that is on the “Strategies for coping with behavioral and environmental challenges of teaching large classes in public universities in Nigeria”.

### **The Learner in the Educational System in Nigeria**

The learner in a formal school system is that individual that makes up the population of the classroom and for whom, learning activities are organized to bring about a relatively permanent change in his/her behavior (Omede and Odiba, 2000). The learner is the focal point of every educational system. All classroom activities revolve round him/her. The indispensability of the learners in an educational system is such that schools cease to exist without them. In fact, teachers, and school administrators as well as other support staff would be needless without students or learners.

Educational psychologists believe that learners in the classrooms are of diverse characteristics and so are uniquely different. Their backgrounds are not the same, rates of learning are not the same either, and their personality compositions also differ. As a result, every learner deserves the attention of his/her teacher. They are not to be treated as a group but as an individual because no one learner learns for the other and the successful ones are certificated individually at the end of a program.

One of the pedagogical requirements of a teacher is to know his/her students well, preferably, by their names. This could be difficult to come by in large classes. In addition, teachers have been taught to professionally make teaching “learner centered”. Learner centered teaching in crowded classes could also be a mirage if the teacher is not sufficiently stuffed with strategies that could make this happen. To achieve the desired learning goals in large classes, teachers would need to know how this could be done effectively. This again is the crux of this paper.

### **The School or Learning Environment in Nigeria**

The physical environment of school buildings and school grounds is a key factor in overall health and safety of students, staff and visitors (New Hampshire Department of Education, 2012). Where the physical environment of the school is in good condition, it could promote learning as well as the overall wellness of the students. For instance, according to New Hampshire Department of Education (2012), studies have shown that students’ achievement can be affected either positively or negatively by the school environment. The school or learning environment is classified broadly into two categories namely; nature and nurture. Nurture according to Omede and Odiba (2000) refers to what the government, the community through the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), the teachers and students do to improve upon the natural environment of the school to make it look beautiful, attractive, habitable and conducive to teaching and learning. According to them, these efforts could be in building of classrooms, hostels, staff quarters and office accommodation as well as provision of suitable furniture, creation of pathways and drainages for controlling erosion. Included too are building of laboratories and libraries and stuffing them with relevant materials, provision of school plants and automobiles for administrative and academic conveniences as well as other infrastructural facilities like pipe borne water, efficient medical facilities as well as sporting equipment for all round development of the students.

Included in the natural school environment are the land upon which the school is situated, its topography, vegetation, as well as the climatic conditions and air quality. All these are strong factors in learning. The aesthetics of a school is a strong factor for patronage. The external and interior beauty of a school environment can be an attraction and could also have impact on learning.

Learning environment is multifaceted (Higgins, Hall, Wall, Wooler and McCaughey, 2005) and panoramic. The purview of this paper however, is not so much about the school environment as a gamut but the classroom environments where teaching and learning take place. Part of the interest of this paper was an identification of the typical behavioral and environmental challenges of teaching in

large classes in universities in Nigeria. The paper was an examination of students' population available to a lecturer vis-à-vis the available classroom facilities and the possible anti-learning behaviors that learners in an overcrowded classes are susceptible to.

### **The Concept of a Large Class**

“Large class” is a relative term and so not always very easy to define. It is a function of so many variables such as the age of the learners, the level of the educational system under consideration (whether basic, post basic or tertiary levels), the professional competence of the teacher as well as the discipline of study and the size and number of facilities available among several others. Understanding this concept of large class also vary from country to country. For instance as rightly noted by Rhalmi (2013), while in some countries, a class with 30 students will not be considered to be problematic at all, in other countries such a class would be challenging for the teacher. Tripod (Undated) noted that when a question was put to some senior academics attending a UNESCO regional workshop on teaching and learning in higher education at MOI University, Eldoret, Kenya, about their understanding of a large class, the excerpts of their responses were given as follows:

- “A large class is one with more students than available facilities can support”
- “Large classes have more than 100 students enrolled”
- “There is no fixed number. The large class depends on the discipline-smaller number for engineering, science and medicine and large number for the arts, humanities and social sciences”

The views above suggest that there are actually no agreed definitions universally about what a large class really should be. Whether there is a working definition or not, one thing is sure that the phenomenon of large classes exist (Tripod, undated). Such negative phenomena of large classes that Tripod pointed out included:

- That students will become faces instead of people
- It will be harder to give individual advice and guidance to students
- Organizational problems are compounded, making it difficult to schedule tutorials, laboratory sessions, and fieldworks
- There can be technical problems
- Monitoring of attendance can be difficult, thus encouraging students to cut classes
- Coping with large numbers of assignments and examination scripts is a source of difficulty
- The quality of feedback to students can be much reduced in large classes

Similarly, Rhalmi (2013) pointed out the following as the difficulties of large classes:

- Tremendous efforts
- Less satisfactory knowledge of students' needs (intimacy with the students and remembering names might be a problem)

- Noise level will inevitably be high
- Active learning may not be easy in a crowded class
- Difficulty in measuring effectiveness
- A hiding place for reluctant students

An ideal classroom size in primary and secondary schools in Nigeria is that that could conveniently accommodate between 30-40 students and will not be overcrowded. In tertiary institutions in Nigeria including the universities, lecture halls and theaters are built to accommodate more student population than in the primary and secondary schools. Even these large halls and theaters have students crammed into them making teaching and learning relatively difficult and of less impact because students are predisposed to behaviors and attitudes that could impede learning. Lecturer-students' ratio is very high in most public universities in Nigeria because they have higher yearly students' enrollment without a commensurate staff employment. Nigeria has one of the worst lecturer to students' ratios in the world (Pollock, 2013). Students-teacher ratios are a general way to measure the teacher's workload and resource allocations in public schools, as well as the amount of individual attention a child is likely to receive from teachers and are also used as broad indicators of the overall quality of a school, district or education system (edglossary.org, 2014).

Although researches according to edglossary.org have found mixed results about students-teacher ratio, classroom ratios is an important factor in learning. Choices in Education (2016) noted that decreasing students-teacher ratios will be more profitable to learning than increasing one. Teachers with fewer students will be able to devote more time and attention to each student and this could increase their chances of improving learning outcome (edglossary.org, 2014). Earlier, Rhalmi (2013) noted that results of some researches showed that benefits in achievement generally occur when class size is reduced to less than 20 students and that above this figure, problems of acquisition and classroom management arise. Academic standard or quality is more likely to be compromised in classes with more than 100 students to a lecturer than in smaller classes of less than 30 students. Classes that have more than 100 students to a lecturer is vulnerable to distractions if the teacher is not skilled and informed about certain strategies to adopt for quality control and improved learning. Helping teachers of large classes to strategize for improved teaching was again the target of this paper.

### **Typical anti-learning Behaviors of students in large classes in public universities in Nigeria**

The under listed behaviors are not only being manifested in large classes. Students also exhibit them in small classes but not as frequently. This is because in small classes, they could easily be spotted and sanctioned by the teacher. Included in these behaviors are the following:

- Truancy (deliberate frequent absenteeism from classes possibly for reasons that are avoidable to the student)

- Passivity or inactivity (a deliberate refusal to participate in learning activities in the class)
- Lateness to class
- Chatting with friends or seat mates while lectures are on
- Cheating during classroom tests
- Writing test or assignment for a friend in proxy
- Sleeping, dozing or napping while lectures are on
- Not having the boldness to ask or answer questions (fear of crowd)
- Tinkering with the cell phone when lectures are on (listening to music using the ear piece, sending and reading text messages to and from friends in the same class, etc.)
- Making noises sometimes deliberately to distract the class
- Dominance. Some students who are bold usually dominate the questions and answers sections
- Inability to take down salient points as notes from the lecture
- Apathy and loss of interest in learning

When these situations prevail in a classroom, the particular student involved will have problem learning effectively. Even though some of these problems come from the students, they are not to be left to “stew in their juices”. They are to be assisted to minimize these behaviors and helped to realize their potentials.

### **The physical conditions of some classes in public universities in Nigeria**

It is known to many educationists that public universities in Nigeria are underfunded. And because of this, basic infrastructures and relevant staff are inadequate and are severely disproportionate to students’ yearly intake. Consequently, most public universities have classes that are large with the following characteristics:

- Inadequate space (more students than the available classroom space). This situation could be chaotic if not properly managed especially where great number of students who couldn’t find space inside stay outside.
- Inadequate seats (more students than the available seats). Sometimes students are seen sitting on windows, and other available pavements while some put their friends on their laps and some others squat for a lecture that is not less than an hour.
- Uncomfortable seats. In some lecture halls, the available seats are not only inadequate, they are poorly fabricated, and sometimes injure and tear the dresses of students. Some are squeaky, creaky and ultimately noisy.
- Acoustic problem.
- Poor visibility. This is as a result of frequent power outages, inability to replace dead bulbs, and the over crowdedness of the classroom.
- Unregulated classroom temperature. Too hot or too cold depending on the prevailing season. The classrooms will be excessively too cold during winter as most window louvers are broken, removed or stolen and are not replaced.

On the other hand, during summer, most halls become hot because the ceiling fans are either not there, or not working due to infrequent electricity supply or that they are even spoilt and not repaired. This is added to the large population of students that have taken over every available space including the windows that are supposed to ventilate the class.

### **Suggested strategies for overcoming the behavioral and environmental challenges of teaching large classes in public universities in Nigeria**

As pointed out before, large classes are common phenomena in many public universities in Nigeria making teaching and learning in these groups very difficult. But since large classes cannot be wished away (Tripod, undated), it becomes expedient that strategies that could improve learning for learners in these groups be suggested so as not to put them at a learning disadvantage comparatively (their counterparts in small groups). These strategies will help the lecturers of such groups to teach with more impact and to, in addition, help learners overcome the anti-learning behaviors and environmental challenges that they are predisposed to. Included in these strategies are:

1. **Taking attendance of students periodically and randomly:** Taking attendance of students periodically could serve as a check against truancy, absenteeism without permission and lateness to class. Because the list will be long and time wasting, it will be difficult to call out the names of all the students. The suggestion therefore, is to scan through and call names or the matriculation number of the students randomly and insist that they stand up to be recognized. When this is done in three lectures either in successions or not, information will go round that the lecturer takes attendance and so incidences of truancy and absenteeism without permission could be minimized.
2. **Extemporized tests or classroom assignments:** The lecturer is advised to warn students ahead of time of possible test that could come up at any time and in any of the lectures. This could equally be a check against truancy, avoidable absenteeism and lateness to class. The teacher should not only warn but that in one of the classes, such tests of between 5 and 10 minutes be actually administered.
3. **Mastery of the subject matter:** One of the likely reasons for loss of interest and apathy in the class, chatting with friends or seat mates, sleeping, dozing or napping or noise making could be that the lecturer has no mastery of the subject matter to communicate effectively with impact. Some of the students know lecturers that are superficial in knowledge about the subject matter. Added to this could be the inability of the lecturer to use the right methodology to dispense the knowledge. The lecturer is therefore, advised to prepare the lesson well ahead of time and find answers to anticipatory questions from the students. In addition, the lecturer should diversify the teaching methods. He/she is not to lecture throughout the period of the class. He should combine relevant methods such as discussions, storytelling, use of

jokes and humors, to generate and sustain students' interests and attentions. Humor and laughter make students like the teacher, love learning and always would want to be available whenever that teacher enters the class (Omede and Jimba, 2013). When a lecturer's teaching is interesting and motivational, students would hardly want to be absent deliberately, sleep, doze or nap in the class. "The more unmissable lectures are, the more they students will try not to miss them whatever else is happening in their lives" (Race, 2008).

4. **Calling late coming students by their names or ignoring them as much as it is possible:** Some lateness to class are genuinely excusable and so could be tolerated or ignored. Open confrontation may discourage such students with genuine reasons such as child care (nursing mothers), work-related matters or health challenges. When this is ignored, and the lecturer pauses for them to settle, it will relieve them as well as putting those students who are coming late for the purpose of seeking attention to shame. In addition, Race (2008) suggested that lecturers could call such students by their names if they know them and show them empty seats if available and that this could have the effect that the late comer knows that the lecturer knows him or her.
5. **Approaching the student, the direction of the distraction or asking the reason for the noise:** To discourage noise making, chatting or other forms of distractions in large classes, the lecturer is advised to go closer to such students or approach the direction from where the distraction is coming and this will make them to stop. In addition, the lecturer could find out by asking the reason for the noise or distraction especially as some could have positive connotations like cross checking of notes, asking for relevant assistance from mates such as a spare biro, cleaner or other learning materials for which they are handicapped or explaining to a neighbor who missed a point.
6. **Encouraging active learning:** The lecturer should encourage questions from students, allow students to answer questions asked by their mates while the lecturer moderates. The lecturer should also allow all the students to write answers to a particular question down and then points at students selectively to read out their answers. These could keep them reasonably busy and the class lively and interesting.
7. **Avoiding calling student's name before asking question:** This is to make all of them attentive as anybody could be called to answer. But when a question is particularized or tied to a student before it is asked, the likelihood is for others not to be attentive or concerned. Questions if properly asked are attention generating and could restore calmness in the class. In addition, a particular student who is inattentive could be told to repeat what the lecturer or a mate said. These could discourage chatting, noise making and fondling with the cell phones.
8. **Distributing looks, questions and opportunities for students to ask and answer questions:** The lecturer should not focus attention on one side or direction of the class for a long time and not repeatedly too. Similarly too, lecturer's questions must be distributed as well as opportunities for questions,

responses and contributions from students. These will encourage active learning and could make learning processes interesting and motivational.

9. **Discouraging students from discouraging their mates:** Some students who are in the habit of discouraging their mates from asking and answering questions by booing or shouting them down should be discouraged to discontinue that practice. The lecturer in a large class should frown at this behavior. This could encourage the shy ones and shield them against some of their mates who are irrational in their behaviors.
10. **Moving among students during lecture:** This will give all students the feeling of being in the “middle of the action” (Rhalmi, 2013). In addition, it could restore calmness in the class and reduce inaudibility on the part of the lecturer.
11. **Improving rapport with the students:** Improve relationship with the students by being humane, accessible, sympathetic and empathetic. As much as is possible, the lecturer should be responsive to some of their needs as “loco parentis”.
12. **Making efforts to know the names of students:** Learn their names and call those you know by their names. According to Tripod (undated), lecturers of large classes are to create a small class atmosphere in a large class setting by learning students’ names, using a microphone, moving around the classroom or lecture hall and eliciting students’ feedback about a course.
13. **Establishing simple rules with the students:** Agree on some rules or class ethics with the students including the use of cell phones in the classroom when lecture is on.
14. **Using a hand-held microphone or loud speakers:** This will solve acoustic problem. But where they are not available or dysfunctional, the lecturer should train in voice projection to speak to be heard from the back hall. To know whether the lecturer is being heard from the back, Race (2008) said it will be wrong for the teacher to ask, “Can you hear me at the back?” Rather, the teacher should ask someone in the back row a question and find out. Moving around in the class as much as the space could permit will also help to reduce this problem.
15. **Liaising with the time table planner, faculty officers and deans:** This will help in knowing the time of the day to allocate to large groups-not always when the temperature is too high. In addition, the lecturer could equally intimate faculty officers or deans about the peculiarity of their groups in terms of space, lighting, furniture and others for onward transmission to university management as appropriate.

### **Conclusion**

Most public universities in Nigeria are characterized by underfunding, overpopulation of students, understaffing, as well as inadequate facilities and these hamper effective teaching and learning. As a result, what have become largely obvious are incidences of large classes in many of the faculties of the public

universities in Nigeria especially, the faculties of Arts and Humanities as well as Social Sciences and Education. The characteristics of large classes are such that put the learners greatly at learning disadvantages comparatively. Therefore, if the phenomena of large classes cannot be easily wished away, what is expedient is for lecturers of such classes to be familiar with strategies that could help them promote and provoke learning for students who happened to have found themselves in such classes not to be put at learning disadvantages. This was what this paper hopefully achieved.

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