

Teaching Large Classes

Teaching a large class can be a daunting undertaking for even the most seasoned instructor. Here are some ideas that will help to inspire a shift from the traditional lecture format, typically used in large class settings, to a more learner-centered approach that promotes a diversity of ideas and deep approaches to learning.

What is a “Large” Class?

A large class is a relative term that is primarily dependent on the disciplinary context or milieu (Schwab, 1976; Pyle, 2013); for example, in a social science discipline, a class of 100 is likely to be deemed a large class, whereas in the sciences, a class with several hundred students is often defined as such. Some of the common challenges inherent to teaching large classes help to further characterize the instructional experience and raises our consciousness about the pedagogical considerations required to support and engage learners in these large classroom contexts.

Common Challenges in a Large Class

- Students feeling isolated (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2010)
- Students remaining anonymous to both instructor and others, leading to decreased motivation to learn and take personal responsibility, and lower attendance rates (Cooper & Robinson, 2000)
- Difficulty acquiring satisfactory knowledge of individual student needs and interests, and meeting those needs in differentiated ways in the lesson or lecture
- Learner engagement in participatory activities may present a challenge due to sheer numbers and, in some cases, due to constraints of physical space in lecture-style classrooms (Shannon 2006)

Engaging Students in a Large Class

Active learning strategies can be used successfully to engage learners in classes of any size. Integrating active learning strategies will help learners to achieve a greater depth of learning and increased levels of participation and motivation as they interact with the material in new and personally meaningful ways (Craft, 2006; Cranton, 2011). Rather than passively receiving information, learners should engage with the course material in a participatory manner, both in individual and collaborative ways. Here are two evidence-based approaches to consider when designing and developing participatory components in your large class:



The Flipped Classroom Approach

In this model, initial exposure to the content takes place outside of the classroom with the aid of educational technology, and is followed by concept engagement in the classroom. This framework provides the opportunity to learn through interactive activity with a balanced consideration of content and process. To maximize effectiveness, Walvoord and Anderson (1998) propose that learners produce work (e.g., writing, problems) independently and in advance of the classroom sessions to increase productivity during class time. Flipping the classroom leads to significant learning gains (Deslauriers et al., 2011).

Peer Instruction Approach

Peer instruction is a modified version of the flipped classroom approach and works on the premise that initial exposure and preparation to content prior to class will be followed by formative assessments (e.g., quizzes, polls) to determine student understanding and proficiency. The design of the peer instructional approach plays out in cycles of mini-lectures in alternation with conceptual questions. Learners are provided clickers to respond anonymously to the questions posed, and the data gathered in real time is addressed and informs discourse while providing an opportunity for the instructor to offer detailed, specific, and timely feedback. Cycles of instruction typically last between 13 and 15 minutes. Peer instruction leads to significant gains for learners when compared to traditional lecture formats (Crouch & Mazur, 2001).

References

Crouch CH and Mazur E (2001). Peer instruction: Ten years of experience and results. *American Journal of Physics* 69:970-977.

DesLauriers L, Schelew E, and Wieman C (2011). Improved learning in a large-enrollment physics class. *Science* 332:

