

What 'Teeny' Group Seminar Teach Us: Enhancing Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in Small Group Seminar through Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL) and Anecdotal Pedagogy

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Li Liu recently obtained her PhD in English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick, where her doctoral project is funded by China Scholarship Council – University of Warwick Scholarship. Her doctoral research concerns the intersection between a shared liminality specifically about working-class female characters, the Victorian bourgeois paternalistic ideologies of class and gender, and the narrative strategies prevalent in mid-Victorian novels written by and, largely, for the middle class. She also taught the first-year core module 'Modes of Reading' as a senior graduate teaching assistant in the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies.



Abstract

This reflective study delves into the nuanced impact of varying class sizes on the pedagogy of teaching literary theories and explores the ways of improving diversity in different classroom settings. It is based on my comparative analysis of the outcomes from teaching two different sizes of small seminar groups previously: one with eleven students and one that had between two and four students in regular attendance (what I term as a 'teeny group'). To empower students to better empathise with the racial and gender inequalities portrayed in theoretical texts, and to facilitate a friendly and open dialogue for students to share their own perspectives and experiences, I employ technological tools such as Padlet and Vevox as well as my own perspective as anecdotal pedagogy, namely, the inclusion of personal experience into teaching methods and contents. In doing so, I create an online platform to allow my students to share their opinions anonymously and visually and make use of my identity as an Asian woman to encourage underrepresented marginalised groups to get involved in discussions. This reflective piece draws on the article 'Violating Pedagogy' by Heather G. S. Johnson (2015) as a theoretical framework to demonstrate both the strengths and limitations of the teeny group in comparison with the normally small group and further to evaluate different pedagogic methods in advancing Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) from a unique perspective. In doing so, this article contemplates the optimal classroom sizes for effective teaching and examines how various pedagogical approaches counteract the differences in class sizes.

Keywords: Small Group Seminar, Anecdotal Pedagogy, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL), Class Size

Introduction

'Literary theory *hurts*', blatantly claims Heather G. S. Johnson (2015: 39, 61) – she finds that literary theory inflicts 'pain (obscenity, degradation, violation)' upon not just students but also professors. Not as an (under)graduate nor a professor, but as a non-permanent graduate teaching assistant, I note that Johnson's argument resonates with my experience. It is not just because of the theoretical confusion and the paradoxical balance between 'relinquishing enough intellectual authority' and 'maintaining enough professional authority' that have been noted by Johnson (2015: 65), but also due to the age of my students and the different sizes of two seminar groups that I tutored.

At Warwick, I was allocated to teach the module about literary theories, named 'Modes of Reading', where my students are predominantly first-year undergraduates. They were arranged into two groups: one with eleven students, which will be referred to as Group A, and another with ten students, which will be referred to as Group B. Despite the similar group size, the majority in Group B, because of various personal or medical issues, could not attend seminars regularly. Thus, Group B seminars normally had between two and four students present. The literature is contradicting in defining Group B as a small group. According to Jean Rudduck (1978: 1), the 'seminar' approach is characterised by the group size of 'at least four students and not more than sixteen'. Rudduck (1978: 55-56) further points out that, in an adolescent group of five or six members, 'there is no diversity of experience and style to bring vigour and surprise to the enquiry' and 'There is a consensus that the optimum size for small group teaching, in general'. Kate Exley and Reg Dennick (2004: 2) take account of group size, too, 'is between five and eight per group', and '[w]hen group membership falls below five, the diversity and variety of interpersonal interaction diminishes'. Given the *tiny* size of Group B, along with the more evident *teenage* attributes of this group, which I will elaborate below, I coin the term, 'teeny' group seminar, to allude to theory teaching in Group B, in contrast with 'small' group work in Group A.

Albeit in different sizes, both groups are organised in a way that Johnson arranges her undergraduate theory course, although my class meets once a week, whereas Johnson's meets twice a week. Johnson (2015: 47) splits her teaching process into 'period 1 'Comprehension Day' (minimal lecture and active discussion of theoretical ideas & questions) and period 2 'Application Day' (review of primary text, group work, and discussion of possible applications)'. This essay, therefore, discusses the different performances of the students from two groups, in terms of their 'comprehension' period, 'implication' period, and after-seminar activities (such as their assignment submission and engagement with my office hours). In doing so, I argue both small group teaching and 'teeny' group teaching carry their own virtues and downsides in the aspects of equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). And technology-enhanced learning (TEL), 'the application of information and communication technologies to teaching and learning' (Kirkwood & Price, 2014: 6), and anecdotal pedagogy, the combination of pedagogy with anecdotal theory that

emphasises 'the inclusion of personal details' of tutors and students into 'content, style, and method of pedagogy' (Bihan, 2011: 50), can counterbalance the distinctions.

Comprehension Period

As shown above, Rudduck (1978) and Exley and Dennick (2004) have observed the lack of 'diversity and variety' in a group of fewer than five students, and indeed by comparison with Group B, Group A provides more theoretical perspectives and subverts the dominance of one specific theoretical school during the 'comprehension' period. Yet, for a teeny seminar group, the tutor's authority to a degree diminishes, and therefore a student-led discussion of theories as well as inclusive education are more likely to happen. One of the difficulties of theory interpretation is what educationalists call 'the language of theory', which refers to the opaque slippery language of literary criticism caused by a 'rather clumsy' translation and the use of 'field-specific jargon' (Byrne, 2011: 119; Johnson, 2015: 38; Eckert, 2008: 111). However, with eleven students attending, Group A is more adaptable in this respect.

Firstly, there are more possibilities that the students can master French or German, so they can read the original texts. For example, students in this group proudly shared their own understanding of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's *The German Ideology* (2014 [1845]: 31-41) and Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2010 [1899]: 121-145) based upon their learning of their German versions. More tellingly, a class with more students perhaps introduces more counterarguments about the chosen theory, given their various educational backgrounds. On one hand, exchange students from German or French universities may be familiar with 'internecine conflicts' among different theoretical frameworks (Bradford, 2011: 167). On the other hand, even in England, the set texts at A-level and GCSE could also be varied (Elliott, 2021: 73, 75). In the case of Group A, students, due to their studies at A-level, was able to decode impenetrable expressions of Louis Althusser (French philosopher) and paraphrase them for their peers, thereby boosting the teaching outcome. This benefit of the command of 'the language of theory' is almost unattainable for students in Group B.

It does not mean 'teeny' seminar teaching by no means has an edge over small seminar teaching. Rudduck (1978: 59) has recognised the significance of the seating pattern for small group work, claiming that 'it is unfortunate if the allocated working space with its arrangement of chairs does not [...] allow face to face interaction among all members of the group'. For students in Group A, their seminars are arranged into a tiered classroom where chairs and tables are fixed to the floor. They can barely communicate face-to-face, particularly considering the social distance rule amid the COVID-19 pandemic, until I divide them into pairs or trios during the 'implication' period. Yet, it is not an issue for Group B. With a 'teeny' group, I can simply drag a chair and sit with the students, pretending to be a member of the seminar rather than a seminar leader. In doing so, I can to the greatest extent avoid intimidating my students with teacher authority and somewhat transform 'teeny' seminars into leaderless tutorials, in which students will not fear asking

foolish questions but 'will raise questions of genuine concern to them rather than ones they think the teacher would like to hear' (Tiberius, 1999: 102).

By way of illustration, students in this group often felt comfortable interrupting me to ask for a more detailed explanation of key concepts, such as 'deterritorialization' or 'logopoeia', or tweaking the structure of seminars by asking questions about the musicality of poetry because, as adolescents, they had an intense interest in dub music or reggae. This kind of active involvement in the comprehension of theory can hardly be identified in Group A where students may be reluctant to interfere with teaching in front of a larger class and their tutor. As such, both small and 'teeny' groups demonstrate their own strong and weak points in grasping the main meaning of theoretical texts.

The employment of technological tools, such as Vevox¹, can help to improve this situation. First, quizzing my students with Vevox helps me to figure out the levels at which my students comprehend the reading materials and lecture videos, thereby allowing me to promote the equality of learners in my teaching. Second, it attracts my students' attention to my teaching content and motivates them to engage in discussion through a game-based competition. I found that using Vevox was helpful to engage with quiet students, international students, and students with learning difficulties or auditory impairments in Group A. According to Bipithalal Balakrishnan Nair (2022: 1), the elements of playfulness can 'enhanc[e] student engagement, participation, and motivation' and 'embrac[e] diversity and inclusion'. Thus, the traditional hierarchy between tutors and students are disrupted and more students in Group A can join in class discussions. Third, the digital tools allow me to save the discussions from Group A and present them to Group B, and further enhance the diversity in Group B by establishing an asynchronistic debate.

Implication Period

Larger class size also affects the students' implication of theory in literary texts with regard to 'diversity and variety'. For academics, the key to teaching theory is to keep open to all theoretical systems and to adopt various theoretical lens. 'To struggle with a literary theory', David Gershom Myers (1994: 333) shrewdly notes, 'is to scramble for counterarguments'. To do so, Johnson (2015: 42) further encourages theory teachers and students to embrace 'theoretical opportunism', that is, 'to accept a multiplicity of constantly changing interpretations, to not insist on a particular perspective (or particular combination of perspectives) as inherently right or proper and to distrust any single grand narrative capable of systematically explaining 'Literature' or 'Culture''. For this theoretical opportunism, I have organised my seminars around some specific terms that our chosen theories construe in some way. Dealing with the unit themed 'poetry', I led my students to challenge 'binary oppositions', including 'poetry/prose', 'men/women', 'black/white', 'life/death', 'human/nonhuman', to name but a few.

¹ Vevox is a digital platform that has polling and survey capabilities.

However, as Johnson (2015: 62) highlights, 'theoretical opportunism involves the selection of stances based on individual interests and particular expediencies'. The premise of this pedagogical approach is the possibility that the students have discrepancies in stances. In a 'teeny' group, there is more likelihood that its members cannot curb a dominant voice and thereby cannot 'find the content which will support depth of learning' (Rudduck, 1978: 55-56). There is also a probability that group members frequently agree with each other, thus 'directing comments at the teacher who either has a different point of view or is able to adopt one' (Tiberius, 1999: 112). Therefore, unsurprisingly, it was in Group A, not Group B, that students argued against my feminist reading of *The Gathering* by Anne Enright (2008) or analysed 'In A Station of the Metro' by Ezra Pound (1913) from an ecocritical perspective, a theoretical perspective that I had not introduced.

Due to its limitation on the aspect of the multiplicity of viewpoints, I draw on anecdotal pedagogy to trigger counterarguments in the 'teeny' group. Benefited from a physically closer distance from students in Group B, I avoided the impasse that Jill Le Bihan (2011: 59) has encountered—to 'provoke emotion, anger in fact', towards gender inequality among her students within a short period, she must resort to outrageous statistics about the abuse and discrimination of women. For me, it was much easier to provoke emotion and share personal experiences in a group of three or four.

Nonetheless, akin to Bihan (2011: 55), I did register the same concern as 'to understand them as an attempt to enter the debate (however irrelevant their words may at first seem)', and to understand 'the experiential testimony of students' as 'a methodology appropriate to the seminar room'. For instance, in a relaxing stimulating atmosphere, one student in Group B mentioned their father's response to the poem, '—', in *Surge* by Jay Bernard (2019), a poetry collection in our syllabus. In this case, I needed to guide the student to link Bernard's indignation about public silence on the 'New Cross Massacre', a suspected racist attack, with their father's unwillingness to discuss the tragic event. I led them to discover how their experience interestingly mirrored the poem, in which a ghost victim child was trying to talk to his father, while outside the poem, they, a real child, was trying to talk to their real father. In doing so, I encouraged my students to crush the binary opposition between fiction and reality as well as life and death, as Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (1976: 15) have argued in *Understanding Poetry* (which has been studied by students too), not only 'understand' poetry but also 'experience' poetry. Hence, with the tutor's guidance, 'teeny' seminar work may create a more equal and creative situation to implicate theory with literature.

After-Seminar Activities

The control and freedom that students in the 'teeny' seminars enjoy further influence the students' performance after seminars. According to Mary M. Reda (2009: 90), due to the 'asymmetrical relationship of power between teacher and student', her student performed '[s]cared stiff' in the compulsory office meeting. In my case, students in Group B were

more willing to meet me during my office hours, whereas no student in Group A has attended my optional office meetings yet. My assumption of the difference is that I am less intimidating to students in the 'teeny' group than those in the small group, and the more accessible tutor image spurs more students to meet me after seminars. In this way, I created an anonymous survey via Padlet² to encourage my students to share their opinions and ask their questions openly and freely. Nevertheless, the problem arises in Group B, too. 'In undergraduate classes', as Johnson (2015: 64) finds, 'deeply undercutting professorial authority can be dangerous' and undergraduates may feel 'uncomfortable and potentially counterproductive when they feel empowered to challenge their grading procedures or their classroom rules'. Indeed, in contrast with the full submission of formative essays in Group A, only a couple of students in Group B handed in their essays because the assignment was not mandatory. Furthermore, during my office hours, the adolescent students in Group B may occasionally change the subject to their hobbies, such as reggae and anime. It required me to reconnect these subjects to literary theory by, for example, associating reggae with the musicality of poems and anime with graphical novels that the students read in the second term.

² Padlet is a digital platform that allows users to create and customise interactive boards for collecting, organising, and presenting various types of content.

Conclusion

This reflective essay argues for a reconsideration of the desired class size and intends to inspire academics to think if it is feasible to incorporate 'teeny' seminar teaching methods into the widely accepted seminar pedagogy or vice versa. Although a seminar group of eleven may bear virtues of diversity and variety, teeny seminar work empowers students to manage the class, engage in discussion, and make use of after-seminar resources more openly and actively. The use of various pedagogic methods can help to weaken the adverse effects of different class sizes, too. My teaching in this way reflects exactly what Johnson (2015: 66) claims: 'the value in the theory course is precisely that it is painful, that it hurts. It creates a discomfort that is productive, leading to deeper self-reflection for teacher and student alike'.

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