Classroom karaoke

A social and academic transition strategy to enhance the first-year experience of youth studies students

An innovative icebreaker initiative – ‘classroom karaoke’ – was deployed at the beginning of a first-year undergraduate course in youth studies at an Australian university. The study used karaoke as a social and academic transition strategy to enhance students’ first-year experience at university. Students responded positively to this lecture-based social integration tool and reported that it made the learning environment less threatening, reduced anxiety and encouraged student interaction.

by Sarah Baker

Increasingly Australian universities are investigating ways to improve students’ experiences of their first year at university. A positive ‘first-year experience’ (FYE) is now viewed as central to student retention, with universities seeking to enhance students’ academic transition to university by focusing on extracurricular issues such as first-year students’ social transition and the effectiveness of university student support services. The brief of both academic and administrative staff is to find new ways to enable students to “gain meaningful membership of the academic and social worlds of the university” as it is believed that “successful integration in both of these spheres reduces the likelihood of student withdrawal” (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld 2005, p.708).

Operating within a mass education environment – a model marked by poor student retention – lecturers are encouraged to adopt innovative learning and teaching methods that will support academic and social transition in the students’ first year. This article reports on one such initiative – the implementation of karaoke, a form of popular music-making, as an icebreaker in the first lecture of an undergraduate youth studies course. Karaoke was used as a way to illustrate the key themes covered by the course (a factor of academic transition) and as an icebreaker that would help foster the development of student–student and student–teacher relationships (a factor of social transition). Drawing on students’ comments about classroom
Youth and Society was redeveloped by Sarah Baker and Sue Lovell in 2008 as part of a Griffith University Blended Learning fellowship in which “improving student engagement and retention” was one of the strategic objectives. Under the mass education model, where student retention rates are of particular concern, adopting blended learning strategies in first-year courses is one way for “educators to capture student interest in the first formative weeks of a course” (Lovell & Baker 2009, p.53).

In redeveloping ‘Youth and Society’, the convenors made the course content directly relevant to the first-year, first-semester cohort, by having an “overarching theme of youth transitions, with a particular focus on the transition to university as an element in youth identity” (Lovell & Baker 2009, p.53). The blended-learning component was the introduction of digital narratives as an assessment item, and, in 2010, karaoke was deployed as an icebreaker to assist in the creation of the digital narratives.

Digital narratives are “personal stories produced using any combination of video,
images, animation, text and audio” and were seen as “an innovative and reflexive tool to assist students in developing a deeper understanding of the process of youth transition” (Lovell & Baker 2009, p.52). In the first eight weeks of semester, students form small groups in which they share their transition experiences and then devise how to represent these experiences in digital narrative form. The course is therefore explicitly designed with the FYE in mind, with the assessment tasks supporting both the academic and social transition of students.

Students begin forming small groups during the first two tutorials. Because of the personal nature of the digital narrative assignment, students need to develop workable relationships with each other very quickly. The building of openness and trust in the cohort is essential to the task, as transition stories are always very personal and sometimes also painful to share. Icebreakers are therefore critical in the early weeks of the course because of the nature of the relationships that will be formed. Students need to leave the first two-hour tutorial knowing not only fellow students’ names, but also details about their lives that might give them an indication that their transition stories mesh or that they will be able to work together effectively. In the second week, the icebreaker exercises continue, but are now content-based with students identifying in small groups, the “critical moments” (Henderson et al. 2007, pp.20-23) that have impacted on their transition to university. By the end of the second tutorial, the students will have formed their digital narrative groups. Because of the intensity of relationship-building in these initial tutorials an icebreaker was introduced in the opening lecture of the 2010 offering of the course. The intention was to scaffold social integration by giving students an “opener” – something that would act as an icebreaker for students before they even attended the first tutorial; something they would want to talk to other students about.

**Karaoke as an icebreaker activity**

Kavanagh, Clark-Murphy and Wood (2011, p.84) define icebreakers as activities “designed to establish common ground in the first class, get students to introduce themselves to others and talk to others in a semi-structured “fun” environment”. They argue that icebreakers “may result in turning points, which can shape or alter the way in which students make meaningful connections with university life” (p.90). There is very little to be found in the literature on the place of icebreakers in large lecture theatres; however, the intent of such an activity is not altered by class size – its purpose is to create student interest in the course and foster a sense of belonging among the cohort. Karaoke was chosen as the lecture icebreaker because it is a familiar aspect of popular culture, it can be experienced within “a comic or ironic frame” (Drew 2005, p.381), and it “seems to demand participation” (Drew 2001, p.27). Karaoke also has transformative potential. As Drew argues, though karaoke is often trivialised, when people sing karaoke, we can observe how “selves are taking shape, lives are interconnecting” (2001, p.119).

The development of karaoke as an icebreaker was informed by literature on the use of popular music as a pedagogical tool in the sociology classroom. Elterman (1983) identifies three principal objectives in using popular music to teach sociology. First, song lyrics can be used as examples of sociological perspectives, concepts and topics. Second, popular music can be used to “arouse students’ interest in the material” (Elterman 1983, p.529). Finally, popular music can be used to demonstrate how a mass-media text can enhance disciplinary understanding. Ahlkvist (1999, pp.127-28) notes that when sociology instructors have adopted popular music in their courses they generally follow Elterman’s approach, particularly in regard to the use of lyrics to “foster informal discussion and underscore the relevance of sociological insights”. Martinez (1994, p.264), for example, describes how lyrics were used in her course to “foster class discussion, to create a unique environment for learning, and to make students question assumptions about themselves and others”. In these ways, popular music can be a tool for scaffolding academic transition.

Additionally, Albers and Bach (2003) point...
to popular music’s potential to enhance social support mechanisms. Popular music can be used to make the teaching environment appear less formal and so make students feel more relaxed, with a flow-on effect of humanising the teaching team and making them appear more approachable. Albers and Bach use popular music in the classroom to create a relaxed, humanised, participatory environment while simultaneously linking sociological knowledge with popular music as a way to “provide a common reference point for students in their discussions” (2003, p.242).

Less has been written about the potential of karaoke for transforming the university classroom. However, karaoke has been used in school classrooms in a variety of ways. Wagner and Brick (1993, p.45), for example, suggest that karaoke can enhance music education in public schools because, unlike traditional music education songbooks, karaoke videos are “visually appealing”, the songs are “contemporary” and some are even “musically exciting”. Karaoke is also seen as beneficial in assisting children’s reading behaviours in primary school. Gupta (2006, pp.80-81) describes how karaoke aids young readers’ “fluency and motivation”, with the “joint delivery of music and text provid[ing] an exciting, immersive experience for the child”. Finally, Dickson and Grant (2003) describe the use of ‘physics karaoke’ in science roadshows for school students whereby lyrics to popular songs are re-written to cover an area of physics taught in the curriculum, thus providing a “significant support for learning” in a way that will “engage, entertain and inform” (Dickson & Grant 2003, pp.322-23). Karaoke has similarly been used as a study tool in college-level biochemistry classes (McLachlin 2009). As with other forms of popular music, karaoke has the potential to “humanize, personalize, and energize” the classroom and learning experience, “tap into students’ interests, and elicit positive feelings and associations”, and also engage students “in active knowledge construction” (Dunlap & Lowenthal 2010, p.59).

The karaoke icebreaker was introduced in the last 10 minutes of the 50-minute lecture. When the activity was announced, a previously silent lecture theatre erupted in chatter and nervous laughter as students asked their neighbour, “Did I hear that right? Did she say karaoke?!” As the initial exclamations died down, the author/lecturer announced to the class that, given karaoke can be embarrassing, the lecture theatre lights would be dimmed and students need only sing if they felt comfortable doing so. If students decided not to sing they were asked to listen and follow the lyrics on screen. A karaoke version (instrumental, no vocals) of Wheatus’s song ‘Teenage Dirtbag’ had been sourced from YouTube for display on the screen at the front of the lecture theatre. The lyrics scrolled across a black background, illuminating each word as it was time to sing. Over 150 students were in attendance, and by the first chorus, the majority of voices, including the three-member teaching team, were joined in song.

‘Teenage Dirtbag’ is about a young man’s experience of alienation at high school and his desire to belong, as expressed through his longing for a girl named Noelle. This song was chosen because the story told in the lyrics mapped on to various themes covered in the course, including belonging, intimacy, education, mobility and violence, thus acting as a pedagogical tool to support academic transition. When the song concluded, the author/lecturer illustrated the various intersections between course themes and song lyrics by way of a colour-coded overhead. Students later reported that the song “gave an insight into what the course was basically about; taking a common aspect/element of youth (in this case the song ‘Teenage Dirtbag’) and using it to break down and explain the key concepts of what ‘makes up’ a youth” (Respondent 18). Beyond its role as an icebreaker, the song, as a form of popular culture, became a useful mechanism for students’ initial understandings of the theoretical and conceptual issues they would encounter as the course progressed. Acting as a “common reference point” (Albers & Bach 2003, p.242), the song transformed into, what one student described as, “a story of youth transition [that] dealt with issues that
all of us as youths were also facing both in society, and actively as individuals” (Yasmin, reflexive journal).

**Methods**

In order to assess the impact of classroom karaoke, questions were added to the teaching evaluation students are invited to complete at the end of semester. Evaluation responses are anonymous. Students were asked to respond, using a Likert scale (from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”), to statements such as “Classroom karaoke helped me feel more comfortable in the learning environment” and “Classroom karaoke made my peers seem more approachable”. The statistical information gathered from these questions was further supported by a final question inviting students to write an extended response about how classroom karaoke impacted their first week of university. Of the 82 students who completed the evaluation, 63 answered the questions about classroom karaoke.

Additional data is drawn from the reflexive journals that students completed as part of the course assessment in the first eight weeks of the semester. In the journals, students were required to write a short weekly entry connecting the lecture topic and associated reading material to their own experiences of transition and the creation of the digital narrative. They were not asked to comment on their experience of classroom karaoke in the reflexive journal. Indeed the purpose of the entries was the demonstration of critical thinking around course content rather than class exercises. However, of the 186 enrolled students, 14 included some mention of the karaoke icebreaker in their first journal entry. These students were then invited to submit their journal to be included in the research and were provided with ethics information sheets and consent forms. The small number of references to karaoke in the journals might be suggestive of the icebreaker’s low impact, but such a critique is dampened by the robust response in the teaching evaluations. The limited acknowledgment of classroom karaoke in the journals is likely a result of a discussion of the icebreaker not being “on task” for meeting the assessment criteria.

A respondent number was used to identify responses by the 63 students to the open question and the comments made in the 14 reflexive journal entries were identified using a pseudonym.

**Karaoke, first-year anxiety and the new classroom dynamic**

Students generally feel considerable anxiety in their first weeks of university (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld 2005) and this was a prominent theme in the reflexive journal entries:

... no matter how many times you think about how the first week is going to be at uni, you can’t really prepare yourself. Sure you can attend the orientations ... but once you’re actually thrown into the mix of thousands of other students, it can be quite daunting. (Leena, reflexive journal)

These feelings of uncertainty are exacerbated when students enter a large lecture theatre filled with strangers:

... when I arrived to my first lecture, Youth and Society, I entered a room filled with people and no friends. I slowly walked in with my head down concerned with what it was going to be like, wondering what I was doing here. (Anne, reflexive journal)

In the first lecture it is therefore important to create a learning environment in which students feel at ease. This was one of the objectives of the icebreaker, and in the evaluations 51 students (62%) agreed karaoke made them feel more comfortable in the learning environment (11% disagreed). One student explained:

... because of the overwhelming feeling uni had for me in the first few weeks it was good to do karaoke because it made things not feel so tense and serious. (Respondent 3)

Another wrote that, after the activity, “I felt less intimidated about my first week of university” (Respondent 25). In sum, there was a general feeling that classroom karaoke “made everyone settle in a lot easier”
“made students feel much more comfortable” (Respondent 46).

The unknown of what university learning entails can be frightening for students, especially when facing it alone. Students reported that karaoke helped lessen this fear: I think it made the lecture room seem like a more fun place rather than a scary place (Respondent 40). The unfamiliar space of the lecture theatre was transformed through song – the university experience was suddenly manageable:

Classroom karaoke was something really new and exciting. I’d never experienced something like this before. Youth and Society was my first-ever lecture at university, and I suppose I was quite unsure about what it would entail … having never experienced an actual university lecture, I would be lying if I said I wasn’t nervous. When we started doing karaoke though, I just felt myself relax completely – I felt at home. It was the best way possible to begin my university experience, and demonstrated that the transition to university doesn’t have to be this big leap into the unknown. (Respondent 2)

Relocating karaoke to the lecture theatre disrupted “the normal patterns of expectations regarding what goes on in the classroom environment” (Albers & Bach 2003, p.239). Fiona described the activity as “causing people to hop out of their comfort zones” (reflexive journal) – something that would normally have negative connotations. To step outside of a comfort zone is challenging and creates discomfort, yet, if this occurs in a supportive environment, anxiety is minimised. Fiona went on to write, karaoke enabled students to “enjoy themselves … and really left an impression on me and the other people I was sitting next to” (reflexive journal).

Albers and Bach promote the use of popular music in university classrooms as a tool that can “help restructure students’ expectations of the classroom dynamic” (2003, p.238). Karaoke seemed to do this for a number of the students. The responses above were echoed in other evaluations, including by students who had attended lectures in other courses:

It was completely random, which was a good thing. No-one expected it, it made my friends and I more comfortable in the classroom, more than we have felt in other lectures. (Respondent 22)

Students reported that this made karaoke a “great way to start the course” (Respondent 53). The classroom karaoke activity presented students with a “new classroom script”, a script which Albers and Bach describe as “emergent” – “where students formulate their own roles in a manner unencumbered by the formality they may have expected” (2003, p.239):

I thought it was funny because as most of us were in our first week of uni altogether, no-one knew whether this kind of teaching was standard or not, so everyone just kind of went along with it. Nothing like this really happened in any other class. I thought it was a good icebreaker … (Respondent 14)

Another student described how karaoke transformed her understanding of the lecture experience, with the karaoke activity being “a welcome change from some of the dry, boring lectures I had encountered on my first day” (Emma, reflexive journal).

In her comment about “dry” lectures Emma is likely referring to a traditional style of passive content delivery that does not include pedagogical practices designed to enhance first-year engagement. As opposed to these more traditional, “dry” learning experiences, classroom karaoke signalled to the students that Youth and Society would be dynamic, challenging and participatory. One student wrote karaoke “made me feel reassured in taking this course because it was turning out like I’d hoped, an enjoyable, interactive class” (Respondent 44). Having rendered the learning setting more informal than might normally be expected, students were “more inclined to interact with one another” (Albers & Bach 2003, p.239), and thus the groundwork for social integration was laid down.
Karaoke as a social integration strategy

The promotion of interaction between students as a means to assist their social transition to university was the principal objective of classroom karaoke. The larger class sizes that accompanied the shift to mass education have had the effect of diminishing the sense of connection between students and between students and teachers. In large cohort courses, the lecture experience can be particularly isolating, and there is a danger that this experience will be “translated to the broader university context” (Kantanis 2000, p.103). Reducing students’ sense of isolation is a crucial aspect of FYE initiatives. Student evaluations indicated that 40 students (48.8%) agreed that classroom karaoke made peers more approachable (13.5% disagreed). In their written responses, students described the social impact of classroom karaoke:

“It really helps to let down those barriers. Everything is so new, no-one knows anyone and it is always easier to feel uncomfortable and laugh about it than to sit in silence and wonder what other people are thinking. It was a good relaxer, and karaoke was a fun, easy way to do this instead of straight out talking to someone you don’t know.” (Respondent 10)

This is a sentiment confirmed by others, with students explaining that karaoke became “a topic of conversation” (Respondent 15) and “was something to laugh about … which made something to talk about with other people” (Respondent 4).

Student responses confirm Fornas’s (1994, p.90) suggestion that karaoke has the potential to open up spaces in a way that can promote “a special form of interaction”. Drew argues that collective karaoke performances “allow audiences to see shared dimensions of their assorted lives” (2001, p.57). As such, karaoke can induce a sense of belonging:

“I thought it was fun to participate in an activity in the lecture, and found that it gave me some sense of belonging amongst the new strangers I was studying with.” (Respondent 59)

In an environment in which “everyone is still nervous and shy around each other” (Respondent 17), karaoke reminds students they are not alone, that they are “members of a common culture” (Drew 2001, p.56). Although “it was very unexpected … and a little scary” (Respondent 37), students reported that karaoke “made you feel a bit more comfortable and confident to ask questions and to mingle with fellow classmates” (Respondent 37). To what extent this “mingling” led to actual friendship among the student cohort is unknown, but at least one student reported classroom karaoke sparked the development of a new social network:

“It was good because it made me feel comfortable in the surrounds; it was interesting because it made you talk to the person next to you, which I ended up developing a friendship with.” (Respondent 45)

Of course, classroom karaoke is not without its problems – a small number of students reported that the exercise made them “feel uncomfortable” (Respondent 52), that it was “embarrassing” (Respondent 33) or “bitterly painful” (Respondent 41) – but as Martinez (1994, p.264) found when using popular music as a pedagogical tool in her sociology classroom “the benefits and pluses outweigh the few poor evaluations and drawbacks”. And as one student wrote of classroom karaoke, “just because it didn’t work for me, I wouldn’t say it is a bad idea or it should be cut” (Respondent 19). Martinez argues that when popular music is played in the classroom it “can clarify concepts, inspire discussions, motivate the sharing of life experiences, and generate broader understanding” (1994, p.264). This appears to be further strengthened when students actively participate in popular-music making.

Conclusion

With the implementation of the current higher education reform agenda, which seeks to further extend participation and increase social inclusion, it is essential that academics continue to develop strategies that will assist young people in their social and academic
transition into higher education. Classroom karaoke is an innovative icebreaker that can be used in a mass lecture environment as a preliminary means of fostering the building of new social support networks for students starting their first year of university. The initial findings outlined in this article illustrate that, as a conversation starter, classroom karaoke has the potential to enhance the tutorial-based get-to-know-you exercises that are integral to the first two weeks of ‘Youth and Society’. Karaoke in the lecture lays the groundwork for student interaction in the small-group setting. Student feedback suggests that, when deployed in the first lecture, this icebreaker can support first-year students’ academic and social integration.

Classroom karaoke altered students’ perceptions of the learning environment. The activity rendered the lecture theatre a more informal space, leading a number of students to report feeling relaxed and therefore open to participation. Students also reported that participating in the icebreaker reduced their levels of anxiety about university life and made them look forward to the semester ahead. Moreover, the song lyrics helped students identify the themes that underpin course content in a way that they could relate to their own life experience. In these ways, classroom karaoke, when used in the first lecture, scaffolds both the academic integration and social integration of first-year students.

Icebreakers have an important role to play in enhancing the FYE. Research on classroom engagement exercises indicates that students report icebreakers to be the most enjoyable activities undertaken in the first week of classes (Henslee, Burgess & Buskist 2006). These activities enhance the FYE because, “when associated with community creation and positive tone”, they can “decrease communication anxiety and increase levels of empowerment” (Sawyer, Braz & Babcock 2009, p.187).

More research still needs to be done on the place of icebreakers in the FYE and the extent to which icebreakers, including an activity like classroom karaoke, actually help build a sense of community in the cohort. Sawyer, Braz and Babcock (2009, p.188) point out that teachers need to find out which “particular activities foster more acute engagement effects than other exercises, such as liking of peers or the course or instructor, empowering students or increasing motivations”. Initial results on the use of classroom karaoke as an icebreaker in a large youth studies lecture are promising and, though further study is required, suggest that classroom karaoke has a part to play in the enhancement of students’ FYE and easing their transition into higher education.

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