

Class Sizes and What We Should Be Aiming For.

1.)

From one extreme to another there is an obvious discretion between small and large class sizes as Bloom demonstrates with his research on the discrepancies between *Conventional Learning, Mastery Learning and Tutoring*. ([Bloom, Benjamin S. "The 2 Sigma Problem: The search for methods of group instruction as effective as one-on-one tutoring." 1984.](#)) There is however, an abundance of evidence to show that in between these two extremes lays a lack of conclusive 'one-size-fits-all' evidence and moreover, credible solutions to remedy this ever-increasing problem.

When addressing the issue of tension between class size and money, it would seem that there are valid points on either side, but in further examination there are far too many factors that influence the finding of a single solution. Bill Gates recently attacked the US Government for how they are funding and spending money on Education. Gates offered advice on how to better utilize resources and potential solutions for making better use of the funding. In an open letter to Gates, Anthony Cody, an 18-year veteran teacher in inner city schools, piece by piece invalidates Gates' ideas and perceptions of changes needed in the education system. ([Cody, A. "Why Bill Gates is wrong about class sizes." 2011.](#)) This is one example of the seesaw battle going on with class size and money. The current evidence seems to be inconclusive or simply create more confusion and raise more questions about class sizes and how money should be spent. As seen on Ali Veshli's CNN broadcast for "[Does Class Size Matter](#)" we can see that due to the evidence examined, there are no real decisive empirical findings that lead us to believe either argument. Either side depending on their interests are able to twist the evidence to their advantage.

This evidence has rarely taken into account the experiences and opinions of the people in the trenches, our teachers. The teachers who deal with smaller budgets, lower wages, more students, and higher demands are being placed on them on a daily basis. When a trillion dollars is spent on the war in Iraq and the US military budget is 650 billion per annum, and more than the combined budgets of China, France, Britain, Russia, Germany, Japan, Canada, Saudi Arabia, Italy, Brazil, Japan, Australia and South Korea there is room to allocate more money to education. ([The Economist](#)) Even if it were cut in half as the Economist suggests the world would still be safe and a considerable amount of money could be added to the continually shrinking education budget. The areas where the evidence is conclusive, is that the lower grades and lower socio-economic urban areas, benefit from smaller class sizes and more one-on-one attention. ([Blatchford, Peter. "Do low attaining and younger students benefit most from small class size effects on pupil classroom engagement and teacher interaction." 2008.](#)) Studies show that smaller class sizes promote better engagement for disadvantaged students, which leads to better results and a brighter future. ([Babcock, P. and Betts, J. "Reduced-class Distinctions: Effort, Ability and the Education Production Function." 2009.](#))

Evidence on either side clearly shows one common factor, there needs to be much more research done!

2.)

The idea of class size is a subject under much debate. After looking at a variety of information out there, there are no real conclusive findings about a specific “magic” number. What one can determine from the information is that there is a range of variables that need to be taken into consideration and by doing this, can we only begin to search for the solution. The problem with having so many variables is that there is an equal amount of differing problems that arise from focusing on only some. The only real conclusion that seems to have been determined and agreed upon is that there is a direct correlation between smaller class sizes for lower grades and lower socio-economic regions such as urban settings. ([Dee, Thomas and Martin West. “The non-cognitive returns to class size.” 2008.](#)) According to Bloom benefits of Mastery learning (ML) are most effective in the earlier stages of learning a subject. ([Bloom, Benjamin S. “The 2 Sigma Problem: The search for methods of group instruction as effective as one-on-one tutoring.” 1984.](#)) From this one could conclude that more attention should be paid to the younger learners to help them build those foundational skills that they will then build off of in the courses that follow. This is however looking for solutions in a narrow margin and thinking within the confines of a system that needs to be updated and revamped.

Due to this narrow-minded thinking, there needs to be a paradigm shift. As Susan Traiman, director of Public Policy at the Business Roundtable says about the low NAEP scores that they are, “unacceptable and really reinforce the fact that high-school reform is long overdue.”([Split. F, “America’s Failing Education System: It Can Still Be Fixed.” 2009.](#)) All this focus on specific class size number needs to be put on the back burner for now. The focus should be on addressing the structure of a failing school system. Why do we force different learners to travel at the same speed? The same age does not necessarily mean the same maturity and ability levels in the classroom. When forcing the proverbial square peg into the circle hole there is undoubtedly going to be resistance and problems just as there is no doubt that excessive class sizes mean less one-on-one time with students. Less one-on-one time with students means that there is less opportunity for a teacher to determine the level of understanding a student has with the curriculum and subject matter. It is vital for educators to have this time to determine how best to address the multiple intelligences that fall within the confines of the classroom setting. ([Gardner, H. “Howard Gardner, Multiple Intelligences and Education.” 2008.](#)) I would like to indicate that teachers will have a better chance of helping and positively impacting lower level learners if the class sizes are smaller. ([Blatchford, Peter. “Do low attaining and younger students benefit most from small class size effects on pupil classroom engagement and teacher interaction.” 2008.](#)) That being said, it would also indicate that these “lower level learners” are in a system that pigeon holes them to an age group regardless of their maturity and readiness to learn concepts. Therefore they are labeled “lower-ability”.

If there was a way to determine students abilities, educational maturity/level, interests and undoubtedly more, that is where, as I see it, results would come. Then and only then would class sizes fall into place and perhaps this debate would subside and funding would be properly distributed and allocated to the places that it is required.

3.)

As previously mentioned, the importance of class size is a secondary issue to the greater problem of an outdated education system needing to be overhauled. As this is something that is unlikely to occur in the near future, and funding is very likely to decrease, solutions need to be found sooner rather than later. Is technology the answer? According to Gardner, technology is the tool and it is up to the teachers to decide if and how it can be utilized to make a difference. ([Gardner, Howard. "Technology and Multiple Intelligences." 2008.](#)) In saying this I believe that technology could be a possible solution for cost vs. class size, however I would like to indicate that the cost difference for one or the other may not be that much depending on how the Government determines the importance of aid and how much to give. Education needs to be a priority and if there is an initial injection to Education and properly managed, then technology could be utilized to soften the blow of larger class sizes. It is all within the delivery of the strategies.

March 2nd 2011, Apple released its iPad 2. In his [keynote](#), Steve Jobs portrayed the iPad 2 as the next advancement in Educational technology, almost a necessity as it were. The interesting thing about this, along with many other new technologies that are flooding the free market is that in some way shape or form, many of them can have practical and applicable uses in the class and students' lives. Bill Gates has approached the US Government to work with and tackle issues about education. Overall the evidence would indicate that big business no matter what the reason is, has identified that there is a problem and through their means is looking for solutions. Obviously there is profit to be made here, but more importantly is this is an opportunity for educators to put in their voices as to what is essential and possibly guide these companies in helping cater new technologies to help and personalize each students educational journey. It is clear that students and people in general when they feel that they have a stake in something are more committed to it and as a result efforts are increased and success is more likely to be found.

I believe that technology can and does alter the learning experience of students and as educators it should be our goal to work with technology to help on so many levels change and redesign our educational system. In their day-to-day lives students are using technology, why not incorporate it into how they are learning. Teachers should step back and look at their curriculum and what students are using most and find ways to use these things to compliment what they are teaching. The idea is not using tech for the sake of getting the students' attention, but rather to relate to them and the world they are growing-up in. Technology can act as a tool to reinforce learning, especially as budgets are decreased and class sizes are increased.