

Chapter 40

Teaching Large Classes: Engaging Students Through Active Learning Practice and Interactive Lecture

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ABSTRACT

Higher education around the world are experiencing significant growth in student enrolment, as a result, educators face the daunting challenge of teaching larger classes, while improving the quality of instruction and subsequent value delivered to students. Large class can become a daunting task to any teacher who has never taught a large class before and teaching a large group of students can be intimidating for both students and lecturers. The purpose of this article is to identify effective teaching and assessment strategies to address the challenges of teaching in large class environment. It focusses on the idea of student engagement as a strategy to address the challenges faced by large class learning environments. By focusing on student engagement and adapting teaching and assessment strategies to promote critical thinking, it is possible to overcome the challenges posed by large class environments into opportunities for effective student learning. The study provides valuable direction for faculty faced with teaching and supporting large-class environments in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970's, higher education institutions around the world are experiencing significant growth in student enrolment (Gibbs & Jenkins, 1992). The increasing access of higher education around the world is generally seen as an instructional and administrative problem because it adds a variety of challenges to classroom teaching that are absent in traditionally sized courses. While this may be unfortunate trend in academic discourse, it is a reality we must face in the current political climate characterized by increasing threats to cut higher education funding. Large classes have become more common due to the limited availability of teaching staff and sheer student enrolment numbers. Large classes are prevalent in many universities and are often gateway courses to students' major fields of study (Stanley & Porter,

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2002; McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000). Most introductory courses at universities that fulfil general education requirements often carry large enrolment of students intended for first and second-year students for whom learning in a large class is a new experience (Twigg, 2003; MacGregor, Cooper, Smith, & Robinson, 2000). These large class settings have historically been heavily lecture-centered, requiring minimal student engagement and expecting little more than memorization of terms and concepts as evidence of student learning and they have fewer opportunities to connect with their instructors and peers (Lynch & Pappas, 2017). Therefore, there is a need for the higher education sector to identify the challenges and opportunities that are unique to large class teaching environments, as well as strategies to address these issues, in order to maintain the quality of student learning in the face of rising class sizes.

The purpose of this study is to identify the challenge of maintaining teaching and learning quality in large-sized classes. It seeks to identify effective teaching strategies to address the challenges of teaching in a large class environment and to provide strategies for promoting student engagement. Large classes are often characterized by less intimacy and trust between students and faculty, with weaker student engagement (Gibbs, 1992). Large classes may be a cost-effective solution to budget crises at some institutions, but they have been criticized by teachers and students for their failure to provide effective instruction, many of which have been documented by researchers Jungic, Kent, & Menz, 2006). Although large classes facilitate a common background for participants and are economically desirable, however, they present several challenges to the educator. Hornsby & Osman (2014) argue that such environments are commonly believed to pose real challenges for experienced and inexperienced teachers who are assigned to teach these classes. One of the great challenges in dealing with large classes lies in how to effectively engage students in a learning process that improves student learning and achieves higher educational goals. The findings from the study will not only help in addressing the conceptual issues of teaching in a large class setting, but it will also provide practical insights for those teachers faced with teaching and supporting large-class environments in higher education.

BACKGROUND

Teaching large class can be a challenge, regardless of experience of the faculty members tasked with teaching these courses may experience frustration, especially if one is doing this for the first time (Kirkwood, 2013). Teaching a large class can be a daunting task to any teacher and teaching a large group of students can be intimidating for both students and teachers alike (Jungic et al, 2006). The large-class experience challenges students, especially if they are new to university experience and with so many of their peers listening, many students in large classes feel too intimidated to ask questions (Ives, 2000) or too overwhelmed by the material to approach instructors or others for help.

Gibbs (1992) indicates that problems with large classes include: the lack of opportunities for the instructor to get to know students, and for students to form relationships with peers, students do not get to know each other well, and absenteeism increases; Lack of student engagement with course content results in less class participation and increases student anonymity; Faculty have a difficult time being able to relate to such a large number of students and the demands made by them; and Class discussion may be brief and superficial and acoustics, visibility, and attention may become communication issues. Such a lack of communication may make it difficult for faculty to determine if students understand course material (Gibbs, 1992). Biggs (1999) adds that large classes mostly foreclose on informal exchanges between faculty and students. The faculty and student interaction suffer as classes increase in size, result-

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