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Embracing Diversity: Toolkit for Creating
Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments
Specialized Booklet 2

Practical Tips for Teaching Large Classes

A Teacher's Guide



Inclusive
Learning-Friendly
Environments

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The Dakar Framework for Action adopted at the World Education Forum in Senegal during April 2000 reaffirms education as a fundamental human right. Ensuring the right to education is at the very heart of UNESCO's mission, which is also affirmed and recognized by its Member States. Such education must also be a quality education. Thus, UNESCO emphasizes not merely the right to education, but also particularly the right to **quality** education for all.

The UNESCO publication *Embracing Diversity: Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments (ILFE)* offers a holistic, practical means to make schools and classrooms more inclusive, learning-friendly and gender-sensitive. This guide, which enriches the ILFE Toolkit as a supplementary reference, focuses on the specific issues that need to be addressed when teaching in large classes. The guide aims to help teachers by giving practical guidelines about how to teach in large classes successfully without compromising quality.

Large classes are often perceived as one of the major obstacles to ensuring quality education. Indeed, there are many research studies that point to the disadvantages of large classes and advocate small classes as a factor to ensure quality education. In spite of this, large classes are a reality in many schools and many countries, often as a direct result of inadequate funding and the absence of political will to provide a sufficient number of teachers and classrooms that would ensure a quality education. Providing tools to address the difficulty of teaching large classes is thus an important step towards realizing quality education for all (EFA) in school settings.

This guide does not offer a universal solution to all the challenges related to teaching in large classes. It attempts to present a variety of practical methods and practices that could be useful for teachers who need to deal with a large class every day. It addresses issues such as how to prepare and plan lessons specifically adapted for large classes. Furthermore, it provides useful tips and pointers to manage the class in the best possible way and to see the large class as a resource, rather than a challenge, to the teaching-learning process. It is also about changing the perspective from

teaching that focuses solely on didactic approaches to more child-centred and learning-friendly methods.

An inclusive, learning-friendly environment (ILFE) is about being friendly not only to children, but also to teachers. Teachers are the single most important factor in improving and ensuring the quality of education. Responsibility for preparing students for the future largely falls to them. Therefore, it is UNESCO's aim to provide teachers with the necessary tools, skills and support needed to pursue this task.

As with the other booklets of the ILFE Toolkit, we hope that teachers will find that the content and methods presented in this guide will help to meet the needs of their daily work.

This guide is truly a collective product. It was first drafted and then revised by George Attig of the Institute of Nutrition, Mahidol University, who has also served as a UNESCO consultant on inclusive education and gender, as well as a consultant to UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (EAPRO) and Save the Children for the development of child-friendly schools. It also benefited from the comments and suggestions of educators around the world. UNESCO Bangkok would like to thank all of them for their contributions. Ochirkhuyag Gankhuyag, Programme Assistant at UNESCO's Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, coordinated the project.



Sheldon Shaeffer
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This booklet is dedicated to the immense contribution of teachers across the globe in awakening potential and fostering the fundamental capacity of human beings to seek knowledge, to disseminate information and to share their collective wisdom.

”



WHAT IS A "LARGE CLASS"?

Many teachers in Asia - and you may be one of them - find themselves working in primary school classrooms that contain many students, sometimes almost filling the room! Actually, though, a large class has no "exact size." Usually it is measured in terms of the number of students per teacher (student-teacher ratio). In some countries, 25-30 students per one teacher is considered large, while in other countries this is seen to be normal or even quite small. From a teacher's perspective, though, a class is "large" whenever it feels large. While a class of more than 50 students is usually considered a large class, to those of you who normally teach 25 or fewer students, a class of 35 can be large and overwhelming.

For many of us faced with large classes, we might be tempted to give up, thinking that there is no chance of getting so many students to learn. The problem is, however, that we assume that learning occurs in proportion to class size. The smaller the class, the more students learn. However, research shows that class size does not automatically correlate with student learning. Students in large classes can learn just as well as those in small ones. What counts is not the size of the class, but the quality of the teaching. Evidence shows that students place more emphasis on the quality of teaching than class size.¹ Moreover, they may not mind being in a large class as much as you may think they do, or as much as you mind it yourself.

I have taught hundreds of students over the span of many years, and my current class has 80 students. At first, I realized that I had finally achieved that comfortable security of having a ready-made set of lecture notes, volumes of exam and quiz questions, and a sense of predictability regarding the course. Strangely enough, however, I was also bored and bothered. Bored from lecturing about the same things year after year, and bothered because my lectures came across so rigidly that I was failing to impart to my students the satisfaction of finding solutions to problems.²

¹ Large Classes: A Teaching Guide - Large Class Introduction. Center for Teaching Excellence, University of Maryland, 2005. www.cte.umd.edu/library/large/intro.html [accessed online on 10/7/2005]

² Dion, L. "But I Teach a Large Class" in: *A Newsletter of the Center for Teaching Effectiveness*. Spring 1996, University of Delaware. www.udel.edu/pbl/cte/spr96-bisc2.html [accessed online on 10/6/2005]

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CHALLENGING OPPORTUNITIES

Teaching large classes is a challenge, but it can also offer many opportunities for you to improve your teaching and to make it more enjoyable and rewarding for you and your students.

In a large class setting, you have the opportunity to improve your organizational and managerial skills as you work to creatively organize your classroom into a comfortable, welcoming learning environment and to manage the many students within it.

Large classes offer you the opportunity to improve your interpersonal skills as you try different ways to get to know each student as an individual through their work in class or their lives outside of it. They will also equally enjoy getting to know you.

Large classes give you the opportunity to improve your teaching and presentation skills. As the teacher above mentions, constantly lecturing to a large class - or even a small one - can become boring and bothersome. The value of a large class is that it contains a diversity of students and learning styles, and you can use many different, active, and fun ways of teaching. The cumulative knowledge, experiences, skills, and interests of your many students, furthermore, can be valuable starting points for planning lessons and activities so that learning becomes meaningful for your students. In addition, by involving your students' families, you will also have greater access to resources for learning.

You will also improve your evaluation skills as you devise a variety of ways to tell whether your students have really learned the material, instead of relying only on short answer exams, which may seem necessary for large classes. For instance, you can give your students in-class and out-of-class assignments that ask them what they have learned and what questions they have about what they have learned. Rather than following your students' failures, you can also track their successes, which are also your successes in teaching. You will find also that involving your students in their learning and in assessing how well they have done can save you time and reduce your workload.

Your students can also benefit from being in large classes. When there are many students in a class, they can share many different ideas and interesting

life experiences. This stimulates the students and enlivens those parts of your lessons where students can discuss and learn from each other. During project work, students can learn to share responsibility and help each other, as well as to listen, to have patience, and to express themselves within a diverse group of people - skills that will be valuable for them throughout their lives. This also brings variety and speeds up the work.

BOOKLET CONTENTS

A growing number of resources are emerging that can guide you in creating and managing inclusive classrooms³ as well as in maintaining positive discipline within them.⁴ Many resources, however, do not take class size fully into consideration, though some of their recommendations are relevant for classes of any size, and you are encouraged to consult them.

This booklet is specifically designed to help you to start overcoming the challenges of teaching large classes. It draws on the experiences of teachers who have had *to learn* to teach such classes creatively and enjoyably. You can find many of them cited here, and we gratefully acknowledge their work and contributions to meeting the challenge of teaching large classes. Overall, each section of this booklet gives you *practical* tips and suggests strategies for:

- a) ***Creating a well-managed classroom community***, so that you and your students are ready to learn in a comfortable physical and psycho-social environment;
- b) ***Teaching in large classes***, including planning lessons for large classes and choosing effective alternatives to the standard lecture format; and
- c) ***Evaluating learning and teaching*** in large classes, so that you can provide good opportunities for students to show what they are learning, and you can reflect on your own teaching practices.

³ See, for example: Booklets 4 and 5 of *Embracing Diversity: Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments*. Bangkok: UNESCO, 2004. This document can be downloaded at: <http://www2.unescobkk.org/elib/publications/032revised/index.htm>

⁴ See, for example: *ILFE Specialized Booklet 1. Embracing Diversity: Tools for Positive Discipline in the Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Classroom - A Guide for Teachers and Teacher Educators*. Bangkok: UNESCO, 2006.

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Please remember, however, that **there is no “best way” to teach large classes**. You must develop the approach that works best for you based on your teaching style, the characteristics of your students, and the goals and objectives of your lessons and curriculum. However, there are some ideas that do work well for many people, and you will find many in this booklet that you can adapt to your way of teaching. Decide which ones are most likely to work for you and try them, or modify promising ones to fit your situation. Some suggestions may seem rather obvious, and many are really principles for good teaching. However, they become even more important in large classes where problems can become magnified. If you're teaching a large class for the first time, or simply want to try a new approach, it's a good idea to review and follow these points. Most of all, don't be doubtful! Be creative! It will make your teaching much more enjoyable.



Creating a Well-Managed Learning Environment in Large Classes

THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Virtually all of us have little to no control over how many students we must teach. However, we do have control over the classroom environment in which they learn. This is very important, since this environment affects how well your students can learn.

Close your eyes and imagine yourself as a new teacher who is assigned to teach a class containing 60 or more students. After the initial shock, or maybe in response to it, what questions might you ask yourself? Most likely the first question that would come to mind is "How am I going to manage them all?" Actually, this question highlights one of the most critical aspects of working in large classes, namely, *managing the classroom's environment* so that it is a comfortable space in which to teach and learn. The classroom environment encompasses the physical environment - including learning resources for lessons - as well as the psycho-social environment; for instance, using ways to promote learning as a community to reduce the feeling of crowdedness and to deal effectively with misbehaviour. Your ability to create well-managed physical and psycho-social environments can make the difference between a calm and functioning classroom and a classroom in chaos.

ORGANIZING THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Ideally, a class is held in a bright, clean, well-equipped room that accommodates every student comfortably and allows them to move around and work well either individually or in groups. To encourage active learning and student involvement, seats are arranged so students can see each other as well as the teacher.

Unfortunately, very few classrooms are ideal settings for learning and, especially in large classes, space is usually limited. Often hot, crowded, and noisy, small classrooms overflowing with many students offer a poor learning

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setting for you and your students. You will need all of your ingenuity and planning skills to create a classroom that is a comfortable place in which to learn. But your hard work will be worthwhile, since it will make your job easier and more rewarding. Below are some areas associated with the classroom's physical environment that you might consider as you plan on how to accommodate all of your students and reduce feelings of crowdedness, confusion, and frustration that often plague large classes.⁵

Maximize classroom space. While many of us don't have control over where we teach, we may have the opportunity to arrange our assigned classroom as we see fit. The arrangement of a classroom may be flexible or a challenge, but the idea is to draw students into the group and to create a physical space that makes them comfortable and want to enter into a discussion or group situation.

In large class settings, space is often a luxury. To maximize what learning space is available, consider removing unnecessary furniture to reduce the feeling of overcrowding and to facilitate movement. If you really don't need a large teacher's desk, ask for a small one. Instead of desks or chairs for students, consider using mats or rugs with your students being seated so that everyone sees each other and feels a part of the group. In some classrooms in Bangladesh, for instance, the lack of desks and chairs is beneficial. A large learning space, covered with a clean, locally made carpet or mat, can be easily changed from a science investigation space to a drama space, and groups can easily be formed and reformed without disturbing other classes. Several chalkboards may also be found around the classroom at the children's level, so that they can sit in groups and use the chalkboards for planning, discussing ideas, problem solving, etc.⁶

⁵ See, for example: *ILFE Specialized Booklet 1. Embracing Diversity: Tools for Positive Discipline in the Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Classroom - A Guide for Teachers and Teacher Educators*. Bangkok: UNESCO, 2006.

⁶ *Booklet 5: Managing Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Classrooms. Embracing Diversity: Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments*. Bangkok: UNESCO, 2004.

Store books, instructional materials (such as chalk, rulers, paper, paint, and scissors), and teaching tools (such as portable chalkboards, easels, chart paper, and work tables) so that they can be obtained and put away easily, and, in crowded classrooms, do not take up valuable space. If certain items take up too much space, such as worktables, remove them from the classroom and, if possible, place them outside, maybe under a shady tree, where students can use them easily. If possible, keep your belongings, lesson materials, and any other items that you do not use during class time in the teachers' lounge or in another safe place outside of the classroom.

Facilitate movement. Develop plans in advance for how students can best enter and exit the classroom; for instance, students who sit in the back of the classroom can enter first, followed by those seated in the middle, and lastly by those seated at the front. A reverse strategy can be used for exiting the classroom. Plan in advance how you will change the classroom arrangement depending on what is being taught, such as moving from a whole class arrangement for test taking to small groups for art or science lessons. Plan on how routine activities will be conducted, such as handing out written assignments and then handing them back to students after grading. Also plan so that your students' individual needs can be met, such as when they need to sharpen their pencils or to get supplies for learning.

Use space outside of the classroom. School grounds can be a rich resource for learning, and they can serve as an enjoyable complement to crowded classrooms. They are also important sites for students to develop both social and cognitive skills and to learn important lessons about cooperation, ownership, belonging, respect, and responsibility.⁷ Look around your school, identify good areas for learning, and incorporate them into your lesson plans. For instance, different areas of the school grounds can be used as activity centres to support what is being learned about a subject in the classroom. In learning about geometric shapes, for instance, students can explore the school grounds and identify as many geometrically-shaped objects as possible. Then they can sit under a tree and write down as many as they are able to recall. Monitor their progress! Before class ends, bring them all together, either in the classroom or outside, to present their findings.

⁷ Malone, K. and Tranter, P. "Children's Environmental Learning and the Use, Design and Management of Schoolgrounds," *Children, Youth and Environments*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2003.

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Display student work creatively. Space is needed to display student work. Rather than display boards or tables, which take up space, students' work can be hung on a classroom wall or displayed just outside the classroom door for everyone to see. Strings can be used onto which each student's work is attached with clips, tape, or even blunt thorns. Decorating the room with student work will also help add to the attractiveness of the room and make it more welcoming, even if there are a lot of students in it.

Involve your students. Students can be very helpful in managing the classroom's physical space, and it helps them to develop a sense of responsibility. They can hang up student work, create bulletin boards, and put away instructional materials at the end of each lesson. Students can also be helpful in solving space problems. When a problem occurs, such as students bumping into each other or inadequate seating space, ask them to suggest solutions.

It is important to remember that what makes you feel comfortable may not be the same as what makes your students feel comfortable. At the beginning of the year, organize your classroom, and then ask your students if they are comfortable with it. Better yet, divide them into groups and ask each group to look around the room and its contents, and then to draw a picture of how they would like the room to be organized. Use ideas from their drawings to design your students' "personal" classroom. Try the arrangement for one or two weeks, and then ask your students if they are comfortable with it. Change the classroom arrangement if they feel a new one would be more comfortable. Moreover, change it whenever you sense that your students are becoming bored with sitting in the classroom.

BUILDING THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

A classroom is often called a "learning community." It is that place within your school where you and your students can be found regularly, where everyone hopefully knows everyone else, and one in which everyone works together - teacher and students alike - to learn new things about the world.

In large classes, it is very important to create a sense of community, one that shows your interest in and accessibility to students and which encourages your students to learn about you and participate in the learning process. The goal is to get you and your students to better understand each other. Creating this sense of community and its positive psycho-social environment can motivate your students to learn, get them involved, and help them to

learn to their fullest, even under seemingly crowded conditions. Moreover, students have reported a greater sense of value in their learning and earn better scores when a teacher is truly willing to help them learn.

Below are some suggestions to create a positive psycho-social environment in your classroom community or improve upon the one in which you and your students are already learning.

Make a large class feel small. Many teachers try to make a large class small by treating it as such. They move towards a student who has asked a question, which reduces physical and social distance, and they help class assistants distribute materials. Remember: students may not mind being in a large class as much as you do. Students once described a teacher who made a large class seem much smaller because of his personal approach. He moved around a lot, walking up and down the room. You knew that he wanted his students to come to class and that he cared about his students. This teacher came to class early to talk to students. He helped students connect with others who could help them with their work. He recognized his students as people with interests and lives outside of his class.⁸

Temporarily reduce class size. During the first two or three days of the new school calendar, some teachers intentionally reduce the size of their classes. They divide their classes in half (or even by one-third), with one-half coming to school in the morning, while the other half comes in the afternoon. During this time, each teacher can conduct "getting to know you" activities to learn student names, to collect information about each student's family background and interests, as well as to initially assess each student's knowledge and skills through diagnostic testing (discussed below) or simple questionnaires.

Know your students – match names with faces. Although it may seem frightening in a large class setting, learning your students' names is the first step in creating a comfortable classroom that will encourage student participation. It also shows students that you are interested in them as individuals. Fortunately, there are many simple ways for learning students' names and getting to know them:

⁸ Intentional Learning: A Process for Learning to Learn. American Accounting Association. http://aaahq.org/AECC/intent/4_4.htm

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Make a seating chart. Ask students to sit in the same seats for the first few weeks and prepare a seating chart. Try to memorize four or five names at each class session.

Take photographs or have students draw pictures. If possible, group students for pictures during the first or second day of class. Posing for a picture often creates an informal, relaxed environment. Pass the photographs around and have students write their names next to their picture, or number each student and have them write their names at the bottom of the photograph next to their number. If photographs are not possible, have them draw pictures of themselves, or put them in pairs and have them draw their partner. Encourage them to draw something unique about their partner, such as a missing tooth or curly hair, to help match pictures to faces. Add their names to the pictures, and place the pictures near where they sit. If it is not possible to put the pictures near the students, for the first week or two of school have your students sit in rows, if they are not doing so already (you can break them into learning groups later). Line up their pictures vertically on the wall next to each row, with the top picture being the student nearest the wall, and the bottom picture being the student furthest from the wall.

Use name cards and tags. If photographs or pictures are not possible, have students make name cards that they place in front of them during class. If you are not using desks, your students can make name tags to wear during the first few weeks of school. Before class, and during it, learn the names of students sitting along the aisles and call on them in class by name. Progressively work your way to the centre of the room, calling each student by name.

Use introductions. Have a few students introduce themselves. Then stop the introductions and ask another student to name all of the students who have been introduced. Once the first few names have been recalled, move on to a few more, and so on, until everyone has been introduced. For very large classes, do this exercise over the first week and select a small group of students to make introductions each day.

Actively take attendance. Call roll using the students' names several times during the beginning of the school year to connect faces and names as soon as possible. Even though there may be some names that you don't seem to be able to learn, your students will greatly appreciate your effort.

Actively use students' names. Have students give their names each time before they speak. This can be continued until everyone feels they know the people in the room. Use students' names as often as possible.

Memorize. Strive to memorize a row or group of students per day. In the few minutes before class begins, review what you've already memorized and then add another row or group of students to that list.

Use "cues." Match a student's name with a physical or personality trait of that specific student. For instance, Maria has the missing front tooth; Ramon has blond, curly hair; and Shireen is always smiling. When you are asking students to introduce themselves, also ask them to give one "outstanding physical feature" that distinguishes him or her from the rest of the group. These features should be consistent over time and visible from the front of the room.

Creatively use class time. When giving an in-class written assignment, for instance, ask students to place a sheet of paper with their names in large letters in front of them, or put their name tag on their desk in front of them. You can then wander around the room learning names.

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Involve students. Asking two or three students each day to be “class assistants” to help you with demonstrations, distributing materials, or other activities can also help you to learn their names. Talk to them while you are working on the activity so that you can learn about their backgrounds and interests.

Break class into small groups. Dividing the entire group into smaller “working groups” will help facilitate name recall. Classroom time can be used to give small projects for each group. Only having to remember 8-9 people in a small group is much easier than looking at 60+ faces. Work on visualizing which faces sit in which seats. Then work on memorizing every name from a particular group.⁹

Conduct interactive “getting to know you” activities during the first two or three days of the school year so that the students learn about each other, and you can learn about your students. For large classes, ask six or eight students to introduce themselves at the beginning and end of each school day. Another activity is called the name game. While this game works well with smaller classes, it can easily be used in large classes by grouping students or when the class has been made temporarily small through some other method. The game begins with a student giving her name. The second student gives the name of the first person and his own name, and the third student gives her name and the names of the first two students. The chain continues until it returns to the first person, with the teacher preferably near the end.

You can also develop a “getting to know you” form with fill-in-the-blanks like,

“After school I like to _____

My favourite food is _____

My favourite activity is _____

My favourite subject in school is _____

I want to be like _____

I want to be a _____ when I finish school.”

⁹ Teaching & Advising: Getting Started - The First Week of Class. Learning Students' Names. Teaching and Learning Center, University of Nebraska - Lincoln. <http://www.uu.edu/centers/faculty/resources/article.cfm?ArticleID=107> [accessed online on 3/7/2006]

You can use this form as a way for students in large classes to get to know each other better, even if they have been together in the same class before. On the sheet of paper with this information, add a column on the right side of the paper but leave it blank. After your students have filled in their blanks, ask them to find other students with the same response to each statement and to write each student's name in the column.

Create student profiles. In large classes, teachers need an effective way to learn about their students' lives outside of the classroom so if learning problems arise, they can help the student as much as possible. Many teachers develop simple questionnaires that ask students about their families. They include questions on aspects that might affect a student's learning and attendance in school, such as whether a student's parents are still living or married and if they live in the same household or have migrated temporarily for work; who takes care of the student; how many persons are in the household; what is their relationship to the student; what are their education and occupational backgrounds; and what resources the family has access to, such as income, land, or community development funds. The information can be collected in many ways, such as sending the questionnaire home to be filled out by parents or guardians or interviewing the students, themselves. If a student starts doing poorly, a teacher can consult the information from the questionnaires to identify possible causes and actions.¹⁰

Be personal. Personalizing a large class means presenting yourself "as a person" to your students, not simply their "teacher." You are showing them how much you want to know about them, as well as how much you want them to know about you. While it is not necessary to share very personal information with your students, including information about yourself in lectures and during learning activities can help personalize the learning environment. The process can begin on the first day when you are talking about what your students will be learning, and your experiences in how students learn best. Remember: humour and showing that you can laugh at yourself can help establish a positive relationship with your students.¹¹

Allow students to express themselves. Giving each student the chance to talk in class during the first two or three weeks of school will encourage them to participate in large class discussions. Remember: the longer

¹⁰ *Booklet 3: Getting All Children In School and Learning. Embracing Diversity: Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments.* Bangkok: UNESCO, 2004.

¹¹ *Large Classes: A Teaching Guide - Large Class Introduction.* Center for Teaching Excellence, University of Maryland, 2005. www.cte.umd.edu/library/large/intro.html [accessed online on 10/7/2005]

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a student goes without speaking in class, the more difficult it will be for him or her to contribute, and you will lose a valuable opportunity to learn just what they have learned. You might want to have students work initially in small groups during the first few weeks of school, because this may make it easier for shy students to later contribute in the large class setting.

Encourage questions and comments. Many students are too shy, or embarrassed, to ask questions or make comments in front of their peers. Some teachers actually do not like students to ask questions because they feel it threatens their authority. Questions, however, are a valuable means of getting feedback on what your students are learning, what they are having difficulty with, and how you can make your teaching more meaningful - and enjoyable - for you and your students.

To encourage students to ask questions or give their views about what they are learning, some teachers use "prompts." In this technique, the teacher asks a question or makes a statement that students are expected to answer in terms of their experiences or what they are learning.¹² Prompt number one may say: "Our class is very large, and I want to get to know all of you as quickly as possible. So tell me about yourself, what you like and dislike, any interesting experiences you have had, and your feelings about school." Another prompt might be "What questions do you have about ...," and then give students time to formulate their questions. Some teachers recommend counting to 10 quietly to themselves in order to give students time to formulate their answers. If none of your students respond, ask for a volunteer to summarize a particular point that was made in class or during an activity. Responses, such as "I'm glad you asked that" or "That's a good question," will encourage your students to continue asking questions and giving comments. Nonverbal actions, such as smiling or nodding, can also show your support for student questions and comments.

Acknowledge difficult concepts and anticipate difficulties. Students in large classes may not want to ask or answer questions because they fear showing others that they don't understand the concept that you are teaching. They have not mastered it. To help them overcome their fear, admit that it is difficult to understand material for the first time. In explaining

¹² Brenner, J. "Making Large Classes More Interactive," *Inquiry*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Spring 2000. www.vccaedu.org/inquiry/inquiry-spring2000/I-51-brenner.html [accessed online on 12/2/2005]

a difficult concept or lesson, you might talk about the difficulties you had in learning it, and what methods you used to help learn and remember it. Before class, after you have finished preparing your lesson, ask yourself: "What might my students find hard to follow in this lesson? What examples might make that more understandable?" Some teachers keep a diary of errors students usually make in assignments or tests, or questions that most commonly arise, as a reminder of what students find most difficult to understand.

Remember: *By acknowledging difficulty and taking steps to prevent it, the risk of belittling students or embarrassing them in front of others will be reduced.*¹³

Be available. One of the biggest disadvantages of large classes is the high student-teacher ratio. One way to combat this problem is to be available to students before and after class. Before class, you might walk around the school grounds or around the classroom and ask students how they are feeling that day. Just as class ends, tell your students that you are available to answer any questions they might have. Set aside 10-15 minutes at other times of the day for students to come and ask you questions; sometimes these questions are ones that they do not want to ask in front of others. You can also target five or more students a day and talk with them about your class or school. In general, get to know their names, and learn something about them as individuals.

Remember: *The more approachable you are in terms of your manner and genuine interest in your students, the more likely students will be comfortable in seeing you, in talking with you, and in listening to you in a large class setting.*

¹³ Student Ratings of Teacher Effectiveness: Creating an Action Plan. Center for Support of Teaching and Learning, Syracuse University, New York. <http://cstl.syr.edu/cstl2/Home/Teaching%20Support/Teaching%20at%20SU/Student%20Ratings/12A500.htm> [accessed online on 1/30/2006].

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Pay attention to individual students. A large class is different from a small one in terms of the increased number of students who need your attention. While some students will do well in either small or large classes, the performance of students who require more guidance often suffers in large classes. This problem can be dealt with in many ways, such as tracking students' progress by reviewing their attendance, their performance on exams and homework, their participation in class, and their performance in other classes. You might also give what is known as a "diagnostic test" covering the knowledge and skills required for mastering a specific topic or lesson. The test, which is given in the first week of school or when starting a new topic, is not graded. Its sole purpose is to help you identify those students who may need extra help so that you can begin working with them early. You can thus focus your attention on a smaller group of students who need you the most, rather than the large, often overwhelming, class of many. If you notice an abrupt change in the behaviour or learning performance of a student, you might have an individual conference with him or her. Be sure to ask about the student's home life, since it can also affect their performance. If a student's problem is beyond your ability to handle, you should refer him or her to counselling or other service that might be available. If several students are having difficulty, you might arrange group sessions to review material and answer questions.

Establish reasonable rules for student behaviour. All classrooms need rules to function effectively, and they are a necessity for large classes. Students need to know the limits, as well as how to behave with others and respect their rights. Explain your rules early on and stress the value of cooperation and consideration. General guidelines for developing rules include the following¹⁴:

- ◆ Involve your students in developing classroom rules! You might take a "rights-based" approach by starting with the principle that "you may do what you want in this classroom, unless what you do interferes with the rights of others, such as your classmates and your teacher." Then ask your students to identify what behaviours are acceptable and what behaviours are not acceptable because they violate the rights of others. Develop rules to fulfill these rights as

¹⁴ *ILFE Specialized Booklet 1. Embracing Diversity: Tools for Positive Discipline in the Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Classroom - A Guide for Teachers and Teacher Educators.* Bangkok: UNESCO, 2006.

well as penalties for violating the rules. Remember that penalties should be consistent with the nature of the misbehaviour and based on positive discipline to help your students to learn good behaviour. For instance, making a student stand in a corner facing the wall for breaking a glass teaches the student nothing. Having the student apologize for his or her action and clean up the mess teaches him or her responsibility.

- ◆ Have your students develop a “classroom constitution” or “classroom policy board” containing the rules and prominently display it in the classroom. Ask them to sign it so that they agree to adhere to the rules and, if they break them, they will abide by the consequences. Misbehaviour is less likely to occur if a student makes a commitment to avoid breaking the rules and to engage in other, more desirable behaviours.
- ◆ Make only a few rules that emphasize appropriate behaviour; neither you nor your students will remember a long list. Make the rules as clear and understandable as possible. They should be stated behaviourally: “Keep your hands and feet to yourself” is clearer, and sends a more positive message than “no fighting.”
- ◆ Consider making rules or setting expectations for the following issues in order to create a smoothly functioning classroom: (a) beginning and ending the period or day, including how attendance will be taken and what students may or may not do during these times; (b) use of materials and equipment; (c) how to ask permission for unexpected needs (such as going to the toilet or sharpening a pencil); (d) seatwork and independent group work procedures; and (e) how students are to ask or answer questions.
- ◆ Choose rules that make the classroom environment orderly and promote successful learning. Do not develop classroom rules that you are unwilling, or are unable, to enforce consistently. Moreover, select rules that are unanimously agreed upon, or abided by, everyone in the school. If students learn that they can’t behave in a certain way in your classroom, but can do so in other classes, they will test the limits to see how far they can “get away with” a misbehaviour.

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Revisit classroom rules regularly to see if some are no longer necessary. If there are, praise your students, and then ask them if other rules are needed.

Use positive discipline techniques. Students in class will misbehave and violate rules, no matter if the class is large or small. It is a normal part of their development and not a reflection on you. When students misbehave, a teacher may use corporal punishment as a way to control the situation. This excuse is common among teachers who face large classes, especially ones in which there are no set rules or routines. The students do not know what is expected of them and the consequences for misbehaving; and the teacher did not take the time to build a positive relationship with the students so they would want to be good. This may be due to his or her authoritative classroom management style, one that says, "I'm the teacher and we'll do things my way!" In trying to maintain control, the teacher may also use corporal punishment to try and put fear into the hearts of the other students so, hopefully, they won't misbehave as well (but they do). Using the threat of physical violence, however, does not encourage students to learn from the teacher, only to fear him or her. It also destroys the classroom's psycho-social environment. Moreover, corporal punishment is a violation of **human rights**, and in many countries it is **illegal**.

While corporal punishment is meant to **control** a student's behaviour, positive discipline is meant to **develop** a student's behaviour, especially in matters of conduct. Rather than corporal punishment, there are many positive discipline techniques that can be used. Following is a list of positive disciplinary actions that you can take to guide students whose misbehaviour is demanding attention.

- ◆ Catch them being good; praise them when they are not seeking attention and misbehaving.
- ◆ Ignore the behaviour when possible, giving the student positive attention during pleasant times.
- ◆ Teach them to ask for attention (for instance, make "notice me, please" cards that they raise when they have a question).
- ◆ Give them a stern "eye" (look), but do not speak.
- ◆ Stand close by rather than far away (there's no need for attention-getting behaviours if you are standing next to them).

- ◆ Target-stop-do; that is, target the student by name, identify the behaviour to be stopped, tell the student what he is expected to do at that moment, let him make the decision about what he does next and its consequences.
- ◆ Do the unexpected, such as turn the lights off, play a musical sound, lower your voice, change your voice, talk to the wall.
- ◆ Distract the student, such as ask a direct question, ask a favour, give choices, and change the activity.

Sometimes teachers in large classes use corporal punishment when they are angry or frustrated. Yet, there are many positive ways to deal with anger and frustration. Some teachers tell their students, "I need a moment to calm down; I am very angry right now." Others calm down by counting to 10 or by leaving the room for several minutes. Some teachers describe their feelings to their students to help them understand what annoys them. The students then learn what not to do and why. They might do it again, but they are responsible for their actions and will have to deal with the consequences. Whatever the case, you are strongly advised to develop a positive discipline plan that incorporates these methods.¹⁵

Involve your students. Students can be very helpful in managing a classroom's psycho-social environment. To deal with misbehaviour, students can elect a "classroom disciplinary committee" to develop a code for classroom behaviour (rules), to identify suitable penalties, and to decide what should be done in cases of misbehaviour.

Another challenge for large classes is how to monitor what is happening with your students, within the classroom, and outside of it. Consider developing a "Student Management Team" - a group of 4-6 elected students that represent the interest of all of the students and have them meet with you to share concerns and ideas on how to make the class better.

¹⁵ For assistance, consult: *ILFE Specialized Booklet 1. Embracing Diversity: Tools for Positive Discipline in the Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Classroom - A Guide for Teachers and Teacher Educators*. Bangkok: UNESCO, 2006.



Teaching Effectively in Large Classes

How, Not Just What, to Teach

Close your eyes and think back to when you were a student; maybe you were one of many in a single classroom. When did you feel that you were just not learning anything? List your ideas on a piece of paper. Some of the most common reasons why students in large classes may not be able to follow what you are teaching are listed below.¹⁶ Are any of these reasons on your list?

- ◆ The lessons, lectures, or activities are not clear to the students.
- ◆ The teacher appears to be unenthusiastic or bored.
- ◆ The teaching method is boring.
- ◆ The examples used in class do not help the students to understand or apply the concepts being taught in a practical manner. The examples have no meaning.
- ◆ Important points are not emphasized, and main ideas are not summarized.

Do any of these reasons characterize the way you teach? Be honest! If they do, don't worry. The information in this section will help you to teach more effectively.

PLANNING LESSONS

In large classes, it is especially important to make the best use of your time and the time available for learning. This means planning in advance. A sizable portion of the work involved in teaching a large class takes place

¹⁶ Student Ratings of Teacher Effectiveness: Creating an Action Plan. Center for Support of Teaching and Learning, Syracuse University, New York. <http://cstl.syr.edu/cstl2/Home/Teaching%20Support/Teaching%20at%20SU/Student%20Ratings/12A500.htm> [accessed online on 1/30/2006].

well before the first day of class. For example, in a small class you can more easily give a spur-of-the-moment (spontaneous) assignment, but in a large class you will need more time to carefully plan your lesson and its activities.

Unfortunately, many teachers have never been taught how to plan lessons. They were taught to rely on textbooks, in some cases because a textbook is the only available teaching aid. In any case, a good lesson plan will help to relieve your own fears about teaching many students because you will know in advance what you will do, why, and how. You will be able to deliver a lesson calmly, and your confidence will carry over to your students who, in turn, will be more comfortable in learning from you. Even if you rely on a textbook, you must plan how to communicate the information in it so that all of your students will understand. For large classes, this planning is not a luxury; it is a necessity because it will bring order into the classroom environment, even though it may be crowded. The planning process centres around three major areas:

- ◆ *The classroom's physical and psycho-social environment, as noted above.*
- ◆ *The content, that is, what topic has been identified in your national curriculum documents, and how can this topic be made meaningful to your students and adapted to fit the local community; and*
- ◆ *The process, or how the content is taught, which may involve using different teaching methods to meet the different learning styles of students or to maximize the time available for teaching and learning.*

Following are some of the most important elements in lesson planning that can help you to manage the learning of many students.

Be comfortable with what you are teaching (topic, content). Teaching large classes becomes much more difficult if you are uncertain about what you are teaching. Read up on those topics that you will be covering so that you are confident in presenting them and can maintain a steady focus during your teaching. Your students will be able to follow your lecture and its activities easily, and will be less likely to become bored and disruptive. Think of questions to ask students, and try to anticipate questions that students might ask you. Review the course materials, assignments, and reading lists

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of other teachers who have taught the topic before. If possible, attend a class taught by an experienced teacher to see how he or she organizes the content and student activities in his or her large class.

Be clear about why you are teaching this topic and its learning objectives. Think about the knowledge, skills, and attitudes you want your students to learn, and choose two or three to focus on in one lesson. Explain clearly to all of your students what you want them to learn from a specific lesson. Some teachers with large classes write the learning objectives on the chalkboard or a large piece of poster paper before class begins. They then explain each objective to their students at the start of the class so everyone has a common understanding of the lesson to be learned.

Structure your lesson logically. The best way to lose students' attention in a large class is to present topics, concepts, and activities in a random manner. Some lessons and their content are best presented chronologically, such as historical events, or sequentially in a step-by-step approach (A leads to B which leads to C). At other times, you can describe a problem and then illustrate its solution, or, better yet, have your students work individually or in groups to illustrate how they might solve it.

Remember: How you organize information in your head may not be the same way that your students do. Consider the difficulty of the material you are teaching and your students' levels of ability as you decide what information to cover, in what order, and in what way (teaching method, examples, etc.).

Plan your teaching strategy and activities in advance. Although you may be tempted to do so, do not plan to lecture for an entire period. Since the attention span of the average student is limited to increments of 10-15 minutes, it is best if you change the format of the lecture every so often so that all of your students will remain attentive. In large classes especially, there is a tendency for students to start talking amongst themselves (or even to fall asleep) when they become bored. Therefore, plan on "mini-lectures" interspersed with brief activities, such as questions and answers or inviting students to share related examples or personal experiences.

In planning your lesson, identify activities in which all of the students can participate in an orderly manner, and select one or, better yet, two teaching methods for each class session: lectures, small group discussions,

independent work, role-playing, demonstrations, etc. Decide how you will: (a) prepare the class instruction, (b) present the new concepts, (c) have students apply what they have learned through activities (for example, through discussions, in-class writing activities, or collaborative work), and (e) assess whether students can put into practice what they have learned (for instance, through a short quiz, in-class writing assignment, a problem solving exercise, or homework).

While a lot of careful planning is needed to develop an appropriate learning activity, the major reward is better student learning in the large class. To start, instead of asking "What am I going to do in each class session?" focus on "What are my students going to do?" Make sure that whatever activities you choose, students will achieve their learning objectives.

Remember: Students in large classes will be more attentive if they are exposed to a variety of learning activities and teaching strategies.

Identify resources and materials. What resources do you need for the lesson? These resources may be physical resources, such as posters or books, or they can be human resources, such as community members who are experts at singing, dancing, or making local handicrafts. For your students to do an activity, such as making a local handicraft, what materials do they need, and can these materials be shared by several children, such as during group work? Can your students and their families supply some of these materials?

Recruit teaching assistants in advance. While you, as the class teacher, are responsible for your students' learning, you can get others to help you. These "teaching assistants" can be valuable assets to the large class because they will allow you to work with individual students, to manage activities effectively, and to observe the overall class. For instance, ask retired teachers, high school graduates, or parents to help manage your large class or to teach appropriate lessons. They can be particularly valuable in helping your students to conduct group activities. You can even ask older students or the best students in the class to act as peer teachers. Encourage "experts" from the community to be resource persons in classes that talk about special skills and knowledge.

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Pay attention to students with more individualized needs. Are there students in your classroom who will need extra help? What kind of support will you need to provide to these students? Do you need to help them on an individual basis, or can other students assist them? Do you need to make sure that they are sitting in an appropriate place in the classroom? Often it helps to have students who need extra help at the front of the classroom where you can easily help them, especially if your classroom is crowded.

Develop, and follow, a formal lesson plan. Good lesson plans achieve at least two objectives. First, they outline what the teacher hopes will occur during a class and, possibly more important, they convey to students that their teacher has thought about the session and its activities. Some of the ways you can plan your lessons well are by using a simple lesson planning outline, daily lesson planning format, or a lesson planning matrix as shown below.¹⁷ Try to use at least one of them in planning your lessons; maybe start with just one topic or lesson. They will give you a firm start in organizing your teaching in a large class setting; a way to monitor whether or not your students are understanding what is taught; and a chance for you to think about what to do next and how to improve your teaching.

Sample Lesson Planning Matrix

Topic	Objectives	Teaching Methods	Classroom Arrangement	Main Activities	Resources	Feedback/ Assessments	Reflection

¹⁷ Examples of these are given in: *Booklet 5: Managing Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Classrooms. Embracing Diversity: Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments.* Bangkok: UNESCO, 2004.

Budget your own time carefully. Teaching a large class takes a great deal of time and energy. If you feel rushed or overwhelmed, your students will feel it too. Set up weekly work schedules for yourself so that you are prepared for what needs to be done. Find ways to scale back other obligations, if you can, so that you have time to deal with the complexities of teaching such classes.¹⁸

STARTING THE TEACHING PROCESS

In a large class setting, how you teach is just as important, if not more so, than what you teach. You can prepare a wonderful lesson plan on an important topic, but it can easily be ruined if you present your lecture and its activities poorly.

One major challenge in teaching large classes is how to communicate with, arouse and hold the interest of many students at once so that they are motivated to learn, will listen to you, and will learn the knowledge and skills you are trying to teach. You can communicate effectively with your students through good speaking, writing, and listening skills, as well as through showing your students why what they are learning is important and how it can be used in their everyday life. Below are some additional tools for helping you to communicate better with your students as you begin the teaching process.

Get to class early. Communication begins when you and your students are in the same room. Some teachers - maybe because they dread teaching so many students or have other priorities - arrive just as the class is supposed to start or soon thereafter. Coming late, or rushing in, communicates to your students that you may not be enthusiastic about teaching them. You start to lose their interest even before class begins. However, getting to class early allows you to ease into your teaching, to relax a bit, before getting the attention of all of your many students. Moreover, if you begin getting to class 10 minutes earlier, you might discover that many of your students are getting there early as well, which avoids the confusion and disruption of many students arriving at once.

¹⁸ Preparing to Teach the Large Lecture Course. Tools for Teaching. University of California, Berkeley. www.teaching.berkeley.edu/bgd/largelecture.html [accessed online on 10/6/2005]

Get your students' attention at the beginning of class. When class begins, the first challenge is getting everyone's attention so that they focus on you and the topic you will be teaching. What is needed is an "attention getter." An attention getter does not need to be a flamboyant action. It can be as simple as asking an interesting question, or making a statement, and then asking students to respond to it. For instance, if you will be discussing occupations and want to include the issue of gender, you might start the class by saying, "When I was walking to school today, I saw many of your parents working. I saw your mothers cleaning your houses and cooking, while I saw your fathers' going out to the fields. Why are your mothers doing housekeeping work, and your fathers doing work outside? Why don't your fathers clean the house and your mothers work in the fields?" For younger students, you could ask, "What are your favourite toys? How many boys like to play with dolls? How many girls like to play with toy cars?" Why do you like these toys?" If you are teaching about seasons and seasonal fruits, you could ask the question, "If a watermelon could talk, what would it say about when and where it is planted and harvested?" If you're teaching science, ask a student to bring in a tool or other piece of equipment that will demonstrate the principles of the day's lessons. Ask the student to talk about how his or her family uses the tool. Use this information to start the lesson and to get — and hold — your students' attention.

Emphasize important information at the beginning, during, and end of class. In large classes, chances are greater that some students will not hear, or know, what information is important for a lesson. Moreover, research shows that students are able to remember information best at the beginning of a class. Their retention decreases to low levels as the class period continues, and then it increases slightly near the end, as they anticipate the ending of class.¹⁹ Making sure that all of your students know what information is important *as early as possible* is thus critical in large classes. At the start of class, and hopefully after your "attention getter," some teachers announce the importance of a concept or idea before presenting it; for instance, they may say "This is really important, so you will all need to pay attention. Is everyone ready?" Writing important points on the board for everyone to see also helps to ensure that they are communicated to your students. Plan on rephrasing important points several times during the lesson because no single explanation will be clear

¹⁹ Ericksen, S. C. *The Lecture*. Ann Arbor: Center for Research on Teaching and Learning, University of Michigan, 1978.

to all of your students. At the end of your lecture or class lesson, it is also good to summarize important ideas by saying, "The most important thing to remember here is..." You can also conduct an activity or discussion at the end of the lesson that reinforces the learning objectives. For instance, in large classes, randomly select 5-10 students at the end of the class session to describe what they have learned, to present questions they have, as well as to make suggestions for how they, and their peers, might learn better.

Use relevant examples. When teaching, you should do more than repeat the information in a textbook. Instead, your lessons should illustrate the textbook's concepts using real-world examples. Research shows that an important characteristic of an effective teacher is the ability to take difficult concepts and transform them in ways that students can understand through the use of examples.²⁰ Develop examples that draw upon students' experiences or are relevant to their lives. For instance, link changes of the season to when certain fruits or crops are grown, and then link this to changing weather patterns. Use different examples to represent the same phenomena, such as the many different objects that are circular. When you use different examples, you increase the chances that every student will understand. You might even dramatize important concepts or images. For instance, if you're talking about the heart, compare it to the size of your fist.

Remember: *The choice of examples is very important. Your students will remember, and listen to you more, if the examples are anecdotal (short and entertaining about a real incident or person), personal, relevant, or humorous.*

Consider different learning styles. Students learn in different ways because of hereditary factors, experience, environment, or personality. Over the years, we have learned that 30% of students learn successfully when they hear something, 33% when they see something, and 37% through movement. As the old saying goes, "I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand."²¹ This is very important! If we only

²⁰ Preparing to Teach the Large Lecture Course. Tools for Teaching. University of California, Berkeley. www.teaching.berkeley.edu/bgd/largelecture.html [accessed online on 10/6/2005]

²¹ *Booklet 4: Creating Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Classrooms. Embracing Diversity: Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments.* Bangkok: UNESCO, 2004.

teach students by having them listen to us, then only about one-third of our students is learning anything. The same situation exists when we ask them only to write something down in their notebooks. It is, thus, important to devise different ways of communicating information that can appeal to learners with other preferences, such as through essays, problem solving exercises, drawings, games, music, group and individual exercises, etc.

USING A VARIETY OF TEACHING METHODS

Students in large classes will be more attentive and their potential for learning will be increased when they are exposed to a wide variety of teaching methods and learning experiences, such as the following. No one method is best; they all mutually support one another.

Lectures

Lecturing is perhaps the oldest and still most commonly used teaching method, and it is the one most often used for large classes. Lecturing has several strengths, as well as weaknesses.²² The strengths include the following:

- ◆ Lectures can actively communicate interesting aspects of the subject being taught. The teacher can convey personal enthusiasm in a way that no book, media, or activity can. Enthusiasm stimulates interest, and interested, stimulated students tend to learn more.
- ◆ Lectures can be used to organize material in a special way. They may be a faster, simpler method of presenting information to students. Lectures are particularly useful for students who read poorly or who are unable to organize print material.
- ◆ Lectures permit maximum teacher control. The lecture format allows the teacher to be in control of the pacing of the class and the accuracy and range of material presented. Lectures can convey large amounts of factual information in a limited time frame.

²² Modes of Teaching. <http://ftad.osu.edu/Publications/TeachingHandbook/chap-5.pdf#search='5%3A%20%20Modes%20of%20Teaching'> [accessed online on 2/6/2006]

- ◆ Lectures can speak to many listeners at the same time.
- ◆ Lectures present a minimum threat to students, since they are not required to do anything, which they may prefer.
- ◆ Lectures emphasize learning by listening, an advantage for students who learn well this way.

Researchers and an increasing number of teachers, however, have identified the following weaknesses of traditional lecturing.

- ◆ Lectures put students in a passive, rather than an active, role and are less effective than active learning in promoting thinking or changing attitudes.
- ◆ Lectures encourage one-way communication. They lack feedback to both the teacher and student about a student's learning.
- ◆ Lectures require effective speaking skills and use of voice, which are usually not stressed in teacher training curricula.
- ◆ Lectures place the burden of organizing and synthesizing the content solely on the teacher, with no student involvement (and little learning).
- ◆ Lectures assume that all students learn in the same way, at the same pace, and at the same level of understanding, which is never true.
- ◆ Lectures tend to be forgotten quickly. Most students cannot listen effectively to a long lecture (over 15 minutes in length).

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If you choose to give a lecture to your large class, remember the following points. Some of these were explained earlier, but it is good to mention them again here because they build on one another.²³

- ◆ Be comfortable with your instructional material.
- ◆ Plan on short mini-lectures supported by student activities.
- ◆ At the start of the lecture, raise a question to be answered by the end of the hour, or use another type of "attention getter," such as a personal anecdote or by telling a funny story or joke.
- ◆ Provide an overview of the lecture (or its learning objectives). List the main points or areas to be discussed on the chalkboard or a piece of poster paper. This is your lecture's "roadmap" and students can refer to it as you lecture.
- ◆ Explain the relationship of the lecture's topic to the real world and the students' daily lives, as well as to previous lectures and materials.
- ◆ Present your lecture in an interesting manner. For many students, memorable lectures are those that are presented by teachers who have effective presentation skills. These are teachers who:
 - Vary their voice projection (such as raising and lowering their voices), enunciate clearly, and speak at an appropriate pace (such as slowing down and repeating important points).
 - Come out from behind their desk and walk down the aisles, and get close to students if and whenever possible.
 - Speak to the students, not to the chalkboard, walls, notes, or floor, and maintain eye contact with the students.
 - Use humour or other methods to show their enthusiasm for a lesson or concept.

²³ Modes of Teaching. <http://ftad.osu.edu/Publications/TeachingHandbook/chap-5.pdf#search='5%3A%20%20Modes%20of%20Teaching'> [accessed online on 2/6/2006]

- ◆ Ask for and respond to student feedback by:
 - Keeping eye contact with students during the lecture to identify nonverbal clues on whether they are paying attention, understanding, or agreeing with you.
 - Encouraging responses by asking a specific question, such as, "Can anyone tell me when we use mathematics in our daily lives?"
 - Involving students, even in large classes, by asking for a show of hands, or hand out different coloured index cards that indicate different responses. It often works to call on a student who gives the correct answer and have him or her explain it.
 - Using praise. Making positive comments when warranted will increase learning.
- ◆ Restate the major points at the end of the lecture, or ask a student to summarize the lecture's key concepts (this may tell you quickly what was learned and what was not remembered so that you can improve your lecture the next time).
- ◆ Invite questions and comments by asking for oral responses or through anonymous surveys that are passed out and returned at the end of class.²⁴

²⁴ Preston, J. A. and Shackelford, R. *A System for Improving Distance and Large Scale Classes*. Georgia Institute of Technology. <http://cims.clayton.edu/jpreston/Pubs/iticse98.htm> [accessed online on 10/6/2005]

Active Learning Strategies

Tell me, and I'll listen.
Show me, and I'll understand.
Involve me, and I'll learn.

- Teton Lakota Indian²⁵

Active learning involves students doing an activity and thinking about what they are doing, rather than passively listening. In active learning, there is less emphasis on transmitting information from the teacher to the student (such as through lecturing) and greater emphasis on developing students' analytical and critical thinking skills, as well as on exploring attitudes and values held about course material. Through active learning, both students and teachers participate in the learning process, and they can receive more and faster feedback.²⁶

Numerous studies show the importance of active learning in improving student learning, increasing retention and application, as well as promoting continuous learning.²⁷ In large classes, however, teachers often tend to limit their teaching methods to lecturing which, if done in a formal way, requires very little effort from the students who remain largely passive. Lecturing is not a bad method of teaching, per se. However, since students learn in many different ways and their active participation improves their learning, a variety of strategies for teaching and active learning should be used. You can improve the effectiveness of a lecture by incorporating active learning activities within it, such as in-class exercises and group exercises.

²⁵ Cited in: Developing Thinking in Large Classes. Teaching Technologies, Center for University Teaching, University of Ottawa, July 1997. www.uottawa.ca/academic/cut/options/July_97/Opt_thinking.htm [accessed online on 19/7/2005]

²⁶ Implementing Active Learning. Houghton Mifflin College Division. Online Teaching Center http://college.hmco.com/psychology/brehm/social_psychology/6e/instructors/active_learning.html [accessed online on 2/6/2006]

²⁷ Frederick, P.J. "Student Involvement: Active Learning in Large Classes" in Weimer, M (Ed.), *Teaching Large Classes Well: New Direction in Teaching and Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1987.

In-Class Exercises

In a small class, you might be able to persuade many of your students to participate in an activity, such as getting them asking and answering questions, discussing issues, laughing at a humorous, but relevant, anecdote, etc. But in a large class, you will probably have difficulty persuading most students to talk in front of 60 or more of their classmates; it feels too risky for them. A different approach is thus needed. A technique you can count on is the in-class exercise.

As you lecture about a topic or explain the solution to a problem, instead of just posing questions to the class as a whole and enduring the ensuing time-wasting silence, occasionally assign a task and give the students anywhere from 30 seconds to five minutes to come up with a response. Anything can be used as the basis for in-class exercises. For example, pose a problem and ask students to:

- ◆ Draw and label a map, diagram, or a flow chart.
- ◆ Make an outline of how they might solve a problem, or what they think is the correct answer, and why.
- ◆ List how and why a concept is useful in daily life.
- ◆ Brainstorm why a certain solution might be correct or incorrect depending upon the situation.

Other examples of in-class exercises that you can try include the following:²⁸

- ◆ Short in-class writing assignments, such as "minute papers" or "minute pictures" for younger students, with selected students reading their papers aloud or presenting their pictures to the class to stimulate discussion.
- ◆ Oral summaries of the previous lecture, readings, etc. that are prepared and presented by students.

²⁸ Bonwell, C. C. *Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom*. St Louis: Center for Teaching and Learning, St. Louis College of Pharmacy, 1995.

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- ◆ Asking students about what they understood to start class discussion.
- ◆ Surveys, questionnaires, formative (ungraded) quizzes to assess understanding.
- ◆ Reports on how the lecture's topic can be used in real life.
- ◆ Students write exam questions related to lecture materials.
- ◆ Student analysis of a problem, poem, photograph, etc.
- ◆ Solving of a problem by students, followed by evaluating each other's work.
- ◆ Demonstrations illustrating a concept from the lecture.

In a large class setting, these spontaneous in-class exercises get students acting and reflecting, the two main ways by which human beings learn. They will ensure that every student will listen to you, especially if you use them regularly, but sporadically, so students don't know when you will give them an exercise. They will also give you immediate feedback about whether or not your students understand what you are presenting, and, if done well, can substitute for "homework" and the need to grade many papers overnight.

Remember: Whichever in-class exercise you use, you should call on individuals to present their responses. If you never do this, students will have little incentive to work on the exercises when you assign them, and many won't. But if they think they may be called on, they won't want to be embarrassed, and you'll get 90+ percent of them actively learning what you're teaching.²⁹

²⁹ Felder, R. *Beating the Numbers Game: Effective Teaching in Large Classes*. North Carolina State University, 1997. www.ncsu.edu/felder-public/Papers/Largeclasses.htm [accessed online on 10/7/2005]

Group Exercises and Cooperative Learning Objectives, Activities, and Design

A group exercise can be conducted as an in-class exercise or out-of-class assignment, and it is a very good way to manage the active learning of students in a large class. Students work together to discuss or solve problems, a process that is also called collaborative learning or cooperative learning. In a large class, students working in pairs or larger groups can help each other and learn from each other. They don't get bored listening to their teacher talk. Group exercises give students an opportunity to meet and work with one another, a good first step toward building a sense of community. Moreover, in the "real" world, working with others is an important skill. Increasing opportunities for students to work together can help them develop this skill. In addition, small-group work encourages students who may be reluctant to participate in a large class setting to become active learners. Cooperative learning also helps to hold students' attention, a special concern for large classes, and to increase student thinking.

There are three main objectives in using small groups in large classes:³⁰

1. To provide energy and interaction, enabling more students to think during class, to participate actively, and to generate more ideas about a text or topic.
2. To give the teacher an opportunity to interact with more students as he or she moves around the room.
3. To provide a short break and shift in energy, which will make students more likely to listen to the teacher's next 20 minutes of lecturing.

You can use three major types of group exercises to achieve these objectives and contribute to a variety of learning goals in large classes.³¹

³⁰ *Developing Thinking in Large Classes*. Ottawa: Center for University Teaching, University of Ottawa, July 1997.

³¹ *Large Classes: A Teaching Guide - Collaborative/Cooperative Learning*. Center for Teaching Excellence, University of Maryland, 2005. www.cte.umd.edu/library/large/coll.html [accessed online on 10/7/2005]

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1. **Cognitive development exercises.** Place a group of students in a real or simulated situation and ask them to solve a problem. Alternatively, write a question or statement with mistakes in it on the chalkboard. These mistakes can be structural (such as grammatical errors) or mistakes in interpretation (such as errors in judgement or in the use of facts). Using language and terms that they can understand, ask them to work in small groups and describe the problem or mistake (if not already given), analyze its causes (diagnose), determine why these causes exist (interpret and analyze), and what solution(s) can be proposed or made. In mathematics, for example, you can give a group of students a “story problem” to solve; in science, you can ask them to classify a group of seemingly unrelated objects into discrete categories and justify why they chose these categories.
2. **Area exploration exercises.** Assign each group a specific topic to study (research), and give them access to resources from which they can learn important information about it. These resources can be books, or they can be people in the community who have knowledge about how to do a special activity (such as a traditional dance or song) or to make a certain object. When the groups are ready, they prepare and deliver a presentation designed to teach the class what they have learned.
3. **Psychomotor exercises.** These exercises focus on developing a particular skill, such as drawing, editing, quick problem solving, etc. In groups, the students practice and are critiqued by their fellow group members. At the end of the exercise, volunteers demonstrate their new skill for the class.

When designing your group exercises (or even for individual exercises), the task that the students are to complete should be specific and clear. Specific tasks, such as completing a worksheet, solving a problem, or answering specific questions, will keep your students focused.

Just as your task should be clear, your instructions to the groups should be clear, simple, and oriented towards completing the task. If possible, tell them what the final product should be like (an example could sometimes be helpful here). Be sure to choose a time limit that is appropriate for the task and helps the groups stay focused. For example, you might say, “In your group of four or five students, come up with four or five instances in

which the ability to multiply numbers is valuable in daily life, such as when your parents sell their grain at the market. You have 10 minutes to finish this exercise." Ask each group to assign one person to keep a record of their findings. After the time is up, or when all of the groups are finished, randomly select 5 or 8 groups to report their findings. Thereafter, ask the other groups if they have different answers to add to the findings that have already been made.

Plan a group exercise in which each group member will have their own special task that is connected to the others. You can even have each group sign a contract in which they each agree to do their own task and finish it by a certain date.

A challenge of teaching a large class may also be that you do not have enough books or teaching and learning aids. Nonetheless, group exercises can help you manage with few textbooks, or even one text book. In designing your group exercises, plan a variety of activities that can be used when you have only one book.

In conducting group exercises, organize the groups to suit the student's abilities. Teachers of large classes have tried different strategies.

- ◆ **Mixed-ability groups.** The more able learners in the group can help the others to master the work so that the teacher need not teach some parts.
- ◆ **Same-ability groups.** The teacher can leave the groups of faster learners to get on with the work on their own. The teacher can then give extra help to individual learners in the slower groups.
- ◆ **Group leaders/monitors.** Some teachers appoint faster, more able learners as group leaders or monitors who can help slower learners.

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Monitor the groups yourself. During group work, you need to move around the classroom to see what progress learners are making and what problems are coming up. You can give advice, encouragement, and extra individual help where it is needed.³²

Evaluation

There are several ways to evaluate group exercises so that you know everyone worked on the task and learned from it; for instance:³³

1. Require some type of **group product** for exercises that are amenable to grading.
Remember: Grading 10 papers or projects is much easier than grading 60.
2. Carefully observe the groups and their members. Grade individual participation as well as the quality of group work.
3. Occasionally require an **individual product** based on group work, such as a one-minute paper about an issue learned from the exercise, a short quiz, or an oral presentation by randomly selected group members. This rewards students who were actively involved in group learning and discourages "free-loading" or the non-participation of some group members.
4. Use peer evaluations at the end of an exercise; for instance, give each student in a group a "score card" and ask him or her to give a grade to each of his or her group members. Be sure to have the students fill out the cards individually and privately, without the other group members watching. This method is especially helpful for judging the relative contributions of members in a large class, where it can be difficult for you to personally evaluate all individuals.

³² Teaching Large Classes. Teachers in Action, BBC World Service / OLSET. http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/methodology/large_classes.shtml#discipline

³³ Dion, L. "But I Teach a Large Class," in: *A Newsletter of the Center for Teaching Effectiveness*, Spring 1996, University of Delaware. www.udel.edu/pbl/cte/spr96-bisc2.html [accessed online on 10/6/2005]

Other Active Learning Strategies

There are many other active learning strategies that you can use in large classes. Not all of your students need to participate in all of these activities, especially those that require individual answers; in large classes, there might not be enough time. However, all of your students should be given the chance to participate in many of them. The challenge lies in selecting the type of activity to match the purpose or objective you have in mind for your lesson.³⁴

Round. Each student has a 2- or 3-minute opportunity to express his or her point of view on a given topic, or passes, while others listen. For older students, the topic can be a controversial or thought-provoking issue, such as "Education is valuable for my daily life." For younger students, choose a simple topic, such as "What I Like About School." This activity will elicit a range of viewpoints that you can consider in delivering your lessons, as well as building a sense of "safe participation" and confidence among your students.

Brainstorm. Ask students to individually think about an issue or a problem and to list its possible causes, such as "Why is water becoming scarce?" or "How can we improve our school?" Assign individuals into groups, and ask them to share their ideas and compile a list of possibilities. Stress that people working together can create more than an individual alone.

Simulations and Games. Ask students to role-play a situation; for instance, "What would happen if you were confronted by a bully? What would they do?" By creating situations that are momentarily real, your students can practice coping with stressful, unfamiliar, or complex situations. Also encourage games that place students in a new role, one that other students may be facing, in order to encourage empathy. For example, blindfold students and ask them to identify their friends just by listening to their voices or touching their faces.³⁵

³⁴ Adapted from: Drummond, T. A Brief Summary of the Best Practices in College Teaching. North Seattle Community College, Washington. www.fctel.uncc.edu/pedagogy/basicscoursedevelop/BestPractices.html [accessed online on 10/7/2005]

³⁵ For other games, see: *Booklet 6: Creating a Healthy and Protective ILFE. Embracing Diversity: Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments.* UNESCO Bangkok, 2004.

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Concept Models. This strategy works especially well for science or mathematics lessons. Give students handouts, or list on the chalkboard, a series of leading questions. Students work in small groups - or you can even lead a whole class discussion - to figure out how something works or build a conceptual model. They can make their own diagrams and record their own observations.

Problem Solving and Demonstrations. Encourage students, individually or in groups, to explain how they arrived at a solution to a problem. You can also ask them to demonstrate how something works; for instance, how does a thermometer work or why do the tires of a bicycle move.

Peer Teaching or Learning Cells. Randomly select students to read about a specific topic and then teach the essence of the material to an assigned partner or group or the entire class.

Poster Sessions. Groups of three to five students each complete a poster display that conveys the group's work in (a) identifying and clarifying a problem or controversial issue, (b) locating appropriate information and resources concerning their issue, and (c) reporting on the evidence they find. This method can also be used to demonstrate Concept Models, as described above. For young students, have them draw a poster on an important topic, such as "My Dream School" and, if they are able, ask them to write about it in one corner of the poster. This will help them to integrate and improve upon their artistic and writing skills.



Evaluating Learning and Teaching in Large Classes

THE ROLE OF FEEDBACK

A major difficulty in teaching large classes is finding ways to provide feedback to, and receive it from, students. Feedback helps students to see how well they are doing and whether they understand the material you are teaching them. Consequently, the more feedback you give them, the better, because it will not only help them, but also you. For instance, ask students about what they think about the pace of your lectures and activities: Are you going too fast? How do the lectures relate to the main activities, including any readings? Are your students understanding your examples and how are they being used to illustrate major points? Besides talking with your students, in-class writing exercises and group activities, as described in the last section, can provide this information.

GIVING ASSIGNMENTS

Assignments are one of the major means by which we help students to learn important concepts. They are also the means to begin assessing our students' achievements so that we can give them constructive feedback. While the number of students in a large class can make it difficult to review many individual papers, projects, or exams, this should not deter you in giving students relevant assignments, particularly written ones. Listed below are some suggestions for making sure that your assignments are meaningful, for you and your students.

Select assignments that are relevant to your learning objectives and outcomes. Assignments are an important part of the planning and learning process, especially in large classes where there is a need to track the learning of many students. As you design your lessons, adopt a student-centred approach by concentrating on what your students will be doing to attain learning objectives and desired learning outcomes. Important questions to ask yourself are: Do my assignments fit the kind of learning I want for my students? Do they fit the different learning styles that

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my students may rely upon? Do they help them to understand important concepts or learn important information? Do they help them to achieve good learning outcomes?

Design assignments so that they actually assess whether or not your students are learning what you are teaching. In many large classes, teachers place an emphasis on getting the right answer to a problem, as assessed by true-false questions or multiple-choice questions, which are fast and easy to grade. Student learning outcomes, however, should also include developing students' abilities to explain the process (the "how") by which they solved the problem, not just give the answer. In large classes, this can be done in many ways, such as asking students to show how they solved a problem given in their homework and then choosing good examples to show to the entire class. During class, you can ask for volunteers to explain the problem solving process to the class. You can also give a problem to your students and ask them to work in groups to describe how the problem can be solved.

Design assignments that reveal whether students can apply what they are learning to everyday situations, not simply just understand the process. Give in-class exercises and out-of-class assignments to see if they have developed this ability. For instance, give them an assignment, either individually or in groups, to observe how mathematical concepts are used in a market or in building a house. These strategies will help you to check the accuracy of your students' thinking processes and analytical skills. Based on your assessment, you can then give them immediate feedback to improve their skills.

Remember: Many students can solve a problem, but you should want them to know why they got a particular answer, not just how. This is the true proof of learning in any subject.³⁶

³⁶ Student Ratings of Teacher Effectiveness: Creating an Action Plan. Center for Support of Teaching and Learning, Syracuse University, New York. <http://cstl.syr.edu/cstl2/Home/Teaching%20Support/Teaching%20at%20SU/Student%20Ratings/12A500.htm> [accessed online on 1/30/2006].

Provide clear directions for all assignments. When you were a student, did you ever say to yourself, "I don't know what my teacher really wants me to do for this assignment"? I think many of us have. In order to be able to give good feedback, we must clearly define the assignment we are giving students so that they know what is expected of them. Some teachers give a verbal assignment at the end of class as homework. Unfortunately, not all students in large classes will hear, or hear completely, the assignment, or they might not have time to write it down in their notebooks. Whether it is an in-class assignment or for homework, the best strategy is to give an assignment sheet, one that is preferably handed out, not written on the chalkboard (since it can quickly be erased). On the one hand, this sheet will help students, since they will know exactly what to do after they return home or when working in class. On the other hand, it can help you as well. It will force you to think through each aspect of the assignment before you share it with your students. This will allow you to design the assignment so that it measures the knowledge and skills that you want it to measure. Be sure to discuss the assignment sheet with your students. This is time well spent since it will avoid student confusion and stress. Questions that students ask during the discussion of the assignment will also help them to begin to frame the work. You can also use this time to anticipate problems and ways to avoid them.

Give a variety of opportunities for students to show what they are learning. Giving students many opportunities to show what they are learning will give you a more accurate picture of their learning achievement and a more informed basis for giving feedback. It is important, however, to use a variety of methods - such as projects, group presentations, papers, exams, and other types of assignments - that are closely tied to learning outcomes. Moreover, research indicates that students are motivated to learn by constructive feedback and evidence of their progress. Students need to know what they are doing well in addition to what they need to improve. It is important to praise their strengths and to be as constructive and helpful as possible in pointing out their weaknesses.³⁷

³⁷ Ibid.

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In large classes, it is very difficult to provide every student with individualized feedback. To identify which students need more personalized feedback, and to manage the paperwork in large classes, many teachers use the "portfolio" method. A portfolio is a file, such as a manila folder, containing samples of a student's assignments, such as essays, stories, and reports; illustrations, pictures, maps, and diagrams; as well as mathematics worksheets, other assignments, and graphs. Students' non-curricular activities can also be recorded, such as taking responsibility in a classroom activity. The material in a portfolio is organized in chronological order with each item containing a date and the context in which it was produced. For instance, the context might be: *'This was a piece of unaided free writing. Only the theme was given and some basic vocabulary. Thirty minutes were given for this task.'* The portfolio is, thus, a record of each student's process of learning, that is, what each student has learned and how he or she has learned it. It follows the student's successes rather than his or her failures. Once the portfolio is organized, you and your students can evaluate their achievements. At least twice every semester or term, review the whole range of work to identify those students who need more individual attention and in what area(s). Ask them in what ways they learn best, and decide what additional activities the student can do to improve his or her learning.³⁸

GIVING EXAMS

Perhaps the most popular way to measure learning achievement is the examination. In large classes, teachers and students, alike, fear them. Students fear taking and failing them, and teachers fear grading them.

Examinations can be either objective (such as multiple-choice exams), subjective (such as essay exams), or a combination of both. In some cases, however, they may not really tell you if your students have truly learned and can apply what you have taught them. This is especially the case for multiple-choice or true-false exams that rely mainly on memorization rather than application. How can the exam process be improved? Here are some options. Can you think of more?

³⁸ Booklet 5: *Managing Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Classrooms. Embracing Diversity: Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments*. Bangkok: UNESCO, 2004.

Create exams that “look” familiar to students. This helps to relieve the exam anxiety that many students experience. Exam questions should be in the same form as those that you used in quizzes, homework assignments, lectures, or discussions. When students can see a link between the things they are asked to do during class and their private study time, and the things they will be asked on the exam, they will be more motivated to make the effort.

Conduct review sessions. As exam time gets closer, set aside class time to conduct review sessions either with the entire class or in groups. One-third of the session time can be spent in presenting a short lecture highlighting the major points of a topic, and then the remaining time for student questions and/or a short practice exercise. These review sessions will also give you feedback about what your students have actually learned, and they will help you to design more effective exams that demonstrate that learning.

Develop exams that demonstrate learning achievement. Rather than, or in conjunction with, standard multiple-choice exams, try one or more of the following to see if your students' can apply what they have learned.³⁹

- ◆ Add short essay questions; control the length of responses by providing students with a limited amount of space for answers (an “answer” box). With such a small space, your students must get to the point. Grading 60 four-line answers is much easier than grading 60 full-page or even half-page answers.
- ◆ Ask students to answer questions using diagrams, flow charts, or pictures. These are short and easy to grade, but can be very informative about student analytical skills.
- ◆ For some multiple-choice questions, ask the student to choose the correct answer and then provide a one- or two-line explanation of how they got that answer.

³⁹ Student Ratings of Teacher Effectiveness: Creating an Action Plan. Center for Support of Teaching and Learning, Syracuse University, New York. <http://cstl.syr.edu/cstl2/Home/Teaching%20Support/Teaching%20at%20SU/Student%20Ratings/12A500.htm> [accessed online on 1/30/2006].

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- ◆ Give group examinations. The same grade can be assigned to all members of the group, based on the "group product" they produce. For individuals, ask group members to anonymously grade each other, and then assign the average of the group's grade to each student.
- ◆ As a writing exercise, have students generate their own examination questions and answers based on your class lectures and activities. These items can be used on actual tests, and students may understand them better than ones that you develop.

Admit that not all exams are perfect. In large classes where the number of students and the diversity of their learning styles is high, the "one exam fits all" strategy may not work well. There may be some items on an exam that are problematic for either individual students, many students, or for the entire class. Research indicates that students are more satisfied with an objective exam if they are permitted to comment on the fairness of questions.⁴⁰ On the exam, consider leaving a space for older students to comment on certain items. If the comment shows that the student understood the material, but not the question (which might have been poorly asked), then the student can be given credit for the item. You can also use this method to identify exam items/questions that were problematic for many students or even the entire class. For younger students, keep a tally of the items that are most often answered incorrectly. For these items, if the problem was due to poor wording, then the item should be deleted. If it comes from poor understanding, you will need to re-teach the concept that you were testing.

⁴⁰ Large Classes: A Teaching Guide - Giving Students Feedback. Center for Teaching Excellence, University of Maryland, 2005. www.cte.umd.edu/library/large/feeds.html [accessed online on 10/7/2005]

GRADING ASSIGNMENTS AND EXAMS

Give prompt feedback on assignments. In large classes, teachers often do not have time to grade homework assignments for 60+ students. As mentioned previously, one way to minimize the amount of assignments to grade is to have students do assignments in groups. It's easier to grade 10 assignments than 60! Another method is to assign a short in-class assignment for individual students and have them bring you their completed assignment when they finish. You can grade it on the spot and give them instant feedback. This quick response ensures that your students are still thinking about the assignment, and thus your feedback will have a more meaningful impact. Moreover, your prompt feedback indicates to your students the importance of what they are learning and that you are concerned about how well they are learning the lesson. To avoid a line at your desk, ask your students to take numbered pieces of paper when they have finished their work and to come to your desk when their number is called. To give them something to do while they are waiting to see you, give them a short writing assignment, maybe for extra credit.

You can even ask older students in upper grades to help you grade your students' assignments; or your students can exchange their assignments and they can grade each other's work. You will need to monitor their grading, however. But it can be a more enjoyable exercise to see how students assess each other, and you can get valuable feedback on what they understand and what they do not.

If homework is an essential part of your class and you do not have anyone to help you to grade your students' work, grade samples of homework assignments to save time. For the assignments that you do not grade, distribute an answer sheet so students can assess their own performance, or set aside class time to go through the answers to the homework with the entire class.

To combat the burden of grading many exams, involve your students. Whenever possible, give short exams, not ones that take up the entire class time. Your students can then help you with the grading process. For the objective questions asked on exams, some teachers prepare answer sheets in advance. Once all of the students are finished, they exchange their exams, and use the answer sheets to grade their partner's exam. The teacher then collects the exams, checks the grading, and grades whatever

subjective (essay) questions are on the exams. Instead of using answer sheets, another way to do this is for the teacher to read aloud the correct answers to each objective question, while the students grade each other's exams. Using this, or a similar strategy, students don't need to wait several days, or weeks, to find out how they did and what they need to improve.

REFLECTING ON YOUR TEACHING

Improving the learning of students in large classes challenges us to keep growing professionally, to strive to improve what we teach and how we teach. Otherwise, we run the risk both of becoming bored and of our students not learning to their fullest.

Good teachers of large classes talk to their students about teaching. They urge their students to tell them about their teaching, what's good and what's not good. The major topics of concern are "to what extent is the classroom environment comfortable, are the lessons and activities well-planned, are the lectures understandable to the students, do the students feel comfortable in talking with their teacher, are assignments appropriate, are they graded fairly and returned promptly, etc.

To get this student feedback, some teachers develop a "mid-term teaching exam" containing questions on all of these topics of concern. The suggestions that the teachers receive in the middle of the school year help them to improve their teaching for the remainder of the year. Likewise, students develop a useful sense of participation in the teaching of the class.⁴¹

Another means of capturing the student perspective is through anonymous surveys. These surveys allow us to collect information from students that is prevalent in small classes but usually lost in large ones. Anonymous surveys establish a safe environment for students to tell the truth about their feelings and problems with the class. From these surveys, we can learn useful information about our students' perceptions of the class, fairness of assignments and grades, how long students worked on an assignment or studied for a test, or other such useful information.⁴²

⁴¹ Hipple, T. and McClam T. Tips for Better Teaching. Chronicle of Higher Education Career Network Pages, 11 March 2002. <http://chronicle.com/jobs/2002/03/2002031102c.htm>

⁴² Preston, J. A. and Shackelford, R. A System for Improving Distance and Large-Scale Classes. Georgia Institute of Technology. <http://cims.clayton.edu/jpreston/Pubs/iticse98.htm> [accessed online on 10/6/2005]

Some teachers even ask students to assess individual assignments. The students complete a short evaluation that asks them to identify the difficulties they had with the assignment, ways to improve it, and what they had learned (or not learned) as a result of completing the assignment. This helps the teacher assess if the assignment is getting at the type of learning that is desired. It also allows them to modify the assignment for future students.⁴³

Good teachers of large classes talk with their colleagues about their teaching. How many times have you talked with your fellow teachers about their interests, their families, what is happening in their lives, and the like? You might have even discussed with them about working on a school committee or community service organization. These are common topics of interest among teachers.

But how often do you and your colleagues talk about your teaching, about the problems you are having in teaching a large class, or about your classroom success stories (not just those "difficult students")? If you don't talk about these (and other) issues, would such discussions make a difference in the quality of teaching? For you? For your colleagues? For your students? It probably would. And how about asking a colleague to visit your class, with the understanding that you later visit hers or his? For teachers of large classes, such an experience - and the later exchange of ideas about what works and doesn't work - could be extremely valuable. What your colleagues can tell you - the good things and bad - and what you can tell them will help you to become better teachers.⁴⁴

Another way of getting this feedback is to build networks. Contact government education agencies, local non-government organizations working on education issues, as well as teacher training institutions in your country and locale. Ask them if they know of any teachers working on improving learning in large classes. Contact these teachers and ask if you and maybe some of your colleagues could visit their school to learn how to better teach children in large classes more effectively. If you cannot visit these schools because it is too expensive, ask if they can send you any resources that you can use in your classroom, such as sample lesson plans, descriptions of

⁴³ Student Ratings of Teacher Effectiveness: Creating an Action Plan. Center for Support of Teaching and Learning, Syracuse University, New York. <http://cstl.syr.edu/cstl2/Home/Teaching%20Support/Teaching%20at%20SU/Student%20Ratings/12A500.htm> [accessed online on 1/30/2006].

⁴⁴ Hipple, T. and McClam T. "Tips for Better Teaching" in *Chronicle of Higher Education Career Network Pages*, 11 March 2002. <http://chronicle.com/jobs/2002/03/2002031102c.htm>

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teaching methods, or samples of instructional materials and group activities that you can easily reproduce. If the resources are available, ask them also to visit your school to get their advice, as well as to talk with school administrators and other teachers about effective ways to teach large classes, especially those that involve active learning rather than simply lecturing. Above all: don't be disheartened. Build networks and a good relationship with those who know how to teach large classes, and keep in contact with them.

Remember: Good teachers of large classes reflect on their teaching. They don't reflect on the problems of having many students in a classroom. It's a given fact, and nothing can usually be done about it. Instead, good teachers think about their teaching - all of it, their own classroom behaviour, the plans they have, the activities they use, the backgrounds and experiences of their students, what and if their students are learning, why and why not. And good teachers do more than think about their teaching; they use whatever means possible to improve upon it. Hopefully through this document, you have learned some valuable tips and suggestions about how to improve teaching and learning in your large class. Which ideas do you want to try first?



Top 20 Tips for Teaching Large Classes

1. Plan ahead and prepare thoroughly; problems can be magnified in large classes, but they can also be dealt with effectively.
2. Maximize classroom space by removing unnecessary furniture, and use space outside of the classroom as learning and activity centres. Ask your students for suggestions on arranging the classroom in a comfortable manner.
3. Do everything possible to get to know your students. A positive relationship with your students builds a willingness on their part to actively participate in class.
4. Have your students introduce themselves to everyone in an interactive manner. You introduce yourself, as well.
5. Move around the class when talking - this engages students more actively, and it can reduce the physical and social distance between you and your students.
6. Be natural and personal in class and outside of it - be yourself!
7. Tell your students you will be available before and after class to answer any questions they might have.
8. Keep track of frequently asked questions or common mistakes. Use these to develop lessons and help students avoid making mistakes.
9. Be aware of the class. If you notice or even feel that there is something wrong, ask a student what is going on. Invite small groups of students to visit you to discuss important class issues. When necessary, involve students and use positive discipline to deal with misbehaviour.
10. Give a background questionnaire or a diagnostic test to check the content of your lessons and the knowledge and skills of your students, to identify those students that need special attention, as well as to make connections to students' life experiences.
11. Recognize the attention span of students is limited: 15 minutes of lecture followed by an activity and then additional lecture if needed is an ideal timeline. Determine what information can be delivered in a form other than lecture and develop these methods.

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For instance, group work, role-playing, student presentations, outside readings, and in-class writing can be excellent ways to vary classroom routine and stimulate learning.

12. Develop a formal lesson plan as a way to organize your teaching in a large class setting; a way to monitor whether or not your students are understanding what is taught; and a chance for you to think about what to do next and how to improve your teaching. In your plan, identify what topic is to be taught, the learning objectives, teaching methods, classroom arrangement, main activities, resources, and assessment methods.
13. Explain to your students exactly how and why you are teaching the class or a specific lesson in the manner that you do. For example, "This is why I give quizzes at the end of class."
14. Develop a visual display of the outline of the day's topics and learning objectives (for instance, a list on a chalkboard). This will make following the flow of the class much easier for you and your students. Plan for a clear beginning, middle, and end to the class.
15. Use "prompts" to develop students' question and answer skills, and count to 10 after you ask a question to give time for the student(s) to answer.
16. Give assignments that really assess whether or not your students are learning what you are teaching. Can they explain the process by which they solved a problem, and can they apply what they are learning to everyday life? Give clear and thorough instructions for all assignments.
17. Develop a portfolio system or other ways to keep track of student performance - both successes and areas needing improvement - and to identify those students who require extra attention.
18. Develop exams that really tell you if your students have truly learned and can apply what you have taught them, not just what they remember.
19. Give prompt feedback on assignments and exams. Involve your students in the grading process to give faster feedback.
20. Reflect on your teaching. Discuss with your colleagues and students how your class can be improved. Visit the classes of colleagues who are also teaching many students, and exchange ideas and materials for teaching large classes. Above all, view the challenge of teaching a large class as an opportunity, not a problem.



Where You Can Learn More

To find out more about how to teach in large classes and related topics, you are encouraged to explore the following sources.

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The University of Maryland's special programme and forum on teaching large classes.

www.inform.umd.edu/CTE/Icn/index.html

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