

Teaching and engaging students in large classes

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ABSTRACT

Teaching large classes can be a challenge, especially if you are doing this for the first time. This article addresses how to approach teaching large classes and provides some strategies for promoting student engagement to facilitate learning.

KEYWORDS

teaching, students, learning, large class

BACKGROUND

In general, large classes are not as effective as small classes for achieving retention of material, developing critical thinking, and changing student attitudes.¹ Faculty can overcome the barriers of a large class size by approaching teaching in this environment using well-developed classroom expectations, a concise syllabus, reducing anonymity, maximizing the space, and planning sessions. A challenge is to make a large class seem “small,” and this can be achieved by employing active learning strategies to engage students in the learning process.²

APPROACH TO TEACHING LARGE CLASSES

Successfully teaching a large class involves setting ground rules, designing the syllabus, and using strategies to overcome student anonymity. It is also helpful to be familiar with the classroom, know yourself, and effectively manage class sessions and assessments.

Setting Class Expectations. Students’ expectations of a class often do not match those of the faculty. On the first day of class, it is important to review your expectations and establish ground rules – this sets the tone for the semester and makes students aware of your preferences early.³ Review the syllabus, course goals and objectives, and relate the relevancy of assignments to the students’ future practice as a pharmacist. Let the students know how they can succeed in the course. Emphasize the attendance policy – if you are going to use unannounced “pop quizzes” to take attendance, state this early. Review your views on student conduct in the classroom, emphasize common courtesy, do not allow issues to intensify, and use positive feedback to reinforce appropriate behaviors.³ Some faculty ask the students to collectively develop a set of expected student behaviors at the beginning of the semester - this way they have some ownership in the course.

Designing a Syllabus. The syllabus is a written contract between you and the student. It provides protection for you and the students! Be clear and concise.¹ Suggested components:

- General Information
- Course Description
- Course Goals/Objectives
- Required Readings/Books
- Assignments
- Evaluation/Grading Scale
- Course Policies
 - a. Attendance
 - b. Missed Assignments
 - c. Communication Method (e.g., Blackboard)
 - d. Classroom Conduct
 - e. Exam Policies
 - f. Students with Disabilities
 - g. Plagiarism/Academic Honesty
- Schedule

Overcoming Anonymity. Students in large classes often have a “group identity” and lack the feeling that they will be called upon to answer a question.² There are several strategies faculty can use to reduce the anonymity that permeates large classes. Arrive early for class and circulate through the classroom to get to know students. Another strategy is to use class pictures or have students complete an autobiographical sketch.¹ Addressing students individually and assigning group work during class will help students feel that they are individually connected to the class. During class move out into the aisles to solicit comments, and make eye contact with different areas of the class not just the first few rows. Some instructors find that conducting review sessions outside of class time is another venue to become more acquainted with students.

Know the Classroom. Visit the classroom ahead of time to become familiar with the layout, equipment, and technology. How the seats are arranged? If there is a white board, be sure to write large enough for students in the back of the room to see it. Where is the clock to keep you on time? Can you walk around the room?³ If you assign students to groups, map out where each group will be located in the classroom. If you have a section of the class at a distant site, plan on how to involve the off-site students in the classroom discussion and allow time for them to ask questions. Develop a back-up plan in the event that technology fails.

Know Yourself. Make a positive first impression - introduce yourself and share information on your professional journey – this humanizes you. During class, command attention using your speaking voice, use the microphone, and walk around. Use your greatest assets whether it is humor, storytelling, or your passion for the topic to connect with the class and convey the course content.³ Share interesting patient cases or current issues that you are facing in practice.

Plan Class Sessions and Assessments. Identify reading assignments and develop a set of learning objectives for each session. Outline how to present the material during class time (e.g., lecture, use of slides or handouts, cases) and refer to reading assignments.⁴ Discussion is an effective teaching strategy for achieving changes in thinking and problem-solving, and it allows students to test their communication skills.² Incorporate an active learning strategy every 10-15 minutes of class time. Develop effective assignments during class to emphasize the most important aspects of the session (e.g., case studies, discussion questions). Consider using supplemental material online.⁴

Assessments are derived from the course goals and class objectives. Decide what types of assessment to use (including technology) and who will grade these. Construct assessments to match the learning level of each objective. How long will it take to give the students feedback? Essay and short-answer questions are superior to multiple-choice questions to affect student learning however, these are time-consuming to grade.¹

PROMOTING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Students who are engaged in the learning process will retain course concepts.^{2,4} Several methods to promote student engagement include personalizing the class, incorporating active learning strategies, and using writing assignments.

Personalize the Large Class. Make the class feel “small” – walk around the room, move towards students when they speak,³ encourage group work, and use active learning techniques. Encourage questions from the students. When you pose a question, allocate time for students to answer and use positive responses. Be accessible to the students (i.e., arrive early, stay late, chat with students, answer emails promptly).³ Monitor student progress through review sessions. Give personalized feedback and compliment students when they perform well on an exam or class response.^{2,3}

Active Learning Strategies. Active learning is an activity that engages students in doing more than passive listening.³ Active participation helps students increase understanding and memory.¹ Some examples that can be completed individually or in groups:¹⁻⁴

- “One-Minute Paper” - ask students to reflect on a topic or respond to a question
- Reading quiz - a short quiz on an assigned reading helps students prepare for participation in class
- Pause - gives students time to ask questions to clarify key points or allow students to compare notes in pairs or groups
- Write a quiz/test question – allows students the opportunity to critically think about course concepts; post the questions for review or include a few on the exam
- Immediate feedback (as formative [non-graded] assessment) – insert a multiple choice question on a slide during lecture to assess students’ level of understanding using an audience response system or by a show of hands
- Case studies – have groups work on a patient case; walk around the room to answer questions; facilitate a discussion between groups to wrap up the case
- Concept maps – have students illustrate connections between concepts to help identify and organize information
- “Think-Pair-Share” – ask students to respond to a topic and then discuss this with a colleague; then ask several pairs to share their responses with the class
- Audience response systems – help gauge student understanding of course material and can be anonymous or graded
- Blended learning – use a mixture of online assignments (e.g., web-based readings, lectures, self-assessment quizzes, blogs, wikis) to promote active involvement
- Others: debates, panels, fishbowl, role plays, games (e.g., Jeopardy![®]), movies

Encourage Student Writing. Use in-class writing assignments to allow students to practice summarizing information using a “One-Minute Paper” or “Half-sheet Response.”¹ A quick writing assignment is to ask each student or group to write a self-assessment by asking “What was the most important point that I learned today?” or “What two things do we not understand about ____?” Technology can be used (e.g., discussion boards, blogs, wikis). A challenge in a large class is the time needed for grading and creating rubrics to reduce subjectivity in grading.¹

Group Activities. Advantages of using group work are promotion of communication skills by engaging students with class content and applying course information, building team-work skills, and giving students a structured setting to have a voice.² It also provides additional forms of assessment and variety to lecture-focused classes, and lets students learn from each other.

Careful planning and the use of active learning strategies can improve the success and learning in large classes. Readers interested in exploring more complex approaches to structured teaching strategies to increase student engagement are referred to references on learner-centered teaching, team-based learning, and problem-based learning.⁵⁻⁷

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