Teaching large classes is a challenge, but it can also offer many opportunities for you to improve your teaching and to make it more enjoyable and rewarding for you and your students.

The best teacher is the one who suggests rather than dogmatizes, and inspires his listener with the wish to teach himself.

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

Teaching large classes typically involves presenting to a large group of students in an appropriately configured learning space. A lecture is a common teaching method at universities, and most academic and teaching staff will present lectures at some point in their career. Lectures are useful means of presenting information or delivering content to a large group of students in a cost-effective and efficient way. As a method of teaching and learning however, lectures do have their limitations. Unless academic and teaching staff have thoughtfully structured a lecture in order to optimise student engagement it may be very difficult to hold the attention of students and achieve lesson and course objectives.

Engaging students

The Griffith Institute for Higher Education (GIHE) Good Practice Guide provides some useful considerations when preparing lectures:

- The first 20 minutes of a lecture is the most crucial time to engage students.
- Student learning is more effective if students are asked to think about the information you are presenting so that they actively engage with the information.
- Students need to be encouraged to apply the information you are presenting to real life experience so that they make the connections.
- If there is no application of the lecture content there is a likely drop in the information retained in the days following the lecture.
- If there is no participation during a lecture there is limited opportunity to obtain and provide ongoing and timely feedback about student understanding.

There are a number of ways to engage students in lectures. The following points, adapted from Twenty Ways to Make Lectures More Participatory and developed by the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard University, provides ideas that should help you to structure interesting and engaging lectures.

Beginning the lecture

- Explain how you intend to present your lecture and your expectations about student participation.
• To engage students from the outset you could begin your lecture by posing a question or a problem that elicits several answers or solutions from students. Alternatively, you could ask students to jot down answers to one or more questions on their own and then to combine answers in a small group.

Encouraging student participation

Recognise that attention span can be limited. Divide your session into a few 15-20 minute lecture chunks dispersed with student activities. Consider whether any information could be delivered through role-playing, outside readings, online discussions, in-class writing or any other methods that can vary routines and stimulate learning.

• Always deal tactfully with student contributions irrespective of the accuracy of their responses.

• Come out from behind the lectern and move closer to students.

• If you have a relatively small student group try to use students’ names (you may need name cards to facilitate this). As a general rule, draw on the more outgoing students’ contribution first until quieter students have developed confidence. Then draw them into discussions by asking them for their thoughts.

• Invite and encourage students to discuss your ideas and the information or perspectives you present.

• When a student asks a question, instead of answering yourself, invite other students to respond to the question.

• Ask questions throughout the lecture so that the lecture becomes more interactive. Along with asking questions you can also ask students to raise their hands if they agree or disagree with propositions.

• The most fruitful questions are thought-provoking and require students to really think. It is helpful to prepare a range of stimulating questions before the lecture.

• Show students a multiple-choice question based on the material you are covering and ask them to indicate which answer they think is correct and why. You could ask students to vote on the right answer and then turn to their neighbors to persuade them of the answer within the space of two minutes. When time is up, ask them to vote a second time. Usually far more students arrive at the correct answer when voting the second time.

• If readings have been assigned for a class, refer to them. Ask questions about the readings or have small groups of students prepare short presentations of their interpretations of the readings.

Ensure students can hear & understand

• In a large group, always repeat a question or paraphrase a response before going on, so that all students can hear and understand (this is especially important when students in the class are not native English speakers.

• Pause in the lecture after making a major point.
• When using slides, maps or handouts, ask students what they see before you tell them what you see. Use these devices to help students think about a problem as you introduce it.

**Use small group activities**

• Break students into small groups and have them contribute to:

  - Discussions – ask students to nominate a spokesperson to report back on the key themes arising from their discussion. If there are a number of small groups ask one group to present their discussion or findings and then ask other groups to report “by exception” i.e. only report information that is different.

  - Debates - form two opposing teams in each group and ask that they take opposing viewpoints.

  - Case Studies - cases are particularly useful for applying knowledge, problem-solving or showing how experts solve problems.

• Quizzes – these may be used throughout the lecture but are especially helpful at the end of the lecture to review material.

• One-minute papers – these are another useful way of reviewing the materials covered in the lecture. Ask students to write down what they consider are:

  - The key ideas presented in the class.

  - The key question they still have as they leave.

• The key questions students have at the end of the lecture can be used as the basis for beginning the next.

**Useful resources**

Support is available from your Deputy Head of School (Learning & Teaching) or equivalent. Your College Academic Development Group or learning & teaching specialist can also provide advice, support and professional development.

RMIT University’s practical guides to teaching will help you to plan and improve your teaching practice: [http://www.rmit.edu.au/teaching/practical](http://www.rmit.edu.au/teaching/practical)

*Teaching Large Classes: Challenges and Strategies* was prepared by Dr Lynn Burnett and Professor Kerri-Lee Krause as part of the GIHE Good Practice Guide. It discusses guidelines and provides tips in the context of large class instruction in university: [http://www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/118924/GPG-tlc.pdf](http://www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/118924/GPG-tlc.pdf)

The Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC) Teaching Large Classes project website offers guidelines for teaching large classes. It has four sections: planning and teaching, planning and conducting assessment, administration and management, and tutoring and demonstrating: [http://www.tedi.uq.edu.au/LargeClasses/](http://www.tedi.uq.edu.au/LargeClasses/)

Teaching large classes by the UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education draws on the experiences of teachers who have had to learn to teach large classes creatively and enjoyably and offers practical tips on teaching large classes particularly in Asian settings: [http://www2.unescobkk.org/elib/publications/095/Teaching_Large_Classes.pdf](http://www2.unescobkk.org/elib/publications/095/Teaching_Large_Classes.pdf)
The Derek Bok Center at Harvard University suggests ways to improve lectures and elicit student participation in both small and large classes: http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/TFTlectures.html

Six ways to make lectures in a large enrollment course more manageable and effective - University of California, Berkeley
http://teaching.berkeley.edu/large-lecture-classes

Ideas for effective large group learning and teaching - University of NSW:

Using Web-Based Lecture Technologies – Advice from students provides an overview of some of the findings of a survey of over 800 students from four Australian universities. It collates students’ qualitative responses into advice on how to use web-based lecture technologies (WBLT) effectively in terms of the structure and content of lectures, the lecturing process and managing the technical aspects of WBLT:

Dave Dusseau on Teaching Large Classes is a video featuring Professor Dave Dusseau speaking about teaching large classes and learner-centered teaching at the University of Oregon’s College of Business:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7QV_iWzA0o

Additional References


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