Reducing disruptive noise in lecture halls by connecting with our students

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Abstract

This author argues that, when lecturers establish a safe environment that supports students' sense of belonging and fosters empathy, disruptive noise in lectures is likely to be reduced. Such a connection may be achieved by considering students' needs and by embedding socio-emotional learning (SEL) into lecture delivery.

Introduction

This opinion piece addresses the problem of disruptive noise during lectures by using educational pedagogy, with reference to Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs' and socio-emotional learning (SEL). It argues that creating a predictable, safe, and empathic environment, in which students are encouraged to express themselves and engage actively, can play a key role in supporting positive behaviours and reducing disruptive noise.

The problem

The World Health Organisation guidelines for community noise (WHO, 1999), defined noise as unwanted sound. Unwanted sounds during lectures, including sounds caused by students talking amongst themselves or sounds related to the use of mobile devices can therefore be classified as noise. Unwanted, unsolicited noise during a lecture is disruptive and may prevent other students from gaining knowledge (Douglas *et al.*, 2016). Students providing feedback on their experience often mention noise as a problem. To create noise that hinders others' learning contravenes Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), that prescribes, among other things, the right to education. The quality of the university's teaching also suffers (Douglas *et al.*, 2016).

In addition, exposure to noise may afflict the health and wellbeing of lecturers, for a noisy environment may lead to voice stress, increased heart rate and high blood pressure, some or all of which may disturb sleep, disrupt mental equilibrium and even, in the worst cases, lead to premature death (World Health Organisation, 2018). There is a legal obligation, under Section 10 of the Control of Noise at Work Regulations (2005), for employers to protect their employees from noise pollution. If a university fails to counter lecture noise promptly, it is likely to continue

throughout whole programmes, to the detriment of everyone involved in them. Just how can lecturers minimise noise during their teaching, especially in large lecture halls?

What students need: Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs'

Noise problems in lectures may be caused by factors other than students talking to each other or using mobile devices – for example, poor room acoustics (Institute of Noise Control, 2020; D'Orazio *et al.*, 2020). This paper explores possible explanations for noise and offers solutions related both to students' underlying needs and motivations, and to pedagogical approaches.

Maslow, in his 'Hierarchy of Needs' (1943), proposed that human behaviour can be understood in relation to the drive to address a hierarchy of physiological and psychological needs. The lowest level of the hierarchy – and therefore the most fundamental needs – are physiological, relating to the need to eat and sleep. This is the foundation on which other levels are built (Benti and Stadtmann, 2021). The need for safety is the second level. According to Wiley (2020), safety involves "*order, predictability, and structure*" and applies equally to the home, schools, and business environments. It is argued that in the HE context, it is important for students to have a sense of order and structure, including a good understanding of how they are expected to behave in a lecture setting. When these expectations are clear, students are more likely to act respectfully, listen and engage in class. It is therefore argued that establishing ground rules for conduct at an early stage in the programme or module may encourage positive behaviours and reduce noise making (Franklin and Harrington, 2019). The next level of the hierarchy focuses on the need for love and belonging. In the lecture setting, opportunities for students to interact with peers and feel part of a group nurture a sense of belonging, as does the perception that lecturers care for them (Meyers, 2009). Web-based audience response systems such as Mentimeter can help lecturers to create "*a dialogic approach and make sure that teaching isn't a one-way conversation*" (Mentimeter, 2020), thereby enhancing a sense of belonging, promoting active engagement, and making a reduction in the amount of disruptive noise more likely.

How to connect with students: incorporating socio-emotional learning (SEL)

SEL is an educational approach that seeks to support learners' "*self-awareness; self-management; social awareness; relationship skills; and responsible decision-making*" (Li *et al.*, 2023, p.78). The Times Higher Education (2023) promotes the integration of these social and emotional competencies into higher education programmes because research on outcomes where SEL has been used in schools has identified such benefits as enhanced mental health and wellbeing (Clarke *et al.*, 2021), improved academic performance (Allen *et al.*, 2020; Roisin *et al.*, 2018; Taylor *et al.*, 2017) and improved behaviour (Li *et al.*, 2021). In addition, research on SEL has provided examples of how educators can create and sustain connections with their students (Balli, 2009; Cervone and Cushman, 2015; Hennessey and Humphrey, 2020; Allen *et al.*, 2020; Clarke *et al.*, 2021; Merav *et al.*, 2023), the success of which rapport may generate more positive behaviour and engagement, while reducing problem behaviours such as disruptive noise.

Connecting with students is based on modelling and supporting the development of empathy. Lecturers can demonstrate empathy by remaining calm and using a normal voice tone when the noise levels increase in class, thereby modelling positive language and behaviour when teaching. Lecturers can teach students how to show consideration for others, by asking students to "*think about their behaviors and think about how their behaviors shape or affect others*" (Dyson *et al*., 2021, p.630). In turn, this can result in a reduction of disruptive noise in class. In addition, actively listening to students, encouraging their participation and respecting their opinions can support the connection between lecturers and students, with the effect of drawing "*students in, encircling them within the unbroken classroom community*" (Rands and Gansemer-Topf, 2017, p.14). According to Pattison' *et al*. (2011), good listening, used and modelled by lecturers, also involves such behaviours as treating students as individuals, calling students by their names, and being encouraging and fair.

Factors relating to the setting of the lecture may affect this process but may be out of the individual lecturer's control. For example, the location and physical arrangement of the classroom can influence students' sense of lecturers' connection with them (Cervone and Cushman, 2015; Rands and Gansemer, 2017). Imms and Byers (2017) found that lecture halls with flexible seating spaces (unlike fixed seating) make it easier for lecturers to move around and interact with students.

If SEL is to be successfully incorporated into teaching and learning, educational institutions must be ready to help and support the training of all lecturers on how to achieve this and to consider tutor-peer and peer-peer interactions when planning teaching space (Yang *et al*., 2019). Furthermore, lecturers should be supported to monitor their SEL competencies, by using self-reporting questionnaires such as those advanced by Merav *et al*. (2023). Further research and evaluation would ensure that the student perspective is accurately understood – it would be valuable to gain students' views on how best to connect with their lecturers and how to promote positive behaviours, as well as to gauge how they feel about the SEL-based interventions that they have experienced.

Concluding remarks

The reality is that students' behaviour is most likely to improve in environments where they feel valued and safe to express themselves. When students are unsure how to participate in the session and uncertain about their role in the lecture theatre or when they feel disconnected from their lecturers, a probable consequence is disruptive noise, with inevitably deleterious effects on peers and teaching staff. There is undoubtedly a compelling case for incorporating the modelling and discussion of empathy in the lecture theatre, drawing on SEL.

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