The University Of Queensland
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Teaching and Learning 2018

Celebrating Large Courses

Some observations and reflections from a long career of Big Wave riding

(with appreciation for the ride thus far, and enthusiasm for those of you riding on..)

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I would like to acknowledge the Turrbul / Jagera people, the traditional custodians of the lands on which we meet, and pay my respects to past, present, and emerging elders. I would like to invite those present to share in this acknowledgement.

What drives our teaching – especially in large courses where we have so much leverage?

What (if anything) are you a cheerleader for?

Aldous Huxley (Brave New World, Island, Doors of Perception, Perennial Philosohy, …) said that he was a Cheerleader for Evolution.

I'm a cheerleader for the Scientific Method (and its use in sorting our psychological crap)

What are we doing – here, now, & in teaching large courses?

A few years ago, a friend who has known me for many years asked me –

 "John, is your evolution towards the *Mr Natural* character (from R.Crumb's comics) a conscious and intentional process, or just an unconscious drift?"
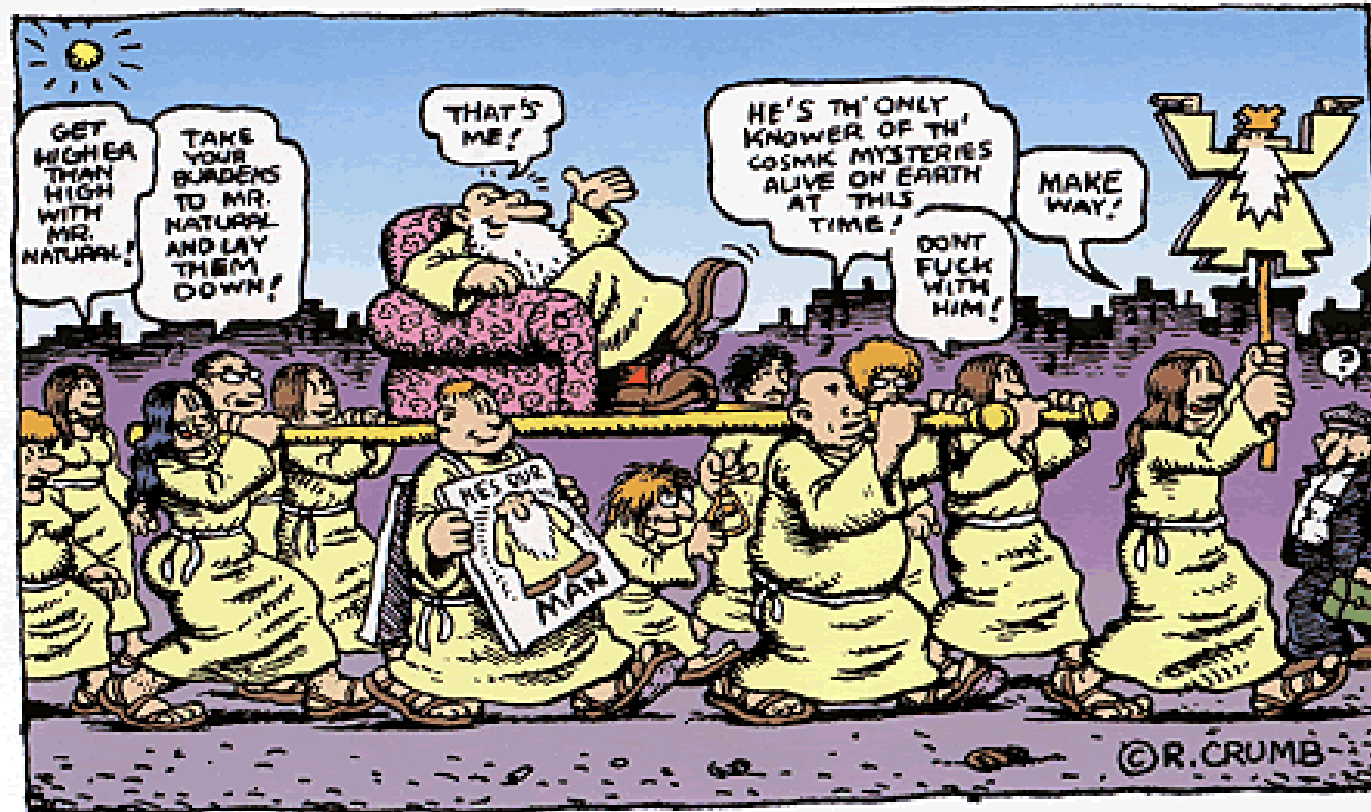
I'll come back to my reply, but first -

Who is this *Mr Natural* character?

My drift into a Mr Natural character was not conscious until my friend pointed out to me that I was evolving into a Mr Natural. Now that I'm aware of it, the drift is more intentional – or at least a wave I'm willing to ride – and perhaps a bit more selective – I want the beard but not the followers.

Psychologically Obvious Point: All of us (including our students) have multiple motivations – some conscious and some not – for doing the things we do.

What are we doing – why are we here, now?

1. "Free" food?

2. Talking about ("celebrating"?) Large Classes?

3. Putting some of our experiences in a broader "Ikigai" (Japanese ~ 'reason we get up in the morning') context?

4. Looking to have some "sanuk" (Thai – 'fun' ; 'pleasure in doing something for its intrinsic value')

Is teaching (in our Large Class context) about more than transmitting information?

What else are we consciously trying to do? (Or not to do?)

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What else might our behaviour and the course structures suggest we are implicitly trying to do?

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If all we are trying to do is to transmit information, we may not need to rely on flipped, blended, mooc'd courses or sages on stages or next gen a.i. - books work pretty well.

Note that the salient "project output" for the Flipped Classroom Project listed on the ITaLI web pages (https://itali.uq.edu.au/about/projects/flipped-classroom-olt) is – a book.

Some of the things I seem to be trying to do in large classes:

Playing host to students in welcoming them into a community (actually communities – sub-discipline, discipline, uni, Aus., world community of thoughtful and caring people,…

Helping /empowering students to learn the ropes to participate as a successful insider in these communities. (n.b. not acting as gatekeeper to some exclusive club)

Helping students see the value of being an insider by showing my enthusiasm for my discipline (Psych), while acknowledging its current limitations. (n.b. enthusiasm should be authentic, but can, perhaps, be amplified by framing – "I'm not anxious, I'm excited")

Some questions of VALUES -

Should (or could) we avoid values altogether – just stick to the facts? Dry facts are not very engaging.

Can we acknowledge our values – disciplinary, cultural, & individual, while also respecting diversity within and beyond our students?

In trying to appeal to our unifying, common, human values, it may be worthwhile to note the limits of our commonality. E.g. for me some of what I take to be common sense may not be held in common – global warming, evolution, gender equity, individualism,…

I (like Mr Natural) am a product (and producer) of a particular historical-cultural set of values, beliefs, & practices –

The education book which I recall as having the greatest impact on me as a young academic was –

Teaching as a Subversive Activity by Postman & Weingartner (1969/1980), whose main thesis is that education is and should be not so much about accumulating information or vocational skills, as about **"instilling an infallible crap detector"** in students. I think "infallible" is hard, but "effective" is do-able.

Of crap detectors and scientific method

I've been basically selling "crap detectors" to students for my whole career..

Usually, I don't call it be that name, but instead, talk about it as teaching Scientific Method and applying it to Psychology, or just evidence-based thinking.

I am a cheerleader for the scientific method (and its application to us, psychologically, as well as to the discipline of psychology)

The market environment for selling crap detectors

We live in rich and interesting times for crap detecting –

On the world stage – "alternate facts", "fake news", "peace-keeper missiles"

Here on our beloved St Lunacy campus - ?? Top 50 rankings?, "create change"?, "not if, when", "own the unknown", "the uni of tom,dick, & harry", Students as partners? Diversity/Inclusiveness? Blonded Learning?

Crapiness may, to some extent, be in the eye & mind of the beholder – one person's crap may be another's cappuccino…

For teaching how to discriminate crap from non-crap, it is indeed useful to have plentiful examples of each.

And the existence of crap is not inherently bad or useless – think of it as future fertilizer. One green day in the future we may look back and thank the VC for all of the future fertilizer he brought to UQ.

Small aside – No one has ever said "John shows such high respect for authority!" Questioning authority is arguably part of a scientific attitude. Among the authorities I encourage students (and you) to question rather than believe is me. Obviously, I seem to be some kind of authority on crap – how can you take that seriously?

"Life is too important to be taken seriously." (Oscar Wilde) is an attitude I resonate to (and can cherry-pick evidence to lend psychological support to its utility).

 Being playful enhances creativity (but may not enhance productivity at mundane tasks)

Being playful probably makes it more likely that others will want to engage in the fun with you in your sand box.

Let's talk engagement – playfully, please

Student engagement has been a core value (or fashionable buzz words) for the last decade.

I've observed/measured student engagement (or its inverse: daydreaming / mindwandering) in my lectures (especially large lectures) for 35 years – spanning many of the changes in tertiary teaching technology of these times. Mostly this has involved a probed "experience sampling" methodology. Some of this has been formal research, most of it just interactive class demo

I'd like to tell you a little of what we've observed, along with some reflection from different eras. Maybe by looking at how changes in educational technology have or have not been game changers for within-class engagement, we'll get a few hypotheses for present and future trends.

Mindwandering in class through the ages

The days of chalk and talk (antiquity – 1980s-90s) and notetaking

Overhead Transparency projectors (1980s-90s) and notetaking

Powerpoint Slides (`2000 -)

                    -without Blackboard – style availability of slides to students

                    - with Blackboard – style availability of slides to students (effect on notetaking)

                    - with "Lecture Capture" recordings (effects on attendance)

The days of chalk and talk (antiquity – 1980s-90s) and notetaking-

In the early 80s, I used to work (literally) at the chalk-face

Mindwandering as a function of whether the lecturer's back is turned –

as a function of notetaking

as a function of student-lecturer relationship dynamics

Overhead Transparency projectors (1980s-90s) and notetaking

A new era of transparency, complexity, enhanced eye-contact, …and darkness.

more on notetaking

Powerpoints – sliding into _____

Early era w/o web supply of ppts – slide changes and mindwandering

Supply of ppts on BB – notes or bullet points and mindwandering

Lecture "capture" of slides & voices

Some other Mindwandering in class relationships -

Related to learning / exam performance ("you must be present to win") but not to other assessment, general ability, gender, time of day, caffeine.

Related to interest.

Related to seating position.

Related to note-taking.

Related to time into lecture.

Related to events in lecture.

+ participation, +question/dialogue, + storytelling

Related (-) to students (and neighbors) having laptop/tablet with them.

Beyond mindwandering / attentional engagement within class, our broader educational environment has, of course, been impacted in myriad ways by the very existence of

The web – we (unis) and libraries have totally lost the franchise as monopoly information providers.

Other universities on-line offerings – e.g. MIT's open courseware initiative. Of course UQ needs to find its way in this environment. And blended learning will be part of this. But we will likely do well to remember the importance of presence – perhaps including in large lectures.

How is/will more online (blended, mooc'd, interactive a.i.'d,..) course delivery likely to impact on

Information transmission

Deeper understanding of content

Appreciation of cultural context and diversity of thought

Membership in cultural communities developing new understandings?

Where is *presence* essential and effective?

John's favourite Psych quote:

Gordon Allport, writing 50+ years ago on what he took William James to have grasped 100+ years ago:

".. .by their own theories of human nature, psychologists have the power of elevating or degrading this same nature. Debasing assumptions debase human beings; generous assumptions exalt them."

Allport, G.W. (1964) The Fruits of Eclecticism – Bitter or Sweet. Acta Psychologica, 23, 27-44. https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-6918(64)90073-3

I think this description of psychologists applies generally to educators. When we describe students as being motivated by assessment, grades, and job prospects, we should not lose sight of the fact that these are not the only things which motivate them, or us.

other tips which some have found useful, some not -

Going into a large class, I remind myself that the rising sympathetic dominance in my autonomic nervous system (e.g. increased HR etc) reflects energy & enthusiasm for the task at hand (as opposed to fear). Think of it as not just a "fight or flight" response, but at least a "fight or flight or persuade" response.

Going into a large class, I remind myself that it is unlikely that I am the smartest person in the room. I probably should be the most knowledgeable and well-prepared person in the room on most of the matters to be discussed, but recognition & respect for how much brilliance resides in the students is helpful to humility and to being able to say "I don't know" in response to a question.

When a class event does not go over as well as hoped, do not be too quick to blame either yourself, or the content, or the students. Having an educational event fly is an emergent process not necessarily reducible to any particular constituent element.

Thanks for your presence this morning!

I hope and trust you'll keep on looking after yours and your students' presence and engagement within the real UQ.

In Summary