

"An Instructor's Survival Kit: For Use With Large Classes" by Maryellen Gleason. From AAHE Bulletin, 39(2), 1986. American Association for Higher Education, One Dupont Circle, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20036. Reprinted by permission.

An Instructor Survival Kit: For Use with Large Classes

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Involve Students

Student involvement is decidedly harder to achieve with 200 students instead of 20, but it can be done.

The adept use of questions to stimulate interaction can be useful in large courses. Some instructors fear opening up discussion in a big class. What if everyone decides to make a lengthy comment? Clearly, that kind of seminar dialogue is not an option with 200 students; what is possible, though, is interaction with the class. For example, use a series of closed questions or queries to which a one- or two-word right answer exists. Direct questions to a general section of the class, not necessarily pinpointing individuals. Take even mumbled responses, repeating them so the rest of the class can hear. It's a good technique for warming a class up and reviewing earlier content.

Solicit questions for short periods. In mid-lecture announce, "Let's take five for questions." Respond concisely. If a student's question relates to content covered in an earlier lecture, politely point that out and suggest that the student check notes with someone else. If the question is a good one, say so. When responding, direct answers to the whole class. Remember, too, that no law dictates that only professors answer questions. Students will object, but with encouragement and praise you can get them responding to each other's questions.

Big classes require extra effort to counter students' passivity, to poke and prod students into states of mental involvement. An example: end a lecture by proposing, "Take two minutes and generate a test question on today's content that you think you might see on an exam." You might just get a good question; use it, and students will take those two minutes of class seriously.

Don't overlook the value of rhetorical questions. Many teachers use them, but the effectiveness is diminished by the way they are delivered. They need to sound like genuine, bona fide inquiries. Give students a few seconds to think about them. Point out that it is a question, not just a comment made in passing.

Interaction with students in large courses takes a certain amount of creativity and ingenuity, but the benefits in terms of student attentiveness and involvement can be high.

Resources

A four-page Idea Paper from Kansas State, "Questioning in the College Classroom," is a superior resource; Hyman has good suggestions for instructor-generated questions and for fielding and answering student questions. Monk recounts his experiences teaching a 350-student math course; it is especially strong on techniques for introducing student involvement.

Hyman, R.T. "Questioning in the College Classroom." Idea Paper No. 7. Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development. Kansas State University, August 1982, 1-4.

Monk, G.S. "Student Engagement and Teacher Power in Large Classes." In Bouton, C., & Garth, R.Y., eds., *Learning in Groups*, 7-12. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, No. 14. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1983.

Use Small Groups

Small group activities don't automatically work well in any class, and especially in large ones. But the reasons are not intrinsic. Group tasks must be specific and concrete. "Groups should generate four possible explanations for the results we've just observed." Or, "In five minutes, I want each group to have a list of three items." Or, "Here's the statement I want to know if the group agrees or disagrees, and why." When tasks are not specific or clear, group members waste time trying to decide what to do, content-related discussion suffers, and students get frustrated. So, rule one is, make the group project specific.

Then, do something with group products. No one likes to contribute to an activity that nobody needs or wants. If students have worked on solving a problem, ask for their answer. If different answers are offered, all the better. Have group members defend and explain answers; take a vote. If groups have taken positions, have group representatives join panels to debate the issue. Collect lists, put them on transparencies, write them on the board, or whatever — but make use of what you have asked group members to do.

A word of advice on time and group size. In large classes, group projects work best if they are short — something quick and easy that adds presentational variety. Time allotted must be proportional to task, but five minutes can be enough to work on a problem. Discussions can be productive in less than 10 minutes. Tight time limits force groups to focus on tasks quickly. Shorter times work well if group size is kept small, to three to five people — or, on occasion people can work in pairs (although, in the latter case, it is harder to use all the group products). Group size is also proportional to participation; it is tougher to be a silent member when there are only two other persons in the group.

Sometimes instructors make too big a deal about group logistics — having groups move to this corner or that while distributing handouts and giving instructions about chair placement. Explain the task first — put it on a transparency, write it on a board, leave it visible throughout the activity. Then simply ask three people sitting near each other to join together. Get any “leftovers” together quickly. The goal is to move past the logistics swiftly.

More could be said about techniques, but the important point about using groups in large classes is to *try it*. They break students out of the passive-receiving mode; they encourage involvement and contribution. Groups attack the impersonality of large courses, and foster acquaintanceship and interaction. And, they force students to grapple, however briefly, with course content — to see, feel, and interact with it at close range.

Resources

Weaver sets out five objectives for small-group discussion, and proposes specific ways to accomplish them. Pulturak describes something he calls “The Colloquation Module,” a method for using small groups in large courses. It incorporates reading and other activities into group experiences. Bergquist and Phillips present a four-page table proposing “Classroom Structures Which Encourage Student Participation.” In it they list 10 different group structures, define each, indicate appropriate use, propose a preparation procedure, and describe its limitations.

Bergquist, W.H., & Phillips, S.R. *A Handbook for Faculty Development*. Washington, DC: The Council for the Advancement of Small Colleges, 1975. Pp. 118-121.

Pulturak, R.W. “The Colloquation Module.” *Journal of College Science Teaching* 4 (March/April 1985): 421-423.

Weaver, R.L. “The Small Group in Large Classes.” *Educational Forum*, 48 (Fall 1983): 65-73.

Develop a Style

Presentational matters include minor aspects of oral delivery that should not matter, but do. The fact that shoulders are hunched, eyebrows twitched, and words repeated should not count for much as against subject matter competence, but sometimes such idiosyncrasies of expression do impair effective communication — especially in large courses, where the numbers somehow exaggerate the errors.

The good news is that most distracting mannerisms are easy to remove once one becomes aware of them. The key is to step out of the action and see yourself as others do. Watch yourself teaching. Where are your arms? Where are you in relation to the podium? Always behind it? Listen to your words. How many times are they repeated? Where are your eyes? Are they in contact with individuals in front of you?

Presentation in large courses need not be substantially different from small classes. It should be an honest, authentic representation of the instructor you have discovered yourself to be. If you don't tell jokes in small classes, don't try to in large ones. If you rely on personal examples in seminars, use them in the big class.

Of course, not all presentational aspects will be the same in large classes. A microphone may be needed, overhead transparencies must be larger, and so on. In general, gestures and movements can be exaggerated in the larger class, and delivery more energetic: in big classrooms, there is lots of room to absorb the action.

There is no single, effective teaching style to covet or aspire to when teaching large courses. Effective instructors of big classes come in as many sizes and shapes as instructors generally. The key is to be yourself, to search for communication techniques that are comfortable and work for you, that maintain student interest, and that make it possible for students to come to grips with content.

Resources

Here are four good references on lecturing, plus one that recommends that you consider alternatives. There are two chapters in books: The first is Chapter 5 in Eble's *The Craft of Teaching*, which begins, "The best advice to the teacher who would lecture well is still, 'don't lecture.'" And the second is "Analyzing and Improving Classroom Performance," Chapter 4 in Lowman's book. Two articles are recommended: The first is a straightforward description of techniques by Weaver (who teaches large classes). The second, by Hanning, is a bit more theoretical, but it gets at the notion of "style." The "Alternatives to Traditional Lecturing" are offered by Brooks, who claims to have tried them with success in his large chemistry courses. Finally, if you feel particularly desperate about delivery, check out the book by Penner.

Brooks, D.W. "Alternatives to Traditional Lecturing." *Journal of Clinical Education*, 21 (October 1984): 858-859.

Eble, K.A. *The Craft of Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1976. Pp. 42-53.

Hanning, R.W. "The Classroom as Theatre of Self: Some Observations for Beginning Teachers." *Association of Departments of English Bulletin*, 77 (Spring 1984): 33-37.

Lowman, J.L. *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984. Pp.72-95.

Penner, J.G. *Why Many College Teachers Cannot Lecture: How to Avoid Communication Breakdown in the Classroom*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1984.

Weaver, R.L. "Effective Lecture Techniques: Alternatives to Boredom." *New Directions in Teaching*, 7 (Winter 1982): 31-39.

Personalize Evaluation

Given 200 students, an instructor can hardly construct an exam to meet every student's needs or provide specific feedback to every individual. Evaluation necessarily must be efficient and logistically feasible. Most often this means machine-scorable, objective exams with computer-printed scores posted for student perusal. The process is objective and efficient, but also cold and impersonal, and doesn't provide much feedback.

Again, small efforts can go a long way toward communicating an instructor's concern and commitment. Select a group of exams from every set to grade yourself. This allows a closer look at the kind of errors students are making and can deepen exam debriefs offered in class. More importantly, groups of students at a time get direct feedback.

If other graders have marked the exam, write a note of commendation on all "A" exams or on every exam score that has improved by a letter grade. This approach has many variations: personally return all "A" papers so you can commend students face-to-face.

If graders are used to alleviate the workload, it is imperative that consistent grading standards be applied as uniformly as possible. These standards ought to be shared with students. Some instructors employ a grade grievance policy that allows students to develop a case for an answer that may not have received the credit they deem appropriate. If instructors adjudicate this process, student objections can be put to rest, and it provides yet another way to communicate concern about student learning.

Pre-exam review sessions offer other opportunities. Announce that 30 minutes next Tuesday will be spent answering questions about material to be covered on the exam. Invite students to submit questions they would like answered during that time. If the questions are solicited beforehand, concise, clear answers can be prepared. Alter the tactic: ask students to submit the questions they would most like to see on an exam, use the review period to answer those questions, and demonstrate in the process how partial credit is assigned or what constitutes an "A," "B," or "C" answer.

Students are not insensitive to the constraints large courses place on instructors. They will notice and respond favorably to small efforts that guarantee the integrity of the learning environment and recognize their existence as individuals.

Resources

Effective testing techniques are important in any course, but especially in large courses where the opportunity to weigh exam responses by individual students is not an option. Lowman's chapter, "Evaluating Student Performance: Testing and Grading," is an excellent general reference that offers

sound advice about virtually every aspect of evaluation. Because objective exams are a frequent necessity in large classes, an excellent article by Scott is referenced; it lays out a five-step process for the preparation of multiple-choice exams.

Lowman, J.L. *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984. Pp. 189-204.
Scott, A.M. "Life is a Multiple-Choice Question." *American Historical Association Perspectives*, December 1983: 16-20.

Get Input

It is difficult to stay in touch in a big class, to find out what's on students' minds, to know when they are confused, outraged, or content. And yet that sort of feedback is crucial.

How can it be obtained? Foremost and fundamentally, from students. There are lots of options. A good starter may be some sort of student evaluation activity. Ignore the literature's debates about students as judges of instruction; students' ability to render descriptions of the effects of instruction is not disputed. And that's the information instructors need — especially if midcourse corrections are to be implemented. The point of an early student survey is to help you determine what you ought to do during a course — especially if things are not going well.

Instructors need diagnostic, descriptive details from students, and they probably need it more than once. Do the lectures facilitate notetaking? Is the pace manageable? Do the readings contribute to understanding of course content? Does the presentation style hold attention? Are the examples relevant? Are there enough of them? Is the value of the course clear?

Data like these can be acquired on an instrument compiled by the instructor — an instrument that asks what the instructor is most interested to know. As an alternative, a number of tried and comparatively true student evaluation instruments do exist and can be found in most books on student evaluation. Remember, though, the trick is to look for instruments that describe, not judge, aspects of instruction.

Student input gathered from a set of closed questions (like those on evaluation forms) has the advantage of being easy to tabulate and the disadvantage of being not very descriptive. Open-ended questions are the alternative. They can produce a plethora of details — so many, indeed, that an instructor can be overwhelmed. But open-ended questionnaires can be managed, even in large classes. Not all students must complete the questions. Probably all students who want to provide feedback ought to have the opportunity, but a survey of part of the class can be an option. Similarly, not every student need answer the same questions. If you're doing surveys more than once, sample a different portion of the class each time.

Open-ended questions can be *too* open — meaning you get everything from soup to nuts, including less than substantive comments. If you ask, "What did you like best about the course?" a student can answer, "The professor's socks." Open-ended questions, then, need a focus. Asking a question like "When do you find yourself most/ least intellectually stimulated in this course?" will give you a list of specific class situations that you can then accentuate or discard.

One can over-intellectualize the analysis of open-ended questions, especially since this is not strictly research. Student responses are best looked at as an idea source and identifier of major trends, matters apparent even in a cursory read-through.

The quality of data obtained from students will to a large extent be determined by what you do about it. Collecting periodic reports from students is well and good, but they need to know what you tend to do about the results. Discuss the findings and your plans with the class. It's a way of keeping channels open, and of making students understand that this is more than a clever activity to occupy idle moments.

Students need to know of the data's constructive use for another reason: to counter the strongly judgmental mindset that so often accompanies student "evaluation" activities. The point of the periodic surveys described here has nothing to do with judging overall instructor quality; the point is to obtain information about the course so that better instructional decisions can be made. When students see that as a result, succeeding surveys will bring from students higher quality and more constructively focused feedback.

There are, of course, many more ways to keep tabs on student reactions in large courses. Under "Resources," there is an article by a professor who monitors large sections of a chemistry course using the management concept of quality circles. Weekly sessions with a group of students are held

to discuss how the course is going. "Are there problems with the reading for the week?" "Students typically have trouble understanding X. Have most students in our class mastered it?" Membership in the group can be voluntary, appointed, or rotated. Agenda items can be at the instructor's discretion or open. It's a novel idea with great potential for spanning the gap between faculty and students in large classes.

Resources

For general background on using input from students to improve instruction, see Abraham and Ost. Collections of student evaluation instruments have been assembled in many of the recent books on evaluating instruction, including *Evaluating Teaching Effectiveness*, *Successful Faculty Evaluation Programs*, *Developing Programs for Faculty Evaluation*, and *Determining Faculty Effectiveness* (which contains an appendix listing "facts about available student rating instruments"). Advice on developing your own instrument is provided by Wotruba and Wright. If you'd like to read how two instructors (who team-teach a 400-student course) use evaluations to improve their instruction, see "Never Wear Your Pink Shirt in the Forum: Student Evaluations of Teaching the Large Course."

Abraham, M.R., & Ost, D.H. "Improving Teaching Through Formative Evaluation." *Journal of College Science Teaching*, 8 (March 1978): 227-229.

Braskamp, L.A.; Brandenburg, D.C.; & Ory, J.C. *Evaluating Teaching Effectiveness: A Practical Guide*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1984.

Brass, D., & Gioia, D.A. "Never Wear Your Pink Shirt in the Forum: Student Evaluations of Teaching the Large Course." *Organizational Behavior Teaching Review*, 9:3 (1984-85).

Centra, J.A. *Determining Faculty Effectiveness*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979.

Kogut, L.S. "Quality Circles: A Japanese Management Technique for the Classroom." *Improving College and University Teaching*, 32 (Summer 1984): 123-127.

Miller, R.I. *Developing Programs for Faculty Evaluation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1975.

Seldin, P. *Successful Faculty Evaluation Programs*. Crugers, NY: Coventry Press, 1980.

Wotruba, T.R., & Wright, P.L. "How to Develop a Teacher-Rating Instrument." *Journal of Higher Education*, 48 (November/December 1977): 653-663.

Check with Colleagues

Faculty tend not to talk much with each other about teaching — which is unfortunate. But the instructor suddenly thrown into a large class would be wise to initiate some useful dialogue. Most colleagues who teach large courses already have a set of survival strategies. Most are willing to share; all will at least commiserate; some may be confident enough to have you come to class. Do that. A "cook's tour" of large courses can open your eyes to a variety of approaches and provide examples and ideas not available otherwise.

Colleagues can help in other ways. One might take a look at a set of student responses to open-ended questions and give an objective outsider's opinion as to what they say. Colleagues in the same discipline are excellent sources of advice on content priority and structure. Colleagues can visit your class. They'll see things there differently from the student perspective, and in many respects are freer than students to call it as they see it. Maybe classroom visitation is an option only after you have your sea legs; colleagues can help, though, but you'll have to ask for it.

Resources

Colleagues' qualifications as assessors of instruction are well delineated by Cohen and McKeachie. Three books on faculty evaluation are listed: each includes a chapter with specific recommendations for the use of peers when the objective is to gain information that can improve instruction. See: Chapter 4, Section 2 in *Evaluating Teaching Effectiveness*; Chapter 4 in *Determining Faculty Effectiveness*; and Chapter 4 in *Successful Faculty Evaluation Programs*.

Braskamp, L.A.; Brandenburg, D.C.; & Ory, J.C. *Evaluating Teaching Effectiveness: A Practical Guide*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1984.

Centra, J.A. *Determining Faculty Effectiveness*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979.

Cohen, P.A., & McKeachie, W.J. "The Role of Colleagues in the Evaluation Process." *Improving College and University Teaching*, 28 (Fall 1980): 147-154.

Seldin, P. *Successful Faculty Evaluation Programs*. Crugers, NY: Coventry Press, 1980.

Conclusion

Large course situations render instructional techniques used in smaller classes less effective. However, large courses do not automatically spell instructional disaster. The strategies described here are built on traditional teaching techniques, adapted to respond to altered circumstances. No one claims that teaching a large course is easy, but it is one of those academic necessities with which instructors committed to larger goals must cope. This "survival kit" can make the situation less traumatic for a first-timer, and turn a problem into an opportunity for learning.