

focus

on university teaching and learning

Volume 8, Number 3

March–May 1999

Teaching Large Classes

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This issue of "Focus" provides suggestions and tips for teaching large classes in the higher education setting. The content consists of direct quotations and adapted material from "Teaching Large Classes" by Allan J. Gedalof. The publication, first in a series of Green Guides on teaching sponsored by the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) has sold nearly one thousand copies since it appeared in June, 1998. Professor Gedalof presented many of his stimulating ideas on teaching large classes to an appreciative Dalhousie audience in the fall of 1998. Copies of the Green Guide can be obtained by contacting the OI.D.T. Editor

In the face of growing programs and shrinking funds, more of us are having to teach large classes for two main reasons. First, to accommodate, with a stable or shrinking complement of faculty members, the burgeoning number of students who deserve to be in university; and second, as a way to preserve smaller classes in some other parts of our programs. Large class size is a problem and should always and everywhere be resisted. We cannot forget, nor can we let those who have put us in this situation forget, that creating large classes is fundamentally contrary to what university teaching is supposed to do: foster the growth of *individuals*, and encourage them in their individuality so that they become independent, creative, self-motivated, critical thinkers and learners. But given the current situation, we might as well do the best job we can.

Part of the problem is that we are so ill-prepared for this task in every way. Far too often we lack the individual and institutional will and the technical and staff support to do this job well. It is a bitter irony that at the highest level of education we have the least amount of teacher

training. In addition, many faculty have earned their current jobs and past successes by developing skills that often seem to be counter-indicative of good teaching, especially at introductory levels where larger classes seem to be most vigorously proliferating. We prepare for a profession, a large part of which is very public, by doing things that are intensely private, often idiosyncratic. Given this, it is no surprise that most of us come to the profession having experienced predominantly negative examples of how to teach, and many simply accept this as the way university teaching is carried out and valued.

Despite these reservations about teaching large classes, I should acknowledge that I feel differently on good days, when I have the right resources and have done the preparation required to use them in a manner commensurate with the size of the class, and things have gone really well, both students and instructors can experience a buzz, a rush that comes from having shared an exciting common experience. And that excitement can go beyond that generated by small classes: scale can affect a class and its members both positively and negatively.

Some fundamental problems

- ◆ The physical problems of being heard and seen
- ◆ Finding ways to deliver material clearly and forcefully to a large group
- ◆ Overcoming the psychological effects of a potentially faceless, undifferentiated mass
- ◆ The degree of trepidation rises in direct proportion to class size

Facing our anxiety

- ◆ Knowing that others are as nervous as you are offers some comfort
- ◆ Try your presentation out on smaller, even informal groups
- ◆ Discover those students who take it upon themselves to radiate approval and focus on them rather than on the class at large
- ◆ Visit large classes taught by successful teachers in your department or faculty

Preparing for large classes

- ◆ Check out the classroom in which you will be teaching
- ◆ Talk nicely to technical support people who provide and maintain the equipment in the room
- ◆ While you are preparing your lectures, think about the room and how you are going to use it
- ◆ Prepare, prepare and over-prepare
- ◆ Organization must be seen to be done
- ◆ Have more material than you think you can use
- ◆ Remember that you can teach only two or three big ideas, if that much, in a single short class
- ◆ Handouts may be helpful, but consider some alternatives
- ◆ Plan in detail and in advance any interactive exercises you will use, including the specific questions you will ask or tasks you will assign
- ◆ Make sure that everything works before class
- ◆ Be prepared for the moment when technology fails you
- ◆ Secure an annual course budget to acquire audio and visual and other course materials
- ◆ If your class is large enough, every student problem comes up every year – be prepared

"Among the list of qualities that would distinguish any teacher, regardless of class size, are the closely related traits of passion, intensity, and energy: the 'sine qua non' of superior teaching."

"The idea of representing or modelling a subject assumes even greater than usual importance when teaching large classes. Prime among our roles are conveying information, teaching skills and concepts, motivating students, and modelling how we practise and engage with our disciplines."

"The qualities that make a lecturer 'ideal' are associated with the ability to motivate, inspire, and relate sympathetically to their students. Such teachers are less concerned with imparting raw content and more with helping students to learn, to want to learn, and to learn how to learn."

"The fundamental principle here is this: if nobody is learning, you are just talking, not teaching. Anybody can provide students with facts or with the body of knowledge that comprises a discipline."

"A good teacher will teach primarily not to provide good notes or a body of facts that comprise part of a discipline, but will motivate and teach how to learn, and especially how to learn things that no one has yet taught."

Recommended classroom strategies and behaviours

- ◆ Strive to teach with energy, passion, and intensity
- ◆ Set the tone with music or an overhead
- ◆ Establish a clear routine to start the class
- ◆ Maintain attention through mobility and body language
- ◆ Physical facts: amplify your voice and make large gestures
- ◆ Teach through the senses: tap into preferred ways of learning
- ◆ Use repetition and variation to ensure learning occurs
- ◆ Vary your instructional method

Interactive methods

- ◆ Begin as you mean to go on: involve students right from the first class
- ◆ Ask questions at a variety of levels
- ◆ Be gentle and helpful in responding to questions and comments
- ◆ Use students' personalities to enliven class
- ◆ Foster a community of learners: encourage student groups
- ◆ Ombuddies: designate students to provide feedback from class
- ◆ Question and suggestion boxes provide another avenue for communication

Monitoring comprehension

It is important to go over the fundamental building blocks or our disciplines: the definitions of crucial concepts or phenomena that students bring to university are inadequate in one or more ways. We all suffer from the syndrome that prompted a frustrated professor to complain to his class that he had been teaching them the same ideas for the past 20 years and they still did not understand it!

Some strategies that might help in correctly estimating the difficulty of material are:

- ◆ Looking at students' notes after class to see what they have or have not grasped
- ◆ Checking for clarity by asking appropriate questions after a unit has been covered
- ◆ Giving regular tests that serve a diagnostic as well as or instead of an evaluative function
- ◆ Holding regular small-group tutorials.



is the bulletin of the Office of
Instructional Development and Technology at
Dalhousie University.



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