

[00:00:03] Bonni: Today on episode number 273 of the Teaching In Higher Ed podcast, I share about engaging learners in large classes.

[00:00:19] Production credit: Produced by Innovate Learning. Maximizing human potential.

[00:00:34] Bonni: Hello and welcome to this episode of Teaching In Higher Ed. I'm Bonni Stachowiak, and this is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to improve our productivity approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

I was recently doing a workshop with our faculty at my institution, and got some push back afterward about whether or not some of the approaches being recommended would actually work in larger classes.

In recent years, I have tended to teach smaller classes, but certainly in my time there in the 15 years have taught classes that were up to 65 people. Some of you are laughing like, "Wait a second, I teach 200." I spit just 60 people [chuckles] and I certainly know that it has to be different from 60 students up to hundreds of students, but I have given workshops at institutions for hundreds of people and also am today going to spotlight some people that do it all the time in their teaching, so I'm excited to share their expertise with you today.

When we talk about class size, it comes up often. What is the relationship between class size and student learning? I think my short answer to that question is, it's complicated. There's a lot of questions to explore, so the answers to what can we discover doesn't matter. Class size, does that affect learning? I would say the answer is yes, no, and sort of. Particularly, if we were just to go down to the most granular level, it's hard to really ascertain what's happening if we see the learning outcomes differing or even the preferences differing based on class size.

One thing that certainly does emerge is that it really can come down to, a lot of times, the larger classes not engaging students as well as the smaller class size. I

think we've all experienced that whether we've sat in lectures ourselves and experienced the boredom that can sometimes ensue or whether we have found ourselves being the people who inflict that same boredom on others. A lack of engagement, a lack of connection. Today is all about how can we make our classes more engaging when they are larger. I've got three experts to share with you.

The first one is Michael Sandel. I have talked about him before on the podcast, but not necessarily in this context. He teaches one of the largest and most popular classes at Harvard University. It's called Justice. He also by the way wrote a book by the same title that is wonderful. The Justice class has become so popular that Harvard now offers it on the edX platform so any of us can take it if we were so inclined. In fact, we could also just watch the videos that I'm mostly referencing today which are viewable on YouTube without needing to enroll in the class.

I assign Michael Sandel's YouTube videos when I teach a business ethics class, which I've shared prior on the podcast. I actually put it inside of the canvas learning management system, there is a video tool which has recently been renamed Studio. I put it on Studio, and actually get to have when Michael Sandel poses a question, he employs the Socratic method quite amazingly on his classes. When he poses a question, I have my students just respond as if they were there in the room with him with all of his hundreds and hundreds of other students.

Here are some of the approaches that I observe that Michael Sandel uses in teaching this Justice classes is, again, an actual on-ground class in Harvard. Hundreds and hundreds of people in a giant lecture hall but when you watch the videos, you feel like you're in the lecture hall and you also feel like it's a much smaller venue than you would normally think just because he is so engaging. Here's some of the things he does. He asks open-ended questions, and he gets us as viewers or he gets his students to first reflect on our own about how we might answer a question. He asks us to reflect.

It's kind of like a version of think-pair-share, but it's more nuanced and more sophisticated than that, but he gets us involved by just asking ourselves the question first before he has anyone share to the broader class. There are microphones throughout his giant lecture hall, and students are invited to come up and share their thoughts on those microphones.

A next item that I notice he does is he invites students to predict what happens next in a story or what might be the result if a specific choice is made. You might remember James Lang talking about this when he came on the podcast to talk about his book, *Small Teaching*. The act of predicting can enhance our learning,

and so Michael Sandel does that a lot. As he's telling his stories, he asks the learners to predict what happens next.

Sandel's slide decks are very simple. He doesn't overwhelm students with a lot of text that would produce too great of a cognitive load where I'm trying to read his text and I'm trying to hear what he's saying, and my brain just wasn't designed. None of our brains were designed to do both of those things at the same time, so he uses minimalistic slide decks.

He starts each class session by asking students to recall what was discussed in the previous session or to bring some of those same questions that he piqued our curiosity about in the last question forward to the present one.

Back to James Lang again, James Lang has some wonderful guides in *The Chronicle*, which I'll link to in the show notes, about those first five minutes of class, but we can do a lot to draw the learning from last time into this time when we employ some of these techniques.

Another thing that Michael Sandel does is he calls students by name even in such a large class. Now, he doesn't know or he does not appear to know every single one of their names, but as they're talking, he asks them for their name as they're introducing their answer to one of his questions that he has posed. Once the person has shared their name, throughout the rest of class session, he regularly refers back to the same person much later in the same class session, so he's clearly paying attention and letting that person know that he cares enough to learn their name and to be able to refer back to their answers, which he shows are valuable to him by going back and emphasizing the student's answer and using their name once again throughout the session.

He is amazing at painting pictures in students' heads through excellent storytelling. In fact, all of the people I'll be sharing about today, the experts, I was going to say such gifted storytellers, but I think we're probably selling ourselves short to think that storytelling is something you either have or you don't. Storytelling is definitely something that we need to grow and--

Storytelling is definitely something that we should all be thinking of with a growth mindset, something that we can get better at. I was just at our children's back-to-school-night with Dave the other night, and one of the things that came up in our son's second grade curriculum is that they're learning how to tell better stories. There's a whole page in the handouts that we received as well as on the wall of the classroom, all these transition phases. Then this happened, and you won't believe what happened next, and then something surprising happened.

I can't remember all of them off the top of my head, but I chuckled a little bit that they're teaching that in second grade but they're also teaching the rest of us in a book about podcasting I've been reading. I've been reading a graphic novel about podcasting. I'll be linking to it in the show notes as well. It has just in the recent pages I was looking at talking about how when we are telling stories, especially in audio format, that it can be helpful to give clues that there's something I want you to listen to next. Things like the same kinds of transitions they recommended to our son.

Then, I was just so surprised by what happened next, and I was so sad by this thing that happened. You're giving these clues that what you're about to say is something someone really should pay attention to is just one of the many storytelling techniques that we can learn. Then the last thing I wanted to share about Michael Sandel is that he explores many different applications of the same concept.

For example, he talks about libertarianism quite a bit in both his book and in the Justice lectures that he gives. He doesn't just stop there and have a lecture about libertarianism and go on and look at another political perspective, instead he looks at libertarianism in historical events, in bioethics in the ways that we compensate people and in human rights among many other topics. He keeps coming back to different philosophers, to different philosophies and ties them into current events and things that really matter to us as people. That's just a little glimpse of the genius that is Michael Sandel and how he so successfully teaches his large classes.

Another master teacher of large classes I want to share with you today is Michael Wesch. He has been on the podcast previously, he's a professor of culture anthropology and university distinguished teaching scholar at Kansas State University. He is a phenomenal storyteller. He has had his videos that have been translated into more than 20 languages and have been viewed by over 20 million people. Mike Wesch has also had his videos featured at conferences and film festivals from around the world.

I've talked about it before on the podcast but if you've not had an opportunity to go visit, one of his large class projects, it's called Anthropology 101 or it's shortened to ANTH101 and I'll have a link to it in the show notes. The courses designed around 10 different challenges that students wrestle with during the class and then they share their learning with a fairly large public that goes well beyond the people who are just formally enrolled in the class. He also engages teaching assistants from all around the world.

They have an opportunity to give them scholarships or some sort of financial compensation for their work as teaching assistants. He had them from places such as Ethiopia, Northern Ireland, Guatemala, Samoa, and Vietnam.

Instead of just focusing on memorization of a set of definitions and in a discipline of anthropology, Mike invites us to, "A new way of seeing the world that can be valuable regardless of your career path." This is from his website, his ANTH101 website.

He challenges us to see how the structure of his course helps us to put on these new lenses and he gives us the simple truth about learning and I'm quoting here again, "You can't just think your way into a new way of living, you have to live your way into a new way of thinking." Here are just some of the things I observe about how Mike Wesch's teaching is effective in engaging these large classes.

He centers the class around 10 big ideas and gets us really curious, gets us thinking about those things and really helps us relate them to our lives and then he links the assignments for the class around those same 10 big ideas, although he never uses the word assignments. He doesn't call them assignments, he calls them challenges and he makes sure that each one of us understand that these things are relevant to us, both now and in the future, and he keeps hooking us time and time and time again, both with wonderful videos he's created as well as with these assignments that really challenge us and get us thinking.

He gives students a chance to share their learning in a radically public way. There are different kinds of students. There are some students who are formally enrolled in the course at his institution but he also opens up the opportunity for people to join in who aren't formally enrolled at all. We can share whatever work we might do in Instagram, on blog post and on Twitter among other areas.

Mike Wesch extends the learning from Anthropology 101 out to other institutions. He even has a free set of resources that he makes available to the faculty who wish to use the materials.

He even offers a free set of resources to faculty who wish to use the Anthropology 101 materials. Then lastly, and I could keep going on and on but I'm cognizant of the length of the episode. [laughs] He's absolutely wonderful.

He uses digital storytelling that is incredibly innovative and he's got an extensive collection of videos which I'll linked to in the show notes and I wanted just to remind us all because sometimes I look at his videos and I'll think, "I could never do something like that," but as we watch them, I want us to not limit ourselves and our mindset, what he's doing is not technically difficult and almost every case that

I can see in terms of the actual video editing, but he seems to be a storyteller who is just an iterative person as in seeing that he's collecting different footage and different ideas and it's always on a creative path to try to tell even more stories in even more unique ways. He thinks very differently about how to keep viewers engaged. I hope you'll go check out his materials.

The last person I'd like to spotlight in this podcast episode about engaging learners in large classes is Dr. Chrissy Spencer. She teaches at Georgia Tech. I went back and looked, she was all the way back on episode 25, but I still think of her so often and so fondly. She was really instrumental in the very early days of the Teaching In Higher Ed podcast.

One of the big takeaways for me from that conversation all the way back on episode 25 is how she invites her students to become part of a chili pepper population in order to learn about evolutionary processes.

One of the things when we talk about class size, remember, the research is pretty mixed as to, does a smaller class size, for example, lead to greater learning? That's not always going to be the case. Sometimes even the preferences might be that students might prefer larger classes versus smaller classes. One of the studies I'm referring to is just sometimes it felt they had to work too hard or it was too intimate to be in those small classes. They just liked the enjoyment factor of larger classes.

Again, for every one of these, I'm citing there's something that says the exact opposite but the theme that comes out is around engagement. Even though Chrissy spends or does teach quite large classes, she really helps students be able to embody the learning and I do mean literally embody the learning as we'll hear about in just a second.

She is a big believer and having students do focused group work and to reinforce their learning through means other than just relying strictly on passive listening to lectures. She has a video which I'll link to also in the show notes where she shares about how she helps students learn about a difficult concept by having the entire class turn into chili peppers to see which one of them winds up perishing and which one of them winds up thriving.

Some of the approaches that I've noticed Chrissy Spencer using in her large classes are, I mentioned earlier about her literally having the class embody the parts of the concepts that she's trying to teach. She'll have everyone stand up or holdup a chili pepper sign and there's different varieties avid and then she'll have these random events happen and see which one of them ends up sitting down or taking their card and putting in their lap. She also uses prediction as a means of deepening learning through a series of interrupted case studies.

I've talked about doing this before with playing a podcast for students and then pausing at partway through. In her case, she's got cases studies that get interrupted partway through so she can make sure that that large number of people has the appropriate time pressure to finish their discussion in an appropriate period of time and keep progressing and she can keep track of where everyone is at.

She talked about a little bit if you just did an uninterrupted case study how people would finish at different times and people may have gotten things wrong and she would have known along the way, so she likes to employ that approach of interrupted case studies.

She is a big believer like so many past guests of offering team based low-stakes assignments to get students to do self-explaining in the classroom, that's an element to enhancing their learning. One of the things that really inspired me about Chrissy's work is that she has introduced service learning as a part of the course assignments and then students can experience what they're learning about in her class has the potential to give back into the local community in some way.

She talked about on that episode, I can still remember it like it was yesterday that she believes and bringing something that she loves, in this case chili peppers into the classroom and just having that passion of hers be able to spread over to the students. Yes, our emotions are contagious as we've talked about on prior episodes.

Then the other thing that we can take away from Chrissy's inspiration is her careful construction of teams in her classes. She uses a tool called a CATME Team-Maker, and what it does is it allows her to set up certain ways in which these teams will be constructed, so considering things like demographics, preferences and even in considering whether or not a student would have transportation to be able to take others over to the service-learning opportunities and make sure that people - no groups just wind up with no one that we would have the ability to carpool over, and we wouldn't have too many people without cars in the same group.

This has been a look at different ways in which three experts have made large classes engaging. I am so thankful to Michael Sandel, Michael Wesch, and Chrissy Spencer for all that you have done for me and my teaching. Also, I mentioned James Lang a number of times in this episode as someone who has provided the research around these approaches in very accessible ways. Recently, James Lang, he knew that we bought his book *Small Teaching* for all of our faculty, and was so kind and gracious to come on a quick Zoom Q&A session with us and share

even more. That was just a delight to get to have him and get to have some of the people from my institution meet him that way.

I have a quick announcement to make on a personal/professional front and then we're going to get to the recommendations segment. I did want to share with you that I have a new role at my institution. I have been promoted to Dean of Teaching and Learning. Many of you know that I've been in faculty of development for a number of years now and have been running our institute for faculty development for a couple of years as well. In this restructure, they're just pretty much turning the entire [laughs] university on its head. A lot of changes on the academic side. We have some new associate deans and then my area groups together a number of related things all around teaching and learning.

I will continue to lead the Institute for Faculty Development and also Educational Technology. We have a new director of teaching excellence and digital pedagogy, David Rhodes who-- it's just a pleasure to have him joining the team. I will also be overseeing the person who leads our library and also our area of student success, the associate dean who leads student success. The writing center, our director of the writing center, the tutoring center, the supplemental instruction.

I feel like I'm missing somethings [laughs] in my head because I am doing this from memory. It feels scary to tell this on the podcast to the sense of, I'm not sure how interesting this will be to people, I'm going to keep it nice and short, but it has been quite a journey, and I'm so grateful for the POD organization which I will link to in the show note as well.

I recently met someone who is a person who just got into faculty of development and so that's just a wonderful organization to get started. I was able to go to their conference, this past year, and I'm so pleased to be speaking with Katie Linder at the upcoming POD conference which will be a great way that-- I don't get to sit quite as much behind the scenes, but I can be behind the scenes the rest of time. I'm excited about my new role, I'm also challenged by it. There is some fear and some excitement and everything in-between and I am grateful though to work with some amazing people and that makes it all a lot better when we are doing this as a team and doing some really amazing things.

Before I get to the recommendation segment, I wanted to thank today's episode's sponsor and that is TextExpander. You've heard me talk about TextExpander previously on the show. I use it every single time I'm on my computer. What happens is I type a series of letters so I just made the show notes for this episode and I typed in TIHE as in Teaching In Higher Ed, SN as in show notes, and as soon

as I hit my space bar, it asks me, "What is the episode number? Who is the guest? What's the podcast category? What's search engine optimization terms you want to include? What's the meta description for the episode? What are the quotes that were quoted in the episode? What are the resources mentioned? What are the recommendations?"

It's all ready for me to fill in now as I am recording the episode, what's been recommended and to take notes and et cetera. It could be something as extensive as what I just mentioned, the set of show notes for an episode. It could be the guts of a reference letter, it could be as something as simple as email addresses. When I type in D@IL, that gives me Dave's email address. When I type in B@IL, that's my Innovate Learning email address as opposed to my institutional one which pops up if I type in B@VU. These are all ways of saving time. I get such a kick out of it because they send an email out that says how much time I have saved and it just brings a smile to my face because I'd rather save that time than spend it with the extra typing, I'd rather spend that time in relationship with others, doing the things that are most important to me.

Sometimes it can seem like things will be too scripted this way. I just sent an email today to David Gooblar to thank him for being on the episode, because as of this recording, his just recently came out and I didn't stop there though. The basic elements of the message were there, the link to the episode he was on, a link to the quote graphics that get produced for each episode so I can ensure that he has all the information he might want to have about the episode, but then I get to take a few minutes and just spend some time for the personal things about what it meant for me to get to talk with him and what an honor that was and that our podcast editor, Anne, said what an amazing episode it was. It isn't like we have to skip out on the personal. This just frees us up to have more time to do that. Then also to not spend as much time composing some of the basics and having to remember, "Now what should I tell him again? What's he going to want to know about?"

That, I just want to thank TextExpander for sponsoring this episode. They're such a wonderful sponsor because we're able to afford some of the things, like transcripts and like the hosting cost for it. In fact, Dave, my husband, just told me the other day, we're about to bump up to a new level of hosting and get to pay even more for hosting which he tells me is a good problem to have, but those expenses add up and we're just very grateful to TextExpander for your support of the show.

This is the time in the show where I get to make some recommendations. I want to recommend the Associate Deans accounts on Twitter. It's a very snarky, [laughs] very sarcastic look at the role of associate dean in an institution. I'll tell

you when I go and read their tweets, it just makes chuckle because sometimes we think it's just us some of the absurd things that will happen and sure enough other people experience, it's just that I find it a nice way to sort of de-stress and not take ourselves too seriously. I'm just going to read one of the ones from August 19th. "You can't find a parking spot because the dean parked in the faculty lot to save her reserved spot for her son. Also, he's in your class this semester."

[00:27:50] Bonni: Just one more from August 17th, two chairs and directors regarding service. "Please let your faculty know that court-ordered community service does not count as service for your annual review." This is a delightful account, it keeps me laughing and I recommend you check out Associate Deans on Twitter.

A second recommendation and these are in no order comes from Mike Caulfield. Mike Caulfield has been on the show and is just such a wonderful resource for us in a lot of areas, but in this case, in terms of information literacy. He has released a self-paced three-hour online course on fact-checking. He calls it *Check, Please! Starter Course*. That "check please" is in reference to the kinds of checks that we should be doing when looking at our sources for news and in fact-checking news sources. It can be dropped into any course or taken as a self-study experience.

It's the same practices that Mike recommends in his open textbook called *Web Literacy for Student Fact-Checkers*. He says, "We have relentlessly shaved the lessons down to what is absolutely needed." He goes on to explain that the fact-checkers book was good but that sometimes it was a little bit too long for what people needed for their classes. He's given us these modules and we can assign them to our students and it could be at the beginning of a semester and then later in that same semester, we could follow it up with more fact-checking specific to the discipline in which we're teaching for a given course.

He also has teachers notes available that he recommends that we look at and take that into consideration as we plan on how to use this as a resource. Thanks to Mike Caulfield for this amazing resource.

My last recommendation is from The Sweet Setup. It's a technology and I don't even know what-- Andrew, what on earth is The Sweet Setup?

[00:30:20] Bonni: My last recommendation comes from thesweetsetup.com which as a side note, is a great website for everything around applications, productivity, writing, photography, reading, home life, and social networks, just to name a few. Specifically, what I'm going to recommend is their Sketchnoting guide.

You heard me talk about Sketchnoting before on the podcast. This article, they title it, "A Guide to Sketchnoting on iPad (using GoodNotes)," but a lot of what they recommend would apply regardless of which tablet it is that you're using and regardless of which app that you're using.

I like how they emphasize, let's not worry about whether we're artists or not. Let's not say that we can't keep up well, the presenter's going, they have specific techniques that would apply, again, regardless of device or regardless of app, although they do talk about GoodNotes as one that they recommend and it's just a wonderful post. It's got the tools, it's got some of the ways in which we hold ourselves back from being able to be better. Sketchnoters and then some tips to help get us started.

Thanks to all of you for listening to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed number 273. If you like to visit the show notes for the episode, you can go to teachinginhighered.com/273 or if you'd like to not have to remember to go grab them, you can always subscribe to the weekly update at teachinginhighered.com/subscribe. Someone recently emailed me and asked, "How do I find show notes for older episodes?" All of the show notes are available at teachinginhighered.com. Just click on the podcast and every episode has the extensive set of show notes for that episode, and as of today, all of the transcripts as well for all the back catalog of episodes. That's an exciting thing.

Sometimes it takes us about seven days to get the most recent episode out and sometimes we are managed to keep up. Check those out and we'll see you next time on Teaching In Higher Ed.

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