

Teaching Large Classes Part 2:

Advantages of teaching large classes and more useful tips and tricks



Wait - Advantages?!

Yes. As we discussed in the last issue, large classes are occasionally looked down upon in higher education. We know many reasons they can be difficult. There are, however, benefits to teaching large groups as well:

- **They are efficient** - First of all, they can be very efficient in terms of resources, but also in terms of time (both for instructors and students). The university can use this efficiency to help support other important aspects such as smaller upper level classes and research.
- **They are diverse** - With large numbers of students there will be diverse perspectives, lots of different ideas and in general more chance of some students knowing one or more suitable answers to any given question.
- **They (should have) more University support** - With large numbers of students comes more tuition dollars and more administrative support for those students (at least there should be). Additional TA hours should be available to help in (or outside) classrooms, and/or to provide administrative support.
- **They can be exciting** - They can be fun and exciting for both students and instructors. There is a large potential for satisfaction for instructors. They can also be a way for students to build confidence speaking in public.
- **They can make students feel safe** – Somewhat paradoxically, for some students being in a sea of others gives a sense of safety, they can safely be anonymous. This can allow them to participate in situations where they might not otherwise.
- **They can be useful!** Consider crowdsourcing your class. Imagine if you had 700 people who would work on a project together if you asked them too. Can you think of something that relates to your class that could benefit the community or the world? Maybe have them write their own textbook? Clean up a beach? Volunteer? Give the students a small amount of marks to motivate them. Amazing things can be accomplished with the right incentives.

Engaging Students

There are many activities and ideas you can use to engage students, below are a few options, however it is easy to create your own. The guiding principle should be that the activity does something to engage the students' minds, rather than having them watch you engage yours. Maybe add a link or two to popular and persistent web resources?

Think Pair Share – Give students a question to think (or write) about **on their own** for a minute or two. Then have them pair up with a neighbour to share ideas. Finally ask the class to share some of their ideas. This will help get a “quiet” class to participate, even in a large lecture space.

Use Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs) – Even in large classes written responses to a prompt are useful for you and students. Simply sampling a few will help you see if your message is getting across. Some ideas to try in your class: Ask students to link two ideas; pose a key question on readings; consider your objectives; ask for “a question I still

have”; ask about logical sequencing; What was the hardest (or most important, most rewarding, muddiest) point; set a one minute paper; Etc.

Worksheets – Try printing out a worksheet to use in class. It can be simple: a few questions; interpretation of an image, video, or diagram; some skill to practice; a check on definitions. Turn your lecture into a big tutorial, you can walk around, help students work, and observe student thinking. If you find groups who have a good job, bring them to the front to explain their work on the Document projector.



iClickers – I know, I know. Still, consider clickers. They really are an improvement over raised hands. Students are forced to engage (hands get about 50%), they can’t just wait to see what everyone else chose, you have an accurate count and record to compare, and they can be an excellent way to derive discussion. There are many resources available here are three:

- <http://www.elearning.ubc.ca/toolkit/clickers/>
- <http://www.cwsei.ubc.ca/resources/clickers.htm>
- http://www.cwsei.ubc.ca/resources/files/Clicker_guide_CWSEI_CU-SEI.pdf

Some key tips

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| Set up class culture on day 1 – Hit the ground running and get them talking to each other as soon as possible. | Efficiency is important. If it is going to take a long time to do something think about how to make it more efficient (e.g. don’t hand back work in lecture). | Adapt. If it works for 30, it should work for 500. This is easy to say, but hard to learn. Consider how you can adapt to do something you’ve done with smaller numbers |
| Delegate and use TAs. You have been given resources, take advantage of them when you can. Also consider having TAs help during lectures. | Use the whole space. Use wireless mics, and remotes to walk around the whole room as you speak. This helps students keep their attention on you. | Continue to make eye contact with the audience. Teaching is more conversation than presentation. When you talk, talk to them. |
| Use technology to improve your lectures, but only if it helps. | Even in large classes, print students’ pictures, and make an effort to try to remember and use some student names. Being able to call them by name makes the class “smaller”. | In most cases, everything you can do in a small class is possible in a large class; you just need to think about how you scale your numbers. |

Finally, is it reasonable to favour small classes over large ones?

Though it might be more satisfying to teach small classes, student learning is not automatically better in a smaller class. In a large metastudy Bloom (1984) showed that the only significant class size that makes a large difference in student outcomes is the transition from 1 student to more than one. In human learning, one on one mentoring is the gold standard. Students who have been mentored one on one outperform other groups by two standard deviations. The results for groups of students greater than one are statistically the same. This is an important result for those of us who teach large classes. It means that student success is always possible in large classes, so long as we do the right things.

Bloom, Benjamin S. 1984 The 2 Sigma Problem: The Search for Methods of Group instruction as effective as One-to-One Tutoring. *Educational Researcher* Vol. 13, No. 6, pp. 4-16