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Class Size
Where is the Research?

Michael Simonson

myth is a legend or story that attempts to account for something in nature. Often myths are invented by someone or some group to explain a situation or phenomena, or to create something supernatural. Myths conjure up names like Hercules, Orpheus, and Ulysses, or in more recent times, Superman, Captain Marvel, or Wonder Woman.

Distance education is not without its myths. Two come to mind quickly. The first is called the "more work" myth, and it goes something like this: "Teaching at a distance takes more work." The proof of this myth is often stated thusly: "Why, I had 200 emails last week alone."

The second myth deals with class size and is even more interesting because it is proposed differently by different people, almost always depending on their job. The first interpretation of the class size myth is that *smaller is better*—10, 12, or 15 students are the maximum size for a distance education class. Most often, the same group that says teaching at a distance is more work are the advocates for smaller class sizes.

A second group makes the claim that, because distance education courses do not require a classroom, one course can have dozens—even hundreds—of students enrolled. It really makes no difference how many, if the course is organized correctly. This group is almost always made up of administrators or those who are not teachers. And, there is even a major disciple of this approach. Otto Peters and his theory of industrialization have demonstrated the economies of mega-sized educational organizations called Open Universities. Interestingly, when Peters' principles have been tried in the United States, they have been much less successful than in Europe.

If distance education is to be credible and adopted widely, then definitive statements about instructor effort and class size must be developed. And, the only truly definitive statements about issues such as these, statements that will stand close inspection, are those based on research. The questions are many; unfortunately, the mythical answers are many also.

Questions such as these require clear, definitive answers. Is distance teaching really more work? Must classes be small to be interactive? And, if they are small, is it possible to have learners work in teams? Should classes be large so teaming is easier, and so the economies of scale come into play?

And finally, traditional education has answered questions about class size and work load, if not by research, at least by common practice. Any professor or teacher can tell you how many students should be in a class, and they know within limits what constitutes a fair work load. Where are the distance education researchers to help us develop our own answers?

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