# Summary of Key Concepts for Teaching Large Classes

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This book offers a broad range of cross-disciplinary strategies for teaching large classes in higher education. The chapters range from identifying key concepts cited in the research literature and supported by practice in teaching large classes to sharing strategies from award-winning faculty from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and institutional settings. The teaching strategies and recommendations in each chapter illustrate how faculty, faculty development professionals, and administrators can improve the quality of teaching large classes in higher education.

A review of the contributing authors and their respective universities illustrates that large classes are a fact of life in today's academic setting. The authors' experiences, examples, and illustrations for effective teaching in large classes clearly demonstrate that it is hard work, if done well. The authors in this text are strongly committed to providing a challenging environment for their students. Ultimately, the development of collegiality across disciplines with faculty peers who teach large classes is one of the most rewarding aspects for members of this "elite club."

*Engaging Large Classes* supports the basic concepts of the importance of effective, creative, and interactive teaching in large classrooms for all academic disciplines. As you review the key concepts and disciplinary chapters, there are far more areas of commonality in effective teaching and learning in large classes than there are differences. This negates the concept that a particular approach or methodology is applicable to only one discipline or one size class. Good teaching in

large classes is challenging and rewarding for both the student and the instructor. A summary of the similarities, strategies, and key issues raised in each chapter are highlighted in this chapter, though the full meaning of this summary can be best understood and appreciated by reading the individual chapters themselves.

## Start Planning Early

The assignment to teach a large class is, to some extent, dependent on structural issues imposed by the institution, scheduling, physical location, classroom amenities, legal requirements, and technology availability. Departments and colleges also establish additional expectations about the course content, course objectives, and learning outcomes for each course. These issues are to be taken into account when planning to teach a large class. The amount and level of detail required for large classes are numerous and demand careful, early attention.

## Manage Your Time Well

More students mean more demands on the instructor's time, TAs' time, tutors, and support staff time. Pre-planning becomes even more important in order to keep the many details under control from the first day of a large class and to ensure that the administration of the class is handled smoothly. The authors suggest you start the process early by developing appropriate course goals, outcomes, and instructional strategies to teach a large class. The end result is a learning-centered syllabus that becomes a contract between the instructor and the students.

## Seek Advice from Experienced Large-Class Teachers

New faculty or faculty new to teaching a large class have access to many excellent resources on and off campus. The contributing authors in this text believe that experienced large-class teachers can be a rich resource of information. They suggest a review of their course syllabi and a visit to their classes. Faculty developers can also play an important role in enhancing an instructor's repertoire of instructional strategies. Many teaching and learning centers and experienced teachers have suggestions for low- and high-risk active teaching and learning strategies that have been tested in large classes.

## Get to Know Your Students

The size of some large classes is daunting for both the instructor and some students. Moreover, many students see the large class as an opportunity for anonymity and passivity. Reducing student anonymity involves developing creative strategies to capture and hold their attention and increasing motivation by getting to know the students as individuals. Develop a method for learning students' names that works for you. Some suggestions from our authors include the following:

- Use index cards with basic information about each student along with a picture to help you recognize faces.

- Ask students to remind you of their names when they see you.

- Encourage students to greet you on campus and talk for a minute or two.

- Make plans to see students before and after class as possible.

- Encourage students to come to office hours with you and the graduate teaching assistants.

A small amount of attention goes a long way toward improved student rapport in large classes.

## Attend to Classroom Management

Getting to know students and their reasons for taking the course helps you manage large classes and creates an atmosphere that encourages civility. Other strategies include the following:

- Let students know what to expect and when.

- Clarify course expectations in the syllabus.

- Establish guidelines for appropriate behavior during class.

- Review the attendance policy.

- Share your philosophy of teaching.

- Seek feedback from students and colleagues.

- Devise efficient ways of distributing information and exams to the students so that chaos and lost class time don't ensue.

- Work closely with TAs.

- Communicate, communicate, communicate.

The authors agree that promoting classroom civility begins with the instructor modeling these behaviors at all times.

## Use Active Teaching and Learning Strategies

Although the lecture format has been the traditional approach to teaching large classes, the overwhelming and consistent response from the authors in this text is that active learning is essential to improved learning in large classes. Among the many suggestions for active learning and engagement that authors describe and suggest using are:

- Creative learning scenarios from business fairs

- Real world assignments

- Assignments requiring teamwork

- Free writing

- Think-pair-share

- Role plays

- Debates

- Hypo teams

- Academic controversies

- Undergraduate peer tutors

- Interactive technology

Active learning works well in large classes, but the activities must be thoughtfully preplanned, consistently and fairly monitored, and continuously assessed.

## Use Technology Appropriately

Instructors are the key to student learning and technology is a valuable, creative, and powerful tool. The authors in this book suggest that technology be used in accordance with course and learning goals to organize the course and provide timely feedback for instructor and students. Technology is used most efficiently for short intervals in the classroom and remains a means to vary the presentation of information for students. Planning for glitches in the use of technology and having an alternative plan when they occur are part of a large-class instructor's organizational game plan.

## Develop Effective Testing Mechanisms and Grading Procedures

Testing in large classes is still generally accomplished via multiple-choice tests; however, other activities that provide additional ways to assess student learning can be effectively woven into the fabric of the course. Providing these other means of evaluating student learning is essential as, for the most part, multiple-choice tests measure mere intake of information rather than meaningful understanding. Although multiple-choice tests reduce administrative problems for the large-class instructor, they do not take into consideration the magnitude of diverse student learners. Assigning grades to active learning activities provides an avenue to enhance student feedback on learning and retention of course content. Create a structured procedure for review of course grades and share it with the students, TAs, and support staff.

## Select and Train Teaching Assistants and Support Staff

Select graduate students who have an interest in teaching and work with them to develop their teaching skills. Meet with your support staff several times before the class begins so that the individuals have a clear understanding of your teaching philosophy and can work in concert with you and your goals. Even with training, TAs and undergraduate staff require support, coaching, observation, feedback, and positive reinforcement as they work with the instructor to make the course the best possible learning environment for all concerned.

## Teach for Inclusion

A class of 100, 300, or 500 students naturally presents a rich diversity in students' age, gender, race, ethnicity, culture, nationality, religion, physical and learning abilities, and sexual identity: The class is reflective of society and the university as a whole. Not only do students have different learning styles and abilities; they also represent differences in their orientation towards time, communication style, view of the subject matter, and view of the world.

Instructors set the tone for balancing emotional and intellectual growth and for valuing student differences by knowing their students, mentoring, broadening their repertoire of instructional strategies, establishing classroom norms that emphasize respect and fairness, and using examples or illustrations drawn from diverse life experiences.

## Remember that Large Classes Provide Teaching and Learning Challenges

The general consensus in higher education is that teaching small classes is the premier assignment for faculty members. It may be, but large classes are a fact of life on college and university campuses today. At very large institutions, their numbers are expanding quickly as funding wanes and enrollments increase. In many academic areas—such as those represented by authors in this book (including law, hard sciences, business, engineering, computer sciences, social sciences, humanities, and pharmacy)—large classes are the norm and have been for decades. Most faculty members can excel and become better teachers with large-class experience.