Teaching Large Classes

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There are both advantages and disadvantages to teaching a large class. Most importantly, in a large class, the instructor has the unique opportunity to engage with a variety of student backgrounds, experiences, and skill levels. However, faculty must adjust to the heightened sense of anonymity and the challenges of keeping students engaged.

This packet contains a series of strategies that are of specific value in larger classes but which can be utilized in classes of any size. Specifically, these strategies can be used to decrease the time spent on class administration and increase time spent on student learning within the class. While additional classroom teaching assistance may be helpful, it is not required for any of the classroom activities. This document is a work in progress that will hopefully be updated regularly.

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Sources

Ryerson University, The Learning and Teaching Office, Teaching large classes website.
http://www.ryerson.ca/lt/resources/teachingstrategies/largeclasses/

Hanover Research. Strategies for Teaching Large Undergraduate Classes.
http://hanoverresearch.com

Queens College; CUNY. Writing at Queens. “Write to Learn Exercises.”
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Large Class Administration

Pre-class preparation
Learn how to effectively use Blackboard (Bb) and CUNYFirst. The links below will direct you to workshops and other QC resources which can assist you with both Blackboard and CUNYFirst. Spending some time upfront learning how to use these resources will allow you to better plan your course. Features such as Blackboard’s gradebook, automated emails (alert system), announcements, and online quiz system can significantly increase your administrative efficiency. In addition, you can email your class from both Blackboard and CUNYFirst. Each system has its own quirks; you might want to experiment with each to find the system with which you are most comfortable.

https://apps.qc.cuny.edu/workshops/deptlist.aspx
http://www.qc.cuny.edu/Academics/SupportPrograms/CTL/Resources/Pages/default.aspx

Decide on a grading entry system and stick with it
The grading system may be on Blackboard or Excel. This means you must have a clear idea of what the assessments will be and how much each assignment will be worth. This is particularly true for Blackboard where everything is weighted equally once it is in the grade book.

Other ways to use Blackboard to get a head start on the semester
Combine Blackboard sections if appropriate. Note that if you enter grades from separate lab sections this may make your work more complicated later.

Post your syllabus, contact information, and announcements about class expectations well before the first class. You might also email the announcement to your class while asking your class to check Blackboard.
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Syllabus
A syllabus is a great tool for every class, both large and small. However, in a large class, a well-developed syllabus can significantly reduce the time you spend directly addressing students' issues (assuming, of course, that your students have read the syllabus!). What follows is a working list of a good syllabus’ key components:

• Course description/ Goals/ Objectives
• Required readings/Books
• Evaluation/Grading scale
• Course policies
  o Attendance
  o Missed assignments
  o Communication method (e.g., Blackboard or QC email)
  o Classroom Conduct
• Exam policies
  o Students with Disabilities
  o Plagiarism/Academic Honesty
• Class Schedule and Assignments

Here are some links you might find useful for developing a great syllabus:

http://www.teaching.utoronto.ca/topics/coursedesign/course-syllabi.htm

http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/tutorials/syllabus/what/index.html

Now that you have a well-developed syllabus, how do you get your students to read and understand it? You could spend a lot of class time reviewing the entire document. Alternatively, you could simply review the highlights and have a Blackboard-based quiz on the syllabus. This introduces the students to the Blackboard quiz system in very low stakes fashion right at the beginning of the course. It also makes the students responsible for the content of the syllabus.
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First day of class

Classroom
Check out the classroom well before the first day of class. Ask yourself the following questions:

• How many students are registered for your class?
• Are there enough working seats in the classroom?
• Is there access for people with physical limitations?
• Is there a chalkboard or a whiteboard?
  o Is there chalk or whiteboard pens?
  o Can you see the board from every seat?
• Can you walk around while you teach?
• How will you project your slides if you use slides? Can you see your laser pointer?
• Do you need a key or a password for the computer console?
• Do you need a mic or a remote control for the computer?
• Can you see a clock?
• Can you limit where the students sit in the classroom?
• Are there multiple classroom entrances? If students enter the room late, can you restrict the number of doors they use to limit the disturbance?

Overcome anonymity

• Welcome everyone and be as inclusive as you can.
• Introduce yourself and consider revealing something personal.
• Have the students introduce themselves to their neighbors; encourage them to get their peers’ contact information.
• Consider electing class representatives who fellow students can approach regarding classroom issues if they are not as comfortable speaking to you directly.
• Consider having students post a photo of themselves on a Blackboard profile.

Define class rules
You should be kind but firm. Students make a decision about their classroom instructor in the first 10 minutes of class so set the standard in the first class. Clearly define:

• Class rules regarding late arrivals, talking in class, class participation, etc.
• Can students use computers? If yes, are there any restrictions you would like to set up?
• What will you provide the class and how? For example, will you post Powerpoints via Blackboard the day before a class session?
• Consider explaining your teaching philosophy and your classroom goals.
• Consider discussing strategies you will use to ensure fairness.
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• Review the tasks that you consider to be your job versus the tasks for which you expect students to be responsible. The goal is to clearly define the students’ responsibilities and to make sure they trust you to help them.

Attendance
While checking attendance is not required in all classes, CUNY does require you to indicate if a student has attended a class at least once in the first 5 weeks of class. Here are some strategies for managing large class attendance:

• Use the class list from Blackboard or CUNYFirst (note that the class lists from each site may not match).
• Put the class list in Excel and add a column for the students’ signature.
• Pass this list around at the beginning of the first few classes to take attendance.
• Check to see if any student has not signed the list but has used Bb.
• You may use these same strategies for keeping track of tests.

Test administration
Students don’t seem to realize that creating and grading tests can be as stressful for the instructor as it is for the students. Here are some ways to help reduce everyone’s stress:

• Have a clear makeup policy on your syllabus. Do you give makeups? When do students have to contact you about their absence? What documents do they need to bring you to be eligible for a makeup? When will the makeup exams be held? Some faculty hold makeup exams after the final exam as a deterrent.
• Provide lots of sample questions so student have a sense of what to expect.
• Get help setting up and collecting tests if you can. You can make the students stay out of the room until you have placed copies of the exams on students’ desks and instruct student to only sit in seats with tests.
• Make two or more versions of the test if you are worried about academic honesty, but work to make each version similar. There are many software systems that make this very easy. Note that a test made up of questions which are presented in the order in which the corresponding material was taught is much easier for students than a test that is made up of randomly placed questions.
• Check student ID’s and make sure that names are printed on test papers. You may have students sign in, too (see attendance).
• Consider multiple-choice versus short answer. Think about what you really want to assess and if you can do that effectively using a multiple-choice test. Consider having a few short answer questions that are easy to grade. For example, you might have a student create a figure and label it.
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• Make sure all students stop working on the test at the same time. Remind students that the test is coming to an end and then insist that all students put their hands up and step away from their tests while you collect them. Once they are all collected students can return for their backpacks and coats.
• Get the test grades back to the class quickly. Students really value knowing how they did in the class.
• Post an answer key on Blackboard and require students to post questions about the exam on Blackboard. This will keep you from having a stream of students asking questions during office hours. This also increases the sense of fairness; everyone has equal access to the information.
• Give the students a time limit for getting back to you with questions regarding their grades.
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Blackboard as a tool for quizzes
Quizzes are very easy to set up on Blackboard. You can use many types of questions and questions can often be graded automatically. Question types include: calculated numeric questions, essays, fill in the blank, multiple choice, true/false, ordering, matching, short response, and jumbled sentences. You can also use a bank of questions so each student can get similar, but not identical, questions. The grades from these quizzes are automatically entered into the grade book so students can see how they are doing. In addition, you can use the early warning system on Blackboard to email students their standing in the class automatically. This helps students decide if they should come to office hours for assistance or if they should consider dropping the course.

Here is a link to great instructions for using Excel to generate a series of test questions and to load these questions into Blackboard:

https://experts.missouristate.edu/display/bb9/Tests%2C+Surveys%2C+and+Pools
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Large Classroom Instruction

Engaging students
Keeping your students focused on learning can be a challenging task in any classroom but the opportunity for distraction is greater in a large class. Here are some strategies that may be helpful:

• Be fair and firm.
• Use humor. If you don’t think of yourself as very funny, then include comic strips, funny YouTube movies, or have the students generate funny content which you can show during class.
• Start the class with clear learning goals and return to these goals as you teach. This helps students to see the arc of the class and to stay focused on the key concepts.
• Keep eye contact with as many students as possible and be enthusiastic.
• Walking around the room can help all of the students in the class feel equally involved and can keep students from being disruptive or fading.
• Consider having students who use laptops sit around the edges of the room. Some students find laptops very distracting even if the student is actually just looking at the class Powerpoint (and not at Facebook).
• Take advantage of technology by using online resources or an interactive classroom system such as clickers. You might also encourage students with computers to search for key information during class.
• Provide something that students can’t get from the book to encourage attendance. For example, you can tell a story, talk about a current news item, or use interactive teaching strategies to teach a key concept. When doing this, make sure students know that even topics not covered in the book may appear on a test.
• Make students “work for it” by having them complete tasks outside of the classroom. For example, you might give an online quiz or establish an online discussion forum which requires student participation.
• Limit your lectures to 15 minute units if possible. Follow each unit with a more active or thought provoking activity.
• Use active or experiential learning strategies (see below).
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Experiential or active learning practices
Experiential learning can be defined in many ways. In this guide, when we use the phrase "experiential learning," we mean any teaching strategy that does not involve lecturing at a room full of students. The idea is to act as a coach who “leads the team” rather than to be the “sage on the stage.” Writing at Queens has put together a great list of activities focused on short in-class writing assignments which work to engage students. The link for a paper which reviews these topics is below:


Assessment of experiential learning activities
While there are many ways to assess active learning activities, first you must decide if any or every activity needs to be assessed. Remember the goal here is engagement and increased learning. With this in mind, many faculty do not grade experiential learning activities. If you wish to grade such activities in a large class consider having students grade their peers’ work.

Experiential learning strategies

Student call out
This strategy is very useful for reviewing course material that students should know from previous lectures, readings, or course pre-requisites. While presenting standard lecture content the instructor starts a sentence but leaves off the last word with the expectation that the students will complete the sentence. This can be an effective tool for determining where the students’ knowledge begins and ends. Students may complete sentences with ease until they reach the end of their content knowledge and then the room will be very quiet.

Pause
As the name suggests, this strategy gives students time to think and to ask questions to clarify content. You may also direct students to compare notes in pairs and to report back on key concepts or difficulties with content.

Audience response system
Audience response systems can take many forms such as “clickers” or the “poll everywhere” interface (http://www.polleverywhere.com). These systems allow the instructor to poll the class for an answer to a question. These questions may take the form of review questions on course content. You may also ask survey questions to propel the conversation. Answers can be anonymous which allows students to feel comfortable revealing information or answering a question when they are unsure of the answer.

Immediate feedback
This strategy can take advantage of an audience response system. Or, students can simply raise their hands. For example, you may insert a multiple-choice question on
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a slide during lecture to assess students’ level of understanding using an audience response system (or a show of hands). If the majority answers the question correctly, then you may summarize the key points and move forward. However, if the majority answers incorrectly, the instructor can clarify the key points or have the students discuss the question with their neighbors. The class is then re-polled and the cycle continues. This technique is very helpful in identifying and resolving areas in which the students have significant misconceptions.

One minute paper
Ask students to reflect on a topic or respond to a question and actually write down their response in 3-5 minutes. Questions can include:

- “What was the most important point that I learned today?”
- “What two things do we not understand about ___?”
- “What is the muddiest concept of the day?”

Think-Pair-Share
Ask your students to respond to a topic and to then discuss their responses with a classmate. The instructor can then ask several pairs to share their responses with the class.

Simulations
Sometimes concepts are easier to understand if they are visual or kinesthetic. This is very clearly explained in the following TED talk:

http://www.ted.com/talks/john_bohannon_dance_vs_powerpoint_a_modest_proposal.html

Using a simulation involves having the students actually act out a key concept. For example, you may develop a “mock courtroom” or “truth commission,” or you may have students pretend to be the protein components required for a key biological process. This activity can get the entire class out of their seats or can be conducted with a few volunteers willing to perform in front of the class.

Picture prompt
Some course content can be easily presented in a figure. Show the students the image or figure from the textbook and give them 5-10 minutes to write about the concepts, processes, or elements of the image. You may also have the students compare their work with each other before reviewing the findings with the class.