

focus

on university teaching and learning

Teaching Large Classes Well

As university enrolment increases, budgets shrink and the faculty complement is reduced, teaching professors find their classes growing. The lecture theatre takes over from the more intimate classroom; the teacher cannot learn all of the students' names; the physical organization of the room necessitates the use of a podium, microphone, and other perceived barriers to rapport. With over 150 students in some first-year classes, for example, how can the professor do anything but lecture? How can the students' role be anything but passive?

Maryellen Weimer from Pennsylvania State University told over 130 Dalhousie faculty that there are ways to teach large classes well and approximate the kind of

interaction more common in smaller classes. She offered many suggestions in the areas of communication, classroom management, and improving rapport.

The Office of Instructional Development and Technology followed Maryellen Weimer's very successful workshop with four lunch-time discussions on various aspects of large class teaching. This issue of Focus contains many of the ideas generated at those noon-hour sessions on Communication in Large Classes; Control in Large Classes; Enlivening the Large Class Lecture; and Teaching Large Classes at Dalhousie.

Eileen M. Herteis

Some Teaching Tips from Maryellen Weimer

✓ **Plan participation in advance.**

In large classes devote pre-determined chunks of time to questions or pair work. Stop lecturing and tell your students to "Turn to your neighbour and try to solve this problem." After five minutes, go on with the rest of the class.

✓ **Ask closed questions which have a one- or two-word answer.**

Don't wait for hands - just look out toward a general quadrant of the room and take any answer. Then look toward another area and ask another question.

✓ **Encourage students to drop their questions into a "question box."**

Place the box by your office door, in the departmental office, or on the desk in the lecture room and deal with the questions regularly in class. Students who are easily intimidated may be more willing to ask questions in this way.

Move around as much as you can during class.

Engage a group of students in a question and answer session, repeat their responses for the entire class if necessary, then move on.



"Large classes have been part of the educational scene for many years," says Maryellen Weimer, "and they will continue to be part of the educational experience for many students for the foreseeable future. To those students who will attend large classes, we have an obligation to do something more than debate the propriety of various class sizes. To the faculty teaching large classes, learning to teach them well is a fundamental professional responsibility."

Improving Communication and Rapport in Large Classes

When a classroom is large enough to hold 180 students, how can professors make it seem "small"? The physical limitations of the classroom and professors' reluctance to turn their backs on some students often make it difficult to step down from the podium and move around the classroom. Whatever the size of the class - 20 or 200 - the goal should be to create a learning environment which promotes active participation by the students.

Participants at the Dalhousie workshop on enhancing communication and rapport in large classes had a number of suggestions on this topic. To improve rapport and human relations in the classroom, for example, simulate actual dialogue with the students by asking them to write their name, student number and one piece of information to you - holiday plans, occasions when the course material brought to mind a real-life event, etc. Respond to these in class or privately, as appropriate.

Researchers at the University of Washington administered questionnaires to over eight hundred students to find out what improves and what impedes student learning in large classes. Communication and rapport topped the list of student concerns:

when students were asked what hindered them in their large classes, by far the most frequent response was the lack of interaction between instructor and students. Students described hindrances to learning due to an "impersonal relationship" in which they had "little contact with the professor" or couldn't "talk to the professor when they misunderstand." A second major concern was the lack of opportunity to ask questions.

(Wulff, Nyquist, Abbott, 1987)

Teachers of large classes have to make special efforts to relate to their students. This is especially true in the case of first-year courses where large classes tend to be most prevalent. First-year students - who may be overwhelmed by university - may feel doubly vulnerable in large introductory courses.

More Dalhousie Tips to Improve Communication and Rapport ...

- Increase the amount of discussion and group work.
- Try conducting class without using your lecture notes, but substituting cue cards. This technique allows you to be more spontaneous and interactive because you are not tied to the lectern.
- Assign specific tasks to small groups of students, giving one student the role of recorder and secretary. After 10 or 15 minutes of discussion, the groups reconvene for a plenary session.
- Ask students to bring a good question to class. Have the class vote on the best questions, then include them on the next exam or quiz.
- Let the students decide at the beginning of each lecture whether they will be "talkers" or "listeners" for that class. Those who want to be talkers sit together and participate; the listeners observe. This system legitimizes the role of listening - especially if active listening strategies are taught.
- Be available. Always show up for office hours, write notes of encouragement on exams, show up for class five or ten minutes early - or finish class early - and ask students who have questions to stay behind.
- Create ad hoc tutorials by using a group approach during your office hours.

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Focus on university teaching and learning is the bulletin of the Office of Instructional Development and Technology of Dalhousie University. The following people contributed to this issue: Eileen Herteis, Sandy Young and Tom MacRae. Thanks to the participants in the noonhour discussions groups. Special thanks to Dalhousie Graphics for design.

Issue No 6 April 1992



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Discipline and Control in Large Classes

Common discipline problems are exacerbated by the large class. Lateness is made worse if the tardy student has to climb up ten stairs and disturb twenty students in order to sit down. Chattering is more disruptive when you can hear the culprits but can't see them well enough to make eye contact. It is important to deal with these disruptive incidents expeditiously, effectively, and constructively, always avoiding the creation of an adversarial attitude.

However, as Robert P. Brooks of the Pennsylvania State University says (1987): "Most discipline problems in the classroom are simple nuisances or distractions. There are a few instances when, during a full moon, a student loses his or her inhibitions and publicly challenges the instructor's authority. The way in which an instructor responds to these challenges in large measure determines how many and how serious subsequent ones will be."

"There are a few instances when, during a full moon, a student loses his or her inhibitions and publicly challenges the instructor's authority."

In a smaller class it is possible to know your students better. Often more knowledge is all it takes to solve a problem. A student may be chronically late because the class he or she takes before yours is on the other side of campus - and the professor always goes overtime. The student who falls asleep in class regularly or seems otherwise distracted may be a single parent working part-time to pay for tuition. On the other hand, in a large class anonymity may make it easier for students to challenge the teacher's authority in subtle, or not so subtle, ways.

There are other aspects of discipline and control which concern the large class teacher:

- Detecting and dealing with lack of motivation among students.
- Addressing the different learning styles and objectives of the students within the limits a large class imposes.
- Gauging students' self-discipline and mastery of the subject matter.

A lack of student motivation may be a major reason for diminished discipline and control in the classroom. Researchers at the University of Washington discovered that students themselves see decreased motivation as the result of various factors which are part of the large class context and which impact on learning: the anonymity a large class engenders, and the fact that weak or troubled students "fall by the wayside" (Wulff, Nyquist, Abbott, 1987).

Student motivation, then, is seen as a key to understanding, and preventing, disruptive behaviour in large classes; perhaps the "disruptors" feel that their backgrounds, goals, and previous experiences are not being recognized by the instructor. Thus, they become bored and dissatisfied, especially if the class is compulsory. This may result in such disruptive behaviours as openly confronting a professor through excessive questioning in class and asking mocking or provocative questions (e. g. "Isn't that too obvious?") which are designed to challenge a professor's authority or convictions.

Professors who see a general lack of attention or motivation in a specific class should speak openly to the class about it and, in an effort to improve the students' self-discipline and responsibility, ask them how they would resolve the perceived problem.

Participants at the Dalhousie discussion group suggested several ways to improve students' motivation and attentiveness:

- Take attendance at tutorials
- Assign marks for tutorials
- Allocate marks for attendance at class
- Show students that there are ways to learn outside the lecture: library, audio-visual approaches, private reading
- Give pop quizzes
- Tell students they've paid for the class; you "owe" it to them
- Make contracts with the students

Of course, occasional chatter or inattention is different from chronic disruptiveness. While the former may be dealt with quickly and effectively through eye contact, the use of humour, or moving toward the chattering students, the latter requires a more serious remedy. You may want to stop lecturing to deal with the problem. In these cases it is important to focus on how the behaviour affects your teaching.

Enlivening the Large Class Lecture

"When the logistics of class size and material mandate a lecture format, we should be able to create a dynamic and involving learning environment," says Charles Bonwell, Director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning at Southeast Missouri State University.

Participants at one of the Dalhousie sessions on large classes generated tips to enhance learning and enliven the large class lecture.

- Use a simple, concrete image as a metaphor for more complex, abstract material.
- Don't overuse the blackboard - you may lose the class when your back is turned.
- Distribute "skeleton" handouts which students can fill in during the class.
- Use handouts to "free up" class time.
- Assume a persona in the classroom and do "unusual" things.
- Get students to role play.
- Invite a guest lecturer.
- Use a combination of teaching styles.
- Use humour appropriately.

"A lively and effective lecture," summed up one participant, "combines substance with flair"

Teaching Large Classes: Selected Readings

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Teaching Large Classes at Dalhousie

"Who wants the truth if it's boring?" asks **Sandy Young**, Director of the School of Recreation, Physical, and Health Education at Dalhousie. Over the years he has formulated a number of steps to make the subject matter of his classes live. In order to keep things interesting, he advises professors to "steal" all they can from all they see, hear, feel, read, sense — and most importantly to keep the punch-line to the end.

Professor Young thinks there a number of steps to make you proud of your teaching. These include being willing to change and asking yourself what price you are willing to pay to improve your teaching

Change comes first from dissatisfaction, so you have to be willing to keep the good and discard the bad "A person who does something the same way for ten years," he warns, "hasn't had ten years' experience, but rather has experienced one year *ten times*"

To keep track of what is working in the class, Sandy sometimes gives carbon paper to some students in the class and asks them to pass in the carbon copy of their notes at the end of class. This is a quick and easy way of seeing what the students are taking in from the lecture.

Tom MacRae, a Biology Professor at Dalhousie, thinks that there are three keys to student involvement in large classes: the professor's organization, attitude, and ability to interact. Students want information, he says, and professors want to give it. Organizing that material well, however, can greatly enhance student attendance and attention. Tom recommends organizing the course into sections and organizing the notes, visual aids, and pacing of individual lectures. Student articulation can be accomplished through the professor's attitude and willingness to interact with the students. Students appreciate a professor who has a sense of humour, shows enthusiasm for the subject and interest in the students, and is approachable and consistent.

Articulating their ideas in class is not so threatening for students if professors have demonstrated a willingness to interact with them. Tom MacRae suggests that you can come to class early, actively seek questions and answers, provide positive feedback, create some suspense in class, and be available outside class hours.