

Teaching Large Classes

The perceived problems with teaching a large number of students at a time (say, 50 or more, for instance) tend to fall into four areas: classroom control, student anonymity, evaluating large numbers, and the need for help in managing the situation (from the teacher's perspective). Before we address these issues, however, let's recognize that the research into class size does not support the commonly held belief that the larger the class, the poorer the learning. In fact, there is evidence that class sizes must get down to about 15 students for any significant differences in achievement to be consistently detected.

Another myth is that only some "gifted" teachers are good at teaching large classes. In fact, the skills to effectively teach in this situation can all be learned, with practice and effort.

Now let's address those concerns...

Classroom control

Well-known mass lecturer Mike Atkinson (University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario), approaches his huge lectures (hundreds of students) by accepting that his lecture is a performance. Using the theatre metaphor, therefore, Mike considers the set, the equipment, the ambiance, and his delivery, where everything is geared to capturing and maintaining the audience's attention. He reminds himself to use the actor's tools of voice, movement, gesture, pacing, and drama. He uses music, video, and lighting to "set the stage" so that students feel anticipation as they enter the room, just as they would on attending a dramatic performance. Mike reassures others that "stage fright" in such a situation is natural, but, as actors learn, can be used as energy to fuel your performance—and that you will get better with practice. And speaking of practice, Mike suggests that you script your lecture (complete with stage directions) and prepare to "perform" it—don't read it or ad lib! Given this approach, Mike maintains that classroom control becomes a non-issue—there are no more disruptions than there would be in the middle of a play at Stratford!

Here are a few other ideas, however, for preventing classroom disruption:

- Reduce the number of students in the room by offering independent study, partial credit, learning contracts or online course options; try to limit the classroom to only those who really want and need to be there
- Pace your lesson to limit lecture to 20-minute chunks, alternated with brief exercises that engage students in review, application etc. with nearby students—be tolerant of the "busy, noisy" atmosphere that will ensue (use the old "flick the lights" trick to get their attention when ready to move on)
- Structure the lessons tightly, with clear learning objectives; provide lecture outlines with space for students to fill in content; be sure all content is clearly linked to the objectives—don't ramble, and move along at a brisk pace
- Make use of appropriate multimedia during the lecture, and integrate with activities and clear connections to course content

Student anonymity (leading to apathy, isolation, attrition)

It is true that connection to the teacher and to other students has been shown to support student success, and in classes with large numbers of students, special efforts must be made to create this supportive atmosphere. Here are some suggestions:

- Create student name cards (tent cards) with first names in large print; spread these on a table near the door before each class and have students collect theirs on the way into each class session (unclaimed cards are quickly grouped with a rubber band—later you can use this to record class attendance, should you wish to do so); calling students by name is a classic way to connect
- Use co-operative learning strategies frequently during the lesson (as suggested above) to give students opportunities to connect with other students
- Use minute papers frequently to get insight into students' mastery of content and experience of the course
- Consider setting up stable learning groups, not for projects or marks, but to provide in-class group structure for shared learning and support
- Have anonymous "send-a-question" sheets available at class breaks, and address questions delivered, after the break
- Use online course sites to engage students in discussion
- Post real and virtual office hours, and honour them with your availability
- Provide as much structure and as many resources as possible so students do not feel lost

Evaluating large numbers

Start by editing your curriculum, asking yourself what students **MUST** know, and what is the most effective way of ensuring that they do know it. Be alert to how the (college) workload formula works, noting that 100% essay/project evaluation is the highest workload rating for a course, whether you have three essays/projects or ten! Be sensible about how many submissions you can mark effectively. Consider combining several smaller assignments into one larger one that combines skill sets. Also, consider writing multiple choice tests with items that assess higher order thinking (the Innovation Centre often runs a workshop on this topic) instead of one or more assignments.

As well, consider creating co-marked assignments with other program faculty, wherein you mark for one aspect and another faculty marks for another, for another course, within the same assignment (for example, English and a technical subject) thereby reducing the number of assignments for the students and for you.

Build in test preparation sessions wherein students create or use checklists, review exercises etc. to increase test readiness and peer support

Cheating on tests can be more prevalent in large class settings, so consider implementing the following preventions:

- Use publisher supplied test-banks to generate multiple versions of tests, and colour code them
- Build in “magic moments” or “study cards” that allow students to access information during selected moments during the test; research shows that these methods actually encourage better test preparation, and do not artificially inflate grades

Getting help

Durham/UOIT is rich in resources to help you plan and deliver your large class sessions. The Innovation Centre has people who can help you with the pedagogy and delivery, from co-operative learning techniques through multimedia. Contact them for details (SW101).

As well, you might invite other teachers of the same course or other courses in the program to brainstorm ways to support each other by sharing ideas and resources. You could also divide the workload of creating tests and assignments.

Finally, be proactive in applying your professional scrutiny to your courses: which are suitable for large class delivery, and which are not? Be prepared to offer a reasoned rationale for your decisions to your Dean.

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