

Teaching Large Classes: Challenges and Strategies

Context and Key Issues

A *large* class generally includes 100 students or more, but there is no single definition. In some cases, *large* may signify a class of 50–70 students, in others, it may include up to 1500 students in a single cohort. Large classes are most common in the first year of study at university. This carries the added responsibility of supporting first year students through the transition to university, while also introducing them to learning in the university context. Teaching large classes requires a combination of skills and strategies including:

- Organising and presenting effective lectures;
- Engaging students and developing a sense of belonging;
- Integrating active learning elements in traditional lecture formats;
- Blending face-to-face and technology-enhanced learning activities;
- *Crowd control* in large groups; and
- Managing and supporting staff teams, including tutors.

What Do We Know About Students' Learning in Large Classes? We Know That:

1. Individuals learn better if they think about what they are learning and are actively engaged with the information;
2. Students need to be engaged in deep learning if they are to develop and become autonomous, critical thinkers and learners;
3. The first 20 minutes of a lecture is the most crucial time for facilitating deep learning and student engagement with the material;
4. If there is no immediate application of what is covered during a lecture, then over a period of a few days there is a rapid drop in the percentage of material retained; and
5. If there is no student participation during a lecture then there is limited opportunity for ongoing and timely feedback to the lecturer about student understanding and engagement.

Strategies

A Few Practical Tips for Applying Good Practice in Large Classes/ Lecture Theatres

- Be motivated and enthusiastic by capturing students' attention;
- Keep it lively by moving around with purpose and reduce student anonymity;
- Give students advance organisers to assist in giving structure to their learning. This might include a list of key topics to be covered in the lecture, or a concept map that graphically depicts the key ideas for the session;
- Make connections between previous learning, the current class, and future topics;
- Connect student learning to real world applications;
- Use visual media, handouts, skeleton lecture notes and problem-based activities to facilitate active learning;
- Encourage interaction and engage with students during lectures by asking questions and expecting responses;
- Use a mixture of activities to break up the lecture and engage with students (e.g., Think, pair, share; Debates; Quiet time; Role plays; Problem-solving tasks; Demonstrations; Think breaks; Identify *clearest* and *muddiest* point; The one minute paper; and Buzz groups); and
- Evaluate student understanding regularly (e.g., Mini quizzes or True/False responses).

Supporting Your Students beyond the Large Class

- Acknowledge some of the key issues students might face (e.g. time management, especially around assignment time, managing study, and paid work);
- Communicate access times for lecturers and tutors. It is important to do this early and often;
- Acknowledge the limitations of lecture theatres. Let students know that you may not be able to talk with them individually during a lecture, but that lectures complement small group work in tutorials or laboratory sessions;
- Advertise support services early and often. Let students know where they can go for help;

- Survey students on:
 - Personal expectations: What do they want from their course(s); how do they feel about the course and assessment?
 - Academic experiences: Survey students in the first lecture/tutorial for prior knowledge and expectations to identify *hooks* for teaching. What do they already know? What is valuable to them?
- Give students a short task in the first tutorial to identify students potentially *at-risk*;
- Provide online support (e.g. discussion forums on the web; course FAQs; self-review quizzes; links to key support sites around the university);
- Develop peer-assisted study programs and mentoring schemes to encourage student interaction; and
- Make the most of small group tutorials for building student confidence and developing connections between students, academic staff and the culture of the Department.

Engaging International Students and Students from Diverse Backgrounds in Large Classes

- Build interest and rapport by adopting a relaxed style where students feel comfortable asking questions. Include regular opportunities for students to discuss key points among themselves. Avoid use of humour which may not be understood by students from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds;
- Make the aims of the class explicit and clear. Follow a straightforward progression with a predictable format;
- **Pace:** vary the pace during sessions to maintain interest (e.g. use a range of media to emphasise key points);
- **Explanation and elaboration:** give clear explanations of technical terms. Use examples from students' own experiences, cultures and backgrounds. Provide definitions and country-specific terms. Some lecturers ask students to compile glossaries of key terms in groups to assist comprehension;
- **Signalling:** explicitly identify important information and key concepts. Use clear verbal and written signals when you change topic or emphasis. Avoid relying on tone or intonation alone to signal changes of topic;
- **Questioning:** create an atmosphere that encourages student questions (e.g. there is no such thing as a *stupid* question). Repeat questions so that the whole group can hear. Respond empathetically to student questions. Model the question-response behaviour that you wish to encourage;
- **Visual and multimedia resources:** use a range of strategies to enhance student understanding (e.g. graphs, diagrams, movie clips) and give students opportunities to revise material (e.g. PowerPoint's and lecture capture technology).
(Adapted from Mulligan & Kirkpatrick, 2000).

Supporting and Managing Your Team of Tutors (or equivalent)

- Provide regular professional development for tutors (e.g. tips for learning students' names; strategies for including students in class discussions; ideas for identifying at-risk students; tips on providing feedback);
- Convene regular meetings with your tutor team to ensure clear and consistent communication and support; and
- Introduce tutors in the first lecture and have key lecturers visit tutorial groups to get to know students and to let students know that you are all part of a cohesive teaching team.

Effective Assessment Practices in Large Classes

- Make clear connections between the lecture material and the assessment process;
- **Front-end assessment:** invest time in developing assessment tasks and preparing students for them (e.g. provide model answers, clear directions, detailed assessment criteria, practice assessment tasks, and self-quizzes);
- Use early assessment strategies and early-warning assessment systems;
- Teach students about strategies for approaching assessment in the first year. This might include strategies for planning, suggested timelines for conducting library research and tips on how to structure their first assignment.
- Use self- and peer-assessment as a way to engage students in active learning, but do not forget to clarify what is expected and how to proceed;
- Automate assessment tasks where possible (e.g. online quizzes); and
- Ensure that assessment tasks are kept to a minimum and focus on what really counts. This approach requires careful planning and needs to be supplemented with continuous assessment during the semester. Give students small, ungraded tasks, both verbal and written, that provide them with early indications of their progress.

Selected References

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