

# focus

on university teaching and learning

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## Teaching Large Classes

During the fall term, a series of workshops on teaching large classes was presented at Dalhousie and several other Atlantic universities by Professor Graham Gibbs, Head of the Oxford Centre for Staff Development, Oxford Brookes University (UK), the largest faculty development provider in Europe. Professor Gibbs, author of many books on teaching, learning, and assessment in higher education, has specialized in preparing professors to teach large classes and in determining the kinds of changes in course design and delivery needed to cope with reduced resources and increased diversity of students. In 1992, he directed the UK's Teaching More Students project which led to the training of 8,500 faculty in over 100 universities and colleges.

At Dalhousie, Professor Gibbs introduced workshop participants to pedagogical strategies ranging from improving lectures through engaging students in active learning to providing self-paced, autonomous learning opportunities for students. These two approaches are described here. Materials from the Teaching More Students project and other publications on this topic are available from the Resource Centre of the Office of Instructional Development and Technology.



## Breaks and Activities You Can Insert into Your Lectures

- **Rests**  
*"OK, take a break for a minute."*
- **Read notes**  
*"Take two minutes to look through your notes. Check them, fill in gaps and make sure you understand them."*
- **Read another's notes**  
*"Swap notes with the person next to you and read them. You may spot things you could add to your own notes when you get them back."*
- **Write down one or two questions**  
*"I'd like you to write down one or two questions you have at this point in the lecture. Get the question exactly right so that it addresses what you are really interested in or confused about."*
- **Ask your questions**  
*"Take the questions you have written down and ask them of the people all around you until you have satisfactory answers."*
- **Tackle a problem**  
*"Tackle this problem I am displaying on the overhead projector. Do it on your own unless you are stuck."*
- **Read some material**  
*"Read the case/text/poem/account on the handout."*
- **Discuss a question**  
*"In pairs, discuss the following question."*
- **Apply this concept**  
*"In threes, analyse this case/problem/text using the concepts I have just outlined."*
- **Take a short test**  
*"Here are three questions/problems. Do them on your own. You have five minutes. Then I'll indicate when it is time to swap your answers with your neighbour. I'll explain the answers: you are to correct and comment on the answers in front of you and pass them back."*
- **Silent reflection**  
*"Take three minutes to think about what we have dealt with so far. Stay silent so as not to interfere with others' reflection."*
- **Planning**  
*"Take two minutes to plan out what further work you need to do on this topic: what you need to read, try out, get practice on or whatever."*

Gibbs, 1992b, pp. 22-23

## Using Active Learning in Lectures

The purpose of the method is to stimulate active learning in and out of class by modeling how students should approach the content.

- Limit lecturing to short bursts, not exceeding 15 minutes.
- Follow lecturing with brief learning activities involving groups of two or three students applying and discussing principles.
- Vary the format of learning activities, but make sure tasks can be accomplished in a short time.
- Provide handouts, course guides, etc. so course materials are available to students outside class.
- Relate in-class learning activities to major out-of-class learning activities.
- Introduce the method gradually, learning as you go what to do and when to do it.
- Explain to students the rationale for the method and the purpose of the tasks.

Gibbs, 1992b, p. 18

## An Alternative to the Large, Introductory Lecture Course

For over 20 years, students at Dalhousie have been able to take Introductory Psychology in a self-paced format called the Keller Plan or the Personalized System of Instruction. Each year, approximately 330 students enrol in the course, with 200 of them completing it. There are no lectures: students study independently, meeting regularly and as desired with tutors who are specially-trained, third year Psychology students.

Working from a textbook and accompanying notes, students must complete a set of questions and quizzes on each of the 26 "units" which comprise the course. Each unit must be completed in sequence and within a (generous) time limit. A quiz determines the student's readiness to move to the next unit.

While providing the opportunity for students to set their own pace for learning, this method also results in the development of strong bonds between students and their tutors who often provide advice on non-course-related matters. In addition, in order to progress, students must demonstrate, at each level, an acceptable level of achievement in their written work. As a consequence, they receive regular and detailed feedback from their tutors on their writing performance—something unlikely in a large lecture class. This class provides students with a unique opportunity to use, improve, or develop study habits that will benefit them throughout their university careers and beyond.

Student response to this course has been very positive. In fact, many state they would opt for other courses in this format if they were available.

(Thanks to Tim Juckes of the Department of Psychology for his description of PSYCH 1010.)

## Teaching More Students Guides

(Available from the Office of Instructional Development and Technology)

The six publications in the Teaching More Students series are available for loan from the Office of Instructional Development and Technology. Designed as guidebooks to accompany a workshop series presented to thousands of faculty in the United Kingdom, they contain numerous useful tips on coping with large classes. The guides may also be purchased directly from the Oxford Brookes Centre for Staff Development. Please contact Janice MacInnis to borrow one or more of the guides or for ordering information.

- Gibbs, G. 1992a. *Teaching more students 1: Problems and course design strategies*. Oxford: The Polytechnics & Colleges Funding Council.
- Gibbs, G. 1992b. *Teaching more students 2: Lecturing to more students*. Oxford: The Polytechnics & Colleges Funding Council.
- Gibbs, G. 1995. *Teaching more students 3: Discussion with more students*. Oxford: Oxford Brookes University, The Oxford Centre for Staff Development.
- Gibbs, G. 1992c. *Teaching more students 4: Assessing more students*. Oxford: The Polytechnics & Colleges Funding Council.
- Gibbs, G. 1992d. *Teaching more students 5: Independent learning with more students*. Oxford: The Polytechnics & Colleges Funding Council.
- Bocher, D., Gibbs, G., & Wisker, G. 1995. *Teaching more students 6: Supporting more students*. Oxford: Oxford Brookes University, The Oxford Centre for Staff Development.



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