This article describes how a collaborative class strategy and an introductory activity were used to develop students’ thinking about business and management communication. The article focuses on teachers who want to integrate critical perspectives about business communication into their classes. A course ethos, learning groups, and an introductory activity were used to develop students’ thinking about business and management communication. These strategies encouraged collaborative peer learning in a large bicultural/multicultural lecture environment and developed learning relationships typically found in a small class context. In addition, the activities produced ongoing lecture learning groups in which business students could question their “trained incapacities,” boundaries, and assumptions gained from their experiences of communicating and managing relationships during these activities.

Keywords: lecture learning groups; critical theory; trained incapacities; business and management communication; pedagogy

FOR MANY COURSES in professional management education, as Lee (2008) notes, “academic lectures remain the principal genre of instruction” (p. 42). One of the problems exacerbated in this large lecture context, according to Cooper and Robinson (2000), is that “students are not usually challenged to engage in much thinking or reflecting on course material” (p. 6). With this in mind and as scholars who use critical theories in our research, we initiated the introductory activities described in this article—a collaborative class strategy and an introductory activity that were used to develop students’ thinking about business and management communication. These strategies were particularly useful in a compulsory large lecture class format in New Zealand.
We introduced these strategies because we wanted to challenge the business students’ initial assumptions, habitual behavior, and expectations of management communication. The other purpose was to develop a collaborative environment of trust to facilitate discussion and to explore what could be considered their “raw” initial understandings of the topics (Brookfield, 2005). Overall, the strategies were attempts to overcome the problem of passive learning, which can be a problem particularly in large lecture classes. Our aim instead was to create a meaningful, engaging learning context for discussions about management communication, informed by critical theories.

TEACHING WITH CRITICAL THEORY

As teachers and researchers who are committed to using critical theories, we agree with Brookfield (2005) that it is untenable to separate “our practice from our theorizing” (p. 349). We endeavour to integrate in our teaching strategies that encourage discussions about power, context, discourses, inequalities, and diversity in management and organizational communication. To promote this discussion, students need to feel that they are working in a safe environment where they can challenge, make mistakes, and think aloud. For many business and management students, this type of learning is unfamiliar terrain, as they have been heavily socialized to be competitive and search for the right and truthful answer (French & Grey, 1996; Linstead, Fulop, & Lilley, 2004). Much of this socialization has occurred during their schooling but is also evident in many early management theories, undergraduate textbooks, and popular fads regarding business (Boje, 1996; Jackson, 2001). This socialization creates what Veblen (as cited in Rosa & Machlis, 2002, p. 252) called “trained incapacities” and comments that “their training in businesslike ways of thinking leaves them incapable of anything like an effectual insight” (as cited in Rosa & Machlis, 2002, p. 256). Rosa and Machlis further defined trained incapacities as “training in expert competence in a specialized field . . . to narrow the ‘range of perception’ and render the professional less effective under changed conditions” (p. 256). This type of training occurs through learned habits that reward and encourage particular ways of thinking and tend to create boundaries around thinking processes leading to restricted judgments (French & Grey, 1996).
Researchers from critical perspectives have argued that the result of these trained incapacities are potential managers and leaders who merely reproduce the status quo, neglect “diversity” in their practices, and ignore the responsibilities of business to the wider societal context (Boje, 1996; Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000). All of which, critical researchers have argued, limits and negates any possibility for change (Brookfield, 2005; Flannery & Hayes, 2001). To address this limitation, critical theorists encourage their students to challenge the production of knowledge and the “dominant educational discourses into which our students are being inducted” (Saltmarsh & Saltmarsh, 2008, p. 627). In a similar vein, when we use these lecture learning groups, it should be noted that we are not always seeking unity, consensus, “right” answers, and harmony. Rather, we aim for students to challenge knowledge production and to understand “the world as someone else sees it” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 253).

**TEACHING LARGE CLASSES**

As student numbers in a class rise, lecturers sometimes feel that “intimacy and somewhat casual atmosphere of the small classroom is lost” (Kryder, 2002, p. 91), and instead distance is created between student and teacher. The increasing class sizes, especially for undergraduate “service” courses, have encouraged teachers to implement various strategies to shift students from passive recipients of the teaching to engaged learners (Biggs, 2003; Brookfield, 2005). Various strategies have been used by lecturers to encourage attendance and motivation. Some of these have included compulsory attendance, leaving blank bullet points in PowerPoint slides, random tests/quizzes, and a random name checks (Burke & James, 2008; Du-Babcock, 2002, p. 87). The strategies of control used to manage the large classroom change the context from one of facilitating learning relationships to the management of students (Kryder, 2002).

Many teaching staff, perhaps also feeling overwhelmed with this situation, seem to revert to the traditional hierarchies of the large lecture format (Burkill, Rodway Dyer, & Stone, 2008; Kryder, 2002). Yet interestingly, research has indicated that from the student’s perspective, class size does not matter; rather it is the quality of the course and the passion from the lecturer that they see as important in their learning (Kryder, 2002). Therefore, the emphasis should be on the quality of the learning processes and experiences gained by the students during
the class. So, rather than adopting the traditional, one-way information approach, lecturing to large classes should be “a two-way adjustment process between the students and instructor” (Du-Babcock, 2002, p. 87) and as such requires a reorientation from a focus on the number of students to the quality of their learning and a move from a surface to a deep learning approach (Biggs, 2003). In response to the challenges presented by large lecture classes, educational researchers have called for a more collaborative and explicit sharing of practice to inform and engage all teachers, addressing issues of learning, context, assessment, and teaching practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rodaway, 2007). In this vein, we share the three strategies that have been used in a large second-year undergraduate lecture. These strategies are then followed by a discussion of three key benefits accrued from these strategies.

**BACKGROUND AND NEW ZEALAND CONTEXT**

For many undergraduate courses, particularly those in New Zealand, the traditional format is that of the lecturer teaching a 2-hour lecture with students also attending a smaller 1- or 2-hour tutorial facilitated by a tutor or the lecturer. Classes are often composed of students from a range of backgrounds. New Zealand, a bicultural nation, has both Maori and Pakeha (European origin) students in addition to a large number of international students from Asia. The activity described in this article was developed from a compulsory second-year undergraduate course, Communication Management, which the first author taught for nearly 8 years. The course is taught over 3 semesters to students numbering from 75 in summer school to nearly 300 in the “B” semester. A semester in New Zealand consists of 16 weeks with 14 weeks of taught classes. The students complete 7 weeks of taught classes, then have a 2-week study break followed by the remaining 7 weeks of classes. The majority of students are studying for a 4-year Bachelor of Management Studies degree, and for many of them, this might be their only course taken regarding communication. Most of the students are 19 to 20 years of age and have varying but often limited experiences working in organizations. Their initial expectations of a communication course can be limited and negative. This is because many assume that communication is just about writing and other technical aspects of business communication. They consider this course as “just
common-sense” or all about business writing. Some of the finance and accounting majors, for example, have tried to avoid communication courses in the past, perceiving themselves not to be good writers.

**PROVIDING THE FRAMEWORK: CLASS ETHOS**

After briefing students about the content and objectives of the course, we begin the very first lecture session of the course with a PowerPoint slide that includes a statement based on the old western proverb: “treat others as you would wish to be treated,” also known as the Golden Rule. Students are asked if they are satisfied with the course ethos and this statement. There is usually silence or agreement from a few students. This conduct expectation is deliberately not discussed at this stage until later. The key problem with this ethos statement, as will be explained later, is that it assumes homogeneity in understanding the course expectations. It also draws on a western proverb and thus prominently positions particular assumptions and understandings drawn from ethnocentric perspectives (Westwood & Jack, 2007).

**FORMING LECTURE LEARNING GROUPS: WORKING COLLABORATIVELY**

Next, we explain that the course aims to be collaborative and that students will need to work in Lecture Learning Groups (LLGs), a peer-group system. These groups are intended to support members with course readings, assignments, and revisions for the final exam. Students are informed that LLGs are voluntary, will not have assessment attached to them, and will not be monitored for attendance. Expectations are only that students aim for a diverse group, ideally containing four people who remain in these groups throughout the course for every lecture.

Students are asked to take a couple of minutes to introduce themselves to each other and to group themselves. They are then set their first LLG task for the day, which is to create a name plate. They are allowed about 5 minutes to discuss and discover 10 things or activities they do or do not have common interests in. For example, the entire group likes the same music, while six of them dislike a particular colour, and four people are interested in surfing. From this list and using the resources made available to them by the lecturer, they are
then asked to creatively think of a group name or logo that communicates something about their group using an A4 coloured card and various materials such as pens, glitter, stickers, glue, and so on.

Once the exercise is complete, the teaching team reviews the creations and asks the LLGs to briefly explain their name plate. The team that is judged by the teaching team as having the most creative name plate (e.g., having called themselves “7 blue eyes and 1 green,” “hate avocados” or used an anagram of their names) is given a large bag of candies. The LLGs are thanked for their participation and asked to keep the name plate as it will be collected at the end of the class. The name plates function as a communication and relationship developing tool for both students and the teaching team. For example, it is always distributed at the beginning of each class and collected again at the end. For the remainder of the course, if the students are asked to discuss anything, they do so in their LLGs and refer to themselves using this selected name.

**INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY**

The remainder of the lecture is spent on the Scavenger Hunt. In a traditional version of this game, teams need to read the clues, quickly discuss possible strategies, and then try to find the answers or items in an allocated time to win the game. The game is explained to the students and they are given four instructions (see the appendix for the materials needed). First, they are told that in their LLGs they will be given a handout containing three questions or clues for them to try to answer, but they cannot turn it over until the lecturer tells them to “go.” It is then stated that they will only be given 15 minutes in which to gather as much as they can in order to answer the three questions or clues. They are informed that they do not have to be restricted to the lecture theater, as long as they are back in the allocated time. The final instruction is that the teaching team can only answer closed questions during the game (i.e., yes/no answers). The first LLG with the nearest or correct answers wins the prize.

A prepared handout with three questions is given to each LLG. The first question does not present much of a challenge and is based on a relatively easy subject that all the students can answer. Such a question could be something based on the local news, community, or around a
popular sporting activity. For example, we have had a question asking who is the current Waikato netball team’s captain? The second question is usually based on a particular age–generation type. This usually proves to be slightly harder for the younger students who generally are not be accustomed to considering age-related experiences other than those of their peers. This second question is usually linked to something that happened in a particular decade. For example, we might play a cover version of an Elvis, Bob Dylan, or U2 song. We might then ask who originally sang the song being played and in what year. The final question is more difficult and is always based on a kind of riddle that involves some broader general, creative thinking, and (importantly for critical theories) historical knowledge.

For this final third question, brain puzzles have been particularly useful as they challenge assumptions, draw on context, and call for a greater understanding of the wider relationships in society. For example, there is one puzzle that we frequently use in the course because it requires a greater understanding of the historical context to figure out the answer. This puzzle is effective in encouraging the students to challenge their boundaries of context and knowledge. To answer this third question, the students need a broader knowledge of past events and contexts, such as World War II. Instead, many of these young students tend to work on their assumptions that the puzzle relates to a current event. They then find it difficult to solve when ignoring or failing to understand the influence and interplay of history and context. As will be discussed later, this question starts to indicate the importance of historical events, understandings, and knowledge in constructing and defining current events.

As this third question can be a difficult question to answer, two envelopes containing different clues are randomly given to two LLGs in order to assist the students. Each envelope contains a piece of paper with a heading stating “clue to help you solve the third question” and the clue. The two envelopes contain two different clues to determine if these LLGs will collaborate with each other, work with groups that do not have the clues, or do not collaborate and keep such information to themselves. This adds an interesting dimension to the activity in terms of relationships, intragroup collaboration, and networks. The teacher then discusses this after the activity and relates it to the organizational networks that businesses will conduct with key stakeholders and publics.
Once the LLGs are back in the lecture theater and the prize is given out to the group with the nearest or most correct answers, we critically discuss their experiences from the session. In their LLGs, they are asked to discuss and provide feedback (either verbally or using a flipchart) including a key insight they obtained about management communication from their involvement in the session. They are also asked to discuss the following questions:

- What communication was challenging or unclear for your group and why do you think it was challenging?
- What resources or knowledge did you draw on? How did they help you to survive/succeed?
- What types of communication can you identify that you used and why did you use these?
- What would you do differently and why?

The questions above are discussed and feedback is given to the entire class.

**DISCUSSION AND EXAMPLES FROM PRACTICE**

The “learning by doing” (Gulati, 2004) experienced in these strategies allows students to go far beyond simple mastery of the Scavenger Hunt game (Biggs, 2003; Brookfield, 2005). It contributes to establishing an ongoing course ethos that the classroom will be an active, collaborative one, drawing on experiences, discussing differences, and open to questioning of all forms of knowledge (Cunliff, Forray, & Knights, 2002). By starting with a learning-by-doing approach, not only are students’ thinking skills developed, but they are also challenged to be active learners who are involved in the class (Biggs, 2003; Brookfield, 2005; Gulati, 2004). The discussion after the game encourages students to reflect and analyze management communication in relation to complexities, failures, context, power, and assumptions. Also highlighted are issues and tensions around managing relationships, business communication, and the processes of organizing that can be re-examined at the lecturers’ discretion throughout the remainder of the course. Thus, the problem of teaching large second-year lecture classes can be addressed by three key areas in our approach—developing a community
of learners, challenging trained incapacities, and demonstrating to students that communication and relationships constitute organizing and organizations. They start to recognize that it is about “an entire fabric of relationships . . . to include a whole array of things, such as symbols, messages, interactions, relationships, networks, and larger discourses” (Cheney, Christensen, Zorn, & Ganesh, 2004, p. 7).

**Community of Learners**

Small LLGs provide a nonthreatening space for students to discuss their raw understandings, challenge ideas, and learn from interactions with each other. The groups also counteract the lonely and overwhelming experiences that large lecture formats can have for many students (Biggs, 2003; Brookfield, 2005). As “pedagogy requires disciplining gaze” (Boje, 1996, p. 180), the fear of embarrassing themselves can overwhelm any desire for a student to get involved in a class (Brookfield, 2005). Small LLGs thus enable students to discuss initial reactions, assumptions, and conceptions about the topics without the fear that they do not have the “right” answer. For students who are more reserved, from diverse backgrounds, or with different learning styles, the LLGs provide an area to interact, contribute, and voice their ideas to the larger class. The students as part of the course assessment are asked to write three critical reflective learning essays. This questioning of assumptions is illustrated here in the student’s first entry in the reflective assignment:

I found the team communication exercise [Scavenger Hunt] very challenging, but not in a negative way, more in the way of taking into consideration the age, gender and academic background of the team and then trying to find common ground. I think I had made an assumption about my team members. I also made an assumption [about] what they thought of me. I was not sure if this assumption-making was normal. As soon as we covered the lecture [material] I realized what I was doing. I will find this team work challenging . . . but will definitely learn a lot from it.

We do not always expect the LLGs to gain consensus, harmony, and unity (Sinclair, 1992); rather the groups are a space to discuss differences and reflect on “their own practice and the contexts in which they practice [to enable] valuable lessons that they can take into other situations from the learning process” (Linstead et al., 2004, p. 1).
Challenging Trained Incapacities

Students are provided with two key ways to engage with and challenge their habitual and trained incapacities through an examination of the commonly used sources of knowledge they apply and their habit of ignoring the interpretive and transformative dynamics of sender–recipient nexus of the communication. First, students are guided through the discussion to reflect and examine the knowledge sources they used during the game. The teacher facilitates the discussion encouraging critical reflection on sources that they drew on, why they valued these types of knowledge, and alternatives they chose not to use in the game. Some students, for example, used explicit sources of knowledge such as the Internet, library, and newspapers, whereas others tried to draw on their tacit experiences in order to make sense of and solve the clues. All this provides an opportunity for the teacher to discuss the different knowledge sources used for decision making and how they are validated (or not as the case may be) by organizations and management (Garrick & Solomon, 2001). This type of discussion thus highlights

[A]cknowledgement of and tolerance for different forms of management knowledge . . . [a]long with . . . a greater tolerance and recognition of different sources of knowledge that can influence how one learns about management as well as the virtues and vices of each form of knowledge generation. (Fulop & Rifkin, 2004, p. 20)

In addition, the exercise starts to develop the skills and learning that can be gained from a deeper reading of texts, contexts, sharing and collating information. As one might imagine, the scenario also requires some creative, critical, and independent, outside-the-box thinking. As one student comments in their reflective assessment:

Our lecture learning groups are a perfect example of how organizational change can be difficult to achieve. All the members of our team have been, or still are, members of other groups who do things differently. Each member has preconceived ideas as to how our team should operate. Attempting to merge these ideas, without some negotiation can make it difficult. We identified and communicated specific rules, processes and guidelines that would apply to our team. At first it was difficult to agree
on these as everyone thought that their ideas were better but eventually after much explicit discussion we compromised. I do understand how in a company context this process may not be so easy to achieve [because] of the number of employees and that they may resist the changes.

The “game” thus allows a student to reflect and articulate the knowledge sources that they rely on and develop their analytical skills into applying a deeper reading of managerial contexts. The second encounter regarding management communication is highlighted through a discussion of the “treat others as you would wish to be treated” ethos statement from the beginning of the course. We ask if this statement was helpful to the students in understanding the expectations of the session and what was happening. Often, there is a mixed response from the groups, and we proceed to unpack this communication with the class. The proverb on which the ethos statement was based illustrates that when constructing business communication, it is important to consider the receivers’ interpretation and needs. The proverb is ambiguous, leaves itself open to multiple interpretations, and does not address different interpretations for understanding the phrase. The statement does not explicitly indicate the expectations of behavior or values in the course and could arguably “be seen to perpetuate rather than combat inequalities” (Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000, p. S29). For example, some students may have felt that it is respectful to not look at the teacher when talking to them, that verbal interruptions are rude, and that they should not ask questions that challenge the “expert” teacher in public. Rather, the proverb on which the ethos statement is based relies on the implicit cultural contextual meaning, ignoring the “ethnocentric orientations . . .” all of which “[carry] circumscribed interests and maybe [act] as a structural barrier” to communication and understanding (Westwood & Jack, 2007, p. 247). There is no acknowledgment or sensitivity to differences in understanding that may impinge on students’ development. The proverb highlights much of the taken-for-granted constructions of management communication in the day-to-day business context and is relevant to issues and tensions of intercultural diversity in the workplace. The proverb is thus embedded with cultural meaning and is relevant to several of the key critiques addressed later in the course regarding the management of diversity in organizations.
Communication Constitutes Relationships, Organizing, and Organizations

The LLGs and the introductory game actively encourage students to consider the symbolic meaning communicated through both the physical surroundings and relationships with other people. Many business students tend to be trained to see management as the “management of things” and the “artificial separation” of ideas and topics (Linstead, Fulop, & Lilley, 2009, p. 19). The activities start to challenge physical and artificial boundaries, encouraging students to make connections between and amongst course topics. For example, the physical setup of the traditional lecture room is challenged by the scavenger hunt. The cathedral-like lecture rooms, with fixed seating and tables that taper to the top of the room preclude active, physical learning and discussion (Boje, 1996). In the traditional format, the lecturer occupies the space at the front and rarely moves through the “ranks” up and around the room. Effectively, the room separates the teacher from the students. Boje (1996), further describes the physical space as “programm[ing] the body” (p. 179), encouraging all to become “docile in the classroom” (p. 172). To resist the designed expectations of the space also challenges the power of who is the knower and who is the passive respondent of this knowledge. The Scavenger Hunt activity opens up a discussion of the unmanageable spaces in organizations and illustrates the reality of workplaces where individuals are not always compliant, passive employees (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Gabriel, 1995).

In addition to examining the relationship of the physical space, the LLGs and the introductory activities open up assumptions regarding communication, managing, people, and groups. These activities illustrate that learning about communication even in student relationships is crucial in the development of lived experience about processes of organizing and organizations (Garrick & Solomon, 2001). The development of lived experience is particularly significant for business students who will encounter workplace relationships that are usually formed into departmental groups or teams. The in-class experience for students exposed to our LLG approach demonstrates for students key challenges, struggles, and negotiations underlying much of organizational and managerial communication. Our strategies and discussion highlight and challenge the initial expectations of many of the students that communication in business is either just common sense or all about presentations. Students
begin to realize what the course is about, what it can offer them, and how it can deepen their future understandings and interactions in the workplace. Students see the difficulties in managing communication and that “power is embedded in relationships [and] is integral to explaining . . . relationships” in organizations (Linstead et al., 2009, p. 18).

CONCLUSION

We have demonstrated our belief that education provides a learner with more than just information: Rather, it is an opportunity for transformation and making sense of and resolving difference (Mezirow, 2000). The role of the teacher is to facilitate ways that students can locate themselves in the world and their disciplinary studies while also beginning to understand something about their relationships with others and those who are different from them. Our LLG learning approach lays down a foundation for lifelong learning as employees and encourages critical reflection on issues of individual freedom, choices, and responsibilities. The LLG approach can be achieved in small and large classes by encouraging questioning of the foundations and possession of knowledge and how we share and use it within our lives. Teaching and sharing knowledge this way opens both academic researchers and teachers to a more vulnerable but honest reflection on how we teach, what we teach, and the implications of our teaching.

APPENDIX

Materials Needed for Lecture Learning Groups (LLGs) and Scavenger Hunt

The following materials are suggested for aiding the creation of name plates:

- PowerPoint
- A4-sized coloured stiff card
- Creative resources such as pens, stickers, glitter, glue, scissors, and so on
- Two large bags of sweets
- Handouts enough for each LLG containing the three questions/clues for the Scavenger Hunt
- Two envelopes, each containing an extra clue for the third Scavenger Hunt question
References


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