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Planning Ahead: Practical Suggestions for Teaching Large Classes

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In these days of increased costs and competition institutions of higher education are very interested in extending limited resources. Offering more large classes is one way to do so; and classes with 100, 200, 300, or even larger numbers of students, are a common phenomenon in higher education. However, "large" does not preclude faculty from providing an effective teaching and learning environment.

The large class can be analyzed, good teaching can be modeled, and practical strategies can be identified. Since 1992 The University of Georgia has provided a forum where faculty can examine teaching and learning in large classes. What follows are some practical suggestions obtained from meetings of the Large Class Interest Group.

Expect a climate of support

Instead of abandoning faculty to their own devices, institutions should take an active role in supporting effective teaching in large classes so that faculty can create exemplary learning environments. This climate should provide faculty with information about effective teaching practices; an adequate environment and infrastructure; and inspiration, recognition, and rewards for encouraging and documenting teaching excellence in large classes. Professional support staff and teaching assistants should be available to assist with tasks associated with conducting large classes.

Technical assistance and expertise should be free and readily available for using technology to produce instructional materials and to facilitate communication between faculty and students. There should be opportunities for collaboration, observation, and participation in mentoring relating to effective large class instruction; and methods should be developed to document and share promising new ideas and teaching approaches.

Be organized and efficient

Large classes require more advance preparation and structure than small classes. Lapses in the flow of the class, while collecting thoughts or locating instructional materials, can result in a loss of student attention. Before the course begins, prepare or identify a variety of instructional aids, demonstrations, and activities to support each meeting of the class. Prepare a syllabus that includes outlines for each class meeting, all project and activity descriptions, and handouts for the entire course. Place course materials on a campus computer resource from which students can access and download materials as needed. Provide structure to the content, and use the structure to organize each lesson. Inform the students of that structure. Taking roll or distributing materials during class is not recommended for large class situations. Student materials or instructions needed for a specific class should be made available prior to class or located so

that students may obtain them with as little disruption as possible.

Connect with your students

It is important to appear approachable in large classes. Build rapport with your students, and recognize the individuality of each student. Move among them when talking. Increase student access to you by getting to class early to listen to their questions, comments, or complaints. Begin by inviting students to call out something they know or recall about a topic. Display the responses as an introduction to the day's activities. Address some of the anonymity students feel in large classes. Try to learn some names, and call on those you know by name. Learn something about as many students as possible. Have your students complete information cards about themselves--career goals, hometown, special skills or interests, expectations for the course, or previous experience with course content. Ask for a few volunteers each day to help with demonstrations and activities and through this process learn some student names. Employ seating charts, take pictures of small groups of students in your classes or make a videotape containing a brief autobiographical sketch of each student.

Provide a variety of experiences

It is appropriate to vary the type of instruction in large classes to encourage discussion, interaction and involvement. Do not attempt to lecture the entire period. Actively involve students during at least a small part of every class meeting. Form groups of three or four to discuss a problem or work on a task for a few minutes. Have a question and answer period at the beginning or end of each class. Stop lecturing

every fifteen minutes, and ask students to summarize major points with their neighbors. Present a question, and have students write their responses on an index card. Call on a few students to read what they have written. Collect all cards at the end of class to obtain information about the level of understanding of the total class.

Encourage participation

Be aware that students are often reluctant to ask or respond to questions in large classes, and it is often very difficult to hear their comments in large lecture halls. Try to be accepting of all questions and responses from students, and paraphrase or repeat every question or response. Provide hand-held microphones if acoustics are poor. Invite students to write questions or comments on index cards and give them to you at the end of class. Increase the wait time after you ask a question. Encourage students to indicate in some way when the pace of the class is too fast or too slow.

Obtain and use feedback

Students in large classes are often reluctant to communicate difficulties they are having with a course or the teaching strategies. Employ informal assessment techniques frequently to obtain student perceptions and suggestions. Use this information as a basis for making small changes in your teaching behavior before the course is completed. Inform your students if you make a change as a result of their suggestions. Hold weekly meetings with teaching assistants, or small groups of students, to discuss student reactions to your teaching and the course. Ask individual students after each class meeting how the course is progressing. Provide a suggestion box, or have an envelope attached to your office door where students may leave comments about you or the course.

Use new technologies

Many large class facilities are equipped with the latest in instructional technology. It can provide an effective means to organize and present video, sound, text, and graphics to large numbers of students. Professors of large classes frequently use large screen video projection, computer displays,

and other visualization techniques to present information, provide examples, and illustrate concepts for students. Some use instructional videos or computer simulations, both during and outside of class, to introduce or reinforce course content. Some professors also make available a variety of self-paced instructional materials that students may use outside the classroom. The successful use of instructional technology requires careful planning and attention to the preparation of materials. Thorough training and support should be provided to all faculty with large class assignments. As the professor of a large class you should also be concerned about the amount of time and effort you can spend responding to special requests from individual students. Traditional office hours may be inadequate, and you may want to employ electronic mail or class notes files as alternative ways to communicate or maintain contact with students in your large classes.

Accept help

The tasks associated with teaching large classes are numerous. Common tasks for which assistance is needed include the location, preparation, production, and distribution of instructional materials; prepara-

tion of class rolls, lectures, and demonstrations; coordination of discussion sessions, study groups, or lab sections; construction of tests and project assignments; monitoring and administration of exams; calculation and reporting of grades; and maintenance of class records. Although no standards exist, many departments provide some type of support for faculty members assigned to teach large classes by providing a graduate assistant for every 50 or 100 students enrolled in a class or reducing the teaching load for faculty assigned to teach large classes. It is important to take advantage of any departmental or institutional support that may be available and to encourage your department or institution to provide you with support for your large classes.

With appropriate effort the large class can indeed be an effective teaching and learning environment.

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Deconstructing Bias and Reconstructing Equitable Classrooms

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Research on college teaching provides startling data on the existence and effects of gender bias. Male and female professors, white and of color, inadvertently perpetuate bias toward certain students and against others. A correlative finding is even more surprising: a full 50% of professors' responses to students are bland, flat, and non-instructive (Sadker & Sadker, 1988). This essay integrates data to assist in understanding biased teaching; describes a simulation exercise created from research findings; and concludes with suggestions for enacting, monitoring, and evaluating one's own biased teaching strategies.

Research on Bias

Myra and David Sadker (1988) documented the existence of inadvertent teacher bias based on gender and race in classrooms from kindergarten through graduate school. They demonstrated how teachers' habitual behaviors encouraged or discouraged student participation and learning, noting that only 50% of college students participate; half are silent spectators. They found that faculty give more praise, criticism, and feedback to males, who are eight times more likely to call out answers and demand attention. Students habitually self-segregate

by sex upon entering the lecture hall; faculty unconsciously interact more with the male side of the room. It is encouraging to note that, upon analysis, faculty at American University succeeded in enhancing equitable interactions. The Sadkers' most striking finding is that the instructor's interactions are not neutral. Teacher attention leads to participation; lack of it causes students to withdraw.

At Harvard, Catherine Krupnick documented differences in male and female students' participation through her analysis of ten years worth of videotaped classrooms (1985). In classes led by either male or female instructors, when males represent a majority, males speak more and for longer periods of time; use technical words, abstractions, and the discourse of the discipline in discussions; and are more likely to interrupt others. Only in classes led by a woman instructor with a majority of women students do women participate fully.

The Project on the Status and Education of Women has published nine reports since 1982 on the chilly classroom climate for non-minority and minority women. Their researchers note that faculty call on men by name, coach them toward more complex answers, wait longer for them to formulate an answer, credit their answers by name, and often address the class as though no women were present (Hall & Sandler, 1982, 1996). Faculty see women as silent and uninterested, but the authors suggest that women are silenced simply by professors' focus on men. It is important to examine both instructors' and students' interactions to have a complete picture of what is really happening in classrooms.

Deconstructing Bias

Different researchers approach bias in the classroom from diverse points of entry. Yet their findings are complementary, and the need to address biased teaching is clear. Knowledge alone does not lead to change because gender bias is subtle, even invisible to the untrained eye. To become proficient in equitable teaching strategies we need guidance, materials, experience, and feedback. At the University of Colorado we have facilitated the process through a large group simulation that deconstructs

bias experientially within a controlled environment (Border, 1990). As one participant explained, "[in the workshop] I was confronted with the very real presence of gender bias. I hadn't truly recognized it in myself and in others in the classroom -- even though I had read the statistics and reports of its existence." This simulation is followed by workshops and individual consultations to identify, modify, and monitor one's own interactions with students.

The workshop includes three simulations by volunteers who teach a lesson in their field according to different instructions. The remaining participants play the role of students, receiving individualized instructions. Professor 1 is instructed simply to teach a lesson in the field. Professor 2 is instructed to look at women, ask them questions, respond consciously to them, and encourage their participation, while only briefly acknowledging men's contributions. Professor 3 seats students alternately by gender and race, asks them to create name plates, alternates calling on them by name and coaches all to more in-depth answers. After the simulated lessons are completed, the workshop facilitator asks participants to vote on which professor was least biased. Without exception they have chosen Professor 3.

Discussion follows through which participants begin to see Professor 1's inadvertent bias. Simulation 2 reverses and thus unveils habitual patterns of bias toward men. Simulation 3 demonstrates deliberately equitable teaching strategies. The workshop reveals the overwhelming impact of the instructors' interactional style. Participants realize that students respond favorably to equitable teaching strategies.

Reoccurring negative reactions to Professor 2 uncover a hidden aspect of bias toward men. As Professor 2 turns attention to the women, the men attempt to recapture it. Subsequent discussions reveal that men feel at least upset and at most aggressively violent when Professor 2 focuses on women. Women's reactions vary from embarrassment and uneasiness to giggles. Some appreciate the attention. Others feel put on the spot, expressing apprehension that the men might "do something." The

men's aggression and the women's uneasiness may belie an unspoken dynamic. Do professors unconsciously perpetuate bias because they fear tipping a delicate balance that preserves men's good will? Is women's silence really fear? This unquestioned and unexamined avoidance of confrontation might explain what the Sadkers described as the typical professor's homophilous classroom environment.

Reconstructing an Equitable Classroom

Most of our thinking about teaching focuses on the abstract how of the classroom -- how to organize content, present material, and grade. This view ignores the concrete how -- how does the professor actually interact with students? Professors must begin to see themselves as the essential part of the equation and must attend to their own planning and response patterns in order to become an unbiased teacher. They can establish rules for or model equitable interactions, expand the lecture to include discussion or collaborative learning, or require non-biased seating arrangements. They can consciously turn toward and alternately question men and women. Equitable teaching requires vigilance and presence.

Most students appreciate a professor's decision to adopt an equitable approach though some may not. Women who are accustomed to invisibility may rebel. Men may act out. Consequently, faculty need to plan and build effective interactions from the first day of class. Because anonymity within a group breeds silence, professors need to reduce it. It is effective to engage pairs of students in one-minute discussions the first week, build to three minute discussions in trios, and then to four minutes in groups of four. Successful large group intellectual exchange occurs naturally when students are ready, confident, comfortable, and regularly called on by name.

Faculty can profit from training in certain counselling and mediation skills. For example, instructors can learn to paraphrase student responses, summarize the immediate discussion, and check for understanding or disagreement. Open-ended questions, such as "What seems most important

to you? or Who would like to express a contradictory opinion? encourage individual expression. Significant change requires attention not only to listening, questioning, and response strategies, but also to body language and voice tone. Non-verbal communication is a powerful conveyor of meaning. Faculty need to acknowledge students' non-verbal communication and encourage them to express diverse opinions. Likewise faculty need to be aware of their own non-verbals and explain incongruencies as they arise.

Changing Ourselves

While the concept of bias is easy to understand, understanding how one's own teaching is biased is not; and the physical reality of change might seem overwhelming. To identify our own bias and observe our own transformation, we need concrete evidence. Working with a peer or teaching consultant we can score and analyze classroom interactions (both pre- and post-interventions) using the GESA materials (1984). Once problem areas are identified, the instructor can begin to introduce non-biased behaviors. Active listening, reframing, and mediation skills, once mastered, lead to change and eventually to proficiency. Practice can occur alone, in pairs, small groups, in workshops with a skilled facilitator, and/or with videotape analysis. Analysis of student responses is also necessary.

Professors who develop equitable strategies foster excellence and equity in college students' performance. With good will and effort we can provide all students with what should be their educational birthright: access to competent, caring, and qualified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1996).

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