

TEACHING LARGE CLASSES

Large classes are often a feature of first year courses at university where managing the high student numbers is complicated by the need to facilitate their transition into higher education and support them to develop academic skills.

Although the temptation to present a 'stand and deliver' expository lecture may be strong, there are a number of strategies that you can incorporate that encourage active learning and interaction with your students. Teaching these classes requires careful planning and a range of strategies, including:

- ▶ preparation and presentation
- ▶ engaging the students and keeping their interest
- ▶ incorporating technology with face-to-face teaching
- ▶ classroom management strategies.

Preparation and presentation

Large classes require particularly careful planning. Generally, things proceed more slowly in large classes, and it tends to be difficult to make spontaneous changes to the activities or content.

- ▶ Consider the content of your teaching and identify exactly what it is that you want the students to be able to know/do at the end of the session. How are you going to divide up your session?
- ▶ How will your class know when you are ready to begin? You could consider having a warning countdown slide on your PowerPoint; background music that stops, or other similar strategies that catch the students' attention and indicates that it is time to get going.
- ▶ How will you introduce your topic? How does your topic link to what the students have already learned or previous activities covered? How will your class develop or extend what they can learn from the textbook or online? (If it doesn't, why do the students need to come to your class at all?)
- ▶ Give the students a structure or map of your session so that they have a sense of your direction. This can be distributed via Stream before the class, or simply a PowerPoint slide at the start of the session.
- ▶ Signpost important information using verbal and visual cues on your PowerPoint.
- ▶ Be available to students before and after your class and set and maintain 'office hours' when students can approach you for help.

Engaging students and keeping their interest

- ▶ Where will you have breaks and changes of pace and activity? How will you check that students understand the content? Incorporate formative activities into your classes.
- ▶ Check that you are audible from the back of the room. Ensure that any questions asked by students are repeated so that the whole class can hear.
- ▶ If possible, move about the room during the lecture – don't feel bound by the lectern. Even if the room doesn't allow for much movement, try not to stand behind the lectern or desk. Make eye contact with students sitting along the edges and at the back as well as those at the front.
- ▶ Give students time to answer questions. Don't be afraid to allow silence to continue until someone has answered... especially if you have asked a complex higher order question. Students often complain that lecturers don't give enough 'think time'.

- ▶ Provide 'writing time'. Students often struggle to keep up with what the lecturer is saying while writing notes at the same time. Giving scheduled writing breaks helps them to consolidate and reflect without losing track of the session.
- ▶ Wherever possible use and build on examples and illustrations from the students' own experience.
- ▶ Learn student names and try to give constructive individual feedback wherever possible.

Incorporating technology

- ▶ Does the content require you to deliver it in a face-to-face mode? Would it be as effective delivered in a podcast/ vodcast? If so, consider making a video presentation or using Presenter to add audio to a PowerPoint. You can then deliver the content to the students online, and use your classroom time for active learning, discussion and reflection.
- ▶ Use an advance organizer (a question or problem to be responded to by students before the class) or survey your students using Stream ahead of time to identify key concerns and problems that you can address during your session.
- ▶ Will your students need handouts or readings? Consider how you are going to distribute these... it may be easier to do this ahead of the class via Stream
- ▶ Technology offers strategies such as embedding online polls or multiple choice questions into your PowerPoint slides so students can answer anonymously using their mobile devices, or setting up a 'backchannel' on which students can hold a conversation or ask questions about the learning as the session progresses.
- ▶ Consider recording lectures so that students can go over them again at a later date.
- ▶ Create a webquest (in its simplest form, a document with links to web resources) to support your class – students who are browsing during class can then access information related to and extending what is being discussed, and thus remain connected to the learning.
- ▶ Use online signposting to support your classroom sessions. Short video clips or forum posts on Stream in which you reflect on what has been covered in the classroom and introduce what is coming next, or pose questions or challenges, can help to make a large class seem very small.

Classroom management strategies

- ▶ Classroom conduct contracts developed by the class can be very helpful in setting the boundaries of acceptable behavior. In the first class students spend some time discussing how to manage issues such as talking in class, mobile phones, etc. Once the ground rules have been established, share these online and remind students of them as required.
- ▶ Students who are confused or bored may become disruptive. Provide a backchannel or other strategy for them to voice their concerns, such as a question/suggestion box at the back of the classroom, which allows them to flag their problems early.
- ▶ Moving closer to disruptive students can signal to them that their behavior has caught your attention.
- ▶ Ask the disruptive students if they need to have a question answered. Sometimes the talking is simply because they don't understand but are too shy to stop the class and ask.
- ▶ Speak to persistently disruptive students after the class, pointing out how their behavior is a problem, and what you would like them to do to modify it.
- ▶ Try to avoid giving too many 'wrapping up' cues as students frequently start packing up the moment they think the class is about to end. Providing a summary of key points can be a good way of keeping their attention to the end of the session.
- ▶ Don't be afraid of the question you can't answer – just admit it and make sure you have the answer for the next session!

Further reading

Hunt, L., & Chalmers, D. (Eds.). (2012). *University teaching in focus: A learning-centred approach*. Victoria, Australia: Acer Press.

Mulryan-Kyne, C. (2010). Teaching large classes at college and university level: challenges and opportunities. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15(2). DOI: 10.1080/13562511003620001.

References:

Francis, R. W. (2012). Engaged: Making large classes feel small through blended learning instructional strategies that promote increased student performance. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning*, 9(2) p. 147-152.