



## Class Size Matters: A Dozen Ways to Maximize Teaching and Learning in Large Groups

**W**hat constitutes a large class in higher education is often confusing and elusive. Colleges and universities advertise their average class size as a marketing tool and an indication that enrolled students will receive a more personalized education through learning experiences in smaller classes. Average class sizes can be misleading because they can disguise the number of large classes that actually exist on a college campus. As an additional form of confounding evidence, if we were to ask university faculty to define the parameters of a large class, the responses would vary based upon their own experiences as learners and the size and culture of the setting in which they teach. In spite of these limitations, and for the purposes of this discussion, it is proposed that



- There is a direct relationship between the overall size of the college/university and the standard for a large class (i.e., the larger the overall enrollment of the institution, the higher the number of classes offered).
- Based upon the construct of supply and demand, the largest classes on most campuses are either in general education courses or gateway courses to academic disciplines.
- Perceptions of large classes may be guided by the learning and teaching experiences of individual faculty (i.e., classes in which they participated as a student or as a faculty member) and the overall levels of satisfaction with those experiences.
- As indicated by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), student learning may be adversely impacted by larger class sizes.
- Regardless of the actual number of students enrolled in a large class, faculty need to adjust their pedagogy as a means of increasing student engagement with course content and with one another.

Before we proceed to a discussion of teaching strategies that can enhance learning in a large group, take a moment to reflect on the size of the classes that you teach. To clarify your own personal context, answer the following questions:

- For me, a large class is one that contains \_\_\_\_\_ or more students.
- The greatest challenges in teaching a large group include \_\_\_\_\_.

“The literature we reviewed from the decade of the 1990s suggests that we may need to revise, at least to a certain extent, our 1991 conclusion that subject matter knowledge is acquired with equal proficiency in both large and small classes. . . . The weight of evidence from the body of research using course grade as the dependent measure is reasonably clear in suggesting that, other factors being equal, increasing class size has a statistically significant, negative influence on subject matter learning.”

(Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 94)

Based upon your responses to these questions, you can pick and choose from the following strategies for teaching a large group of students and the degree to which they respond to your individual teaching needs, your students, and your personality.

## 1 Plan the Time

There is nothing more frustrating, embarrassing, and challenging than to stand in front of a large group of students and run out of anything meaningful to share. The elephant in that classroom is the fact that students are also fully aware of the fact that the teacher is awkwardly treading water and waiting for class to end (just like they are). Over-planning of available teaching time is a virtue. Always be thinking about ways that you can maximize each teaching moment—and do it in advance!

## 2 Set the Stage

Create a mental frame that will assist your students in preparing for the topic of discussion. This can be done through the use of advance organizers (e.g., a provocative question, an outline, a news clip, a story) that help participants begin to think in a focused manner about what lies ahead (Smith, Sheppard, Johnson, & Johnson, 2005).

## 3 Effective Use of Available Space

A student enters a room. He or she begins to observe and assess the best place to sit. That decision can be based on a variety of personal preferences, but through some process a choice is made. What happens next, and on subsequent trips to that same room, is an undeniable part of the human DNA: the tendency to find a comfortable location within a room and return to that spot every time. As a result of this action, students spend class discussion time with the same collection of learning neighbors. During your class, provide opportunities for students to stand, sit, and interact in varied parts of the classroom. Create learning opportunities that require everyone to get out of their seats, move around the room, and talk with a variety of fellow learners.

## 4 Become a Moving Target

The front of the classroom is generally considered to be the focal point for teaching. For those sitting near the back of the room, this fact provides a sense of security and great comfort. One way to establish contact with your students, build physical proximity, and gain a better connection with them is to become a moving target. Move to the sides of the room, move to the rear of the room, or take a seat in the audience. Be everywhere!

## 5 Create Talk Time

Even in very large classroom settings (as you define it), it is possible to create opportunities for participants to engage in conversation and processing around the topic of the day. Two-minute drills (i.e., directed conversations that students have with their neighbors or an assigned partner) do wonders to energize the learning environment and give students a chance to talk about and process the content under consideration.

## 6 Expect the Unexpected

You may be the most amazing teacher to ever to stand before a group of students. In spite of your excellent skills, it is incredibly difficult for anyone to maintain a high level of attention and involvement with any group for 40 hours of classroom instruction over the course of a semester. Only your sensibilities will limit this endeavor: wear a costume, speak in different voices, use props, use off-beat video clips—be the teacher who is full of surprises!

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## 7 Hold Students Accountable

Being in a large group should not diminish the level at which learners are responsible for participating in their own learning. Gray and Madson (2007) propose that there are a variety of techniques that can be used to hold students accountable for what happens in the classroom through techniques like daily quizzes, one-minute essays, calling on a student every two to three minutes, and the use of electronic personal response systems. Remind students that they are more than passive observers.

## 8 Create a Visual Roster

Many electronic classroom management systems (e.g., Blackboard, CNet) provide tools for the creation of yearbook-style class rosters that include student pictures. This resource will greatly facilitate your ability to learn student names—and to call students by their names!



## 9 Meet and Greet

One of the distinct disadvantages of large classes is the challenge of building relationships and personalizing the instructional process. To build bridges and establish personal contact with your students, invite your students to introduce themselves when they see you on campus or in the community. This invitation brings amazing results and gives your students a warm invitation to identify themselves as a member of your class.

## 10 Maximize PowerPoint

Avoid the common trap of loading up your PowerPoint slides with bullet points (a.k.a., the lecture killer) and vast amounts of information. Although there are times that bulleted lists are a good choice, change the pace with a clever or unexpected picture or a cartoon that provides you with a jumping-off point for the next topic of conversation. Use PowerPoint as an agenda—not as a script.

## 11 Finish With Flair

The way that you choose to end a class session has great significance. Think about ways to close each class in a manner that dramatically summarizes the key talking points including a video clip, a Letterman-style top 10 list, a provocative quote, or a story that captures the key points of the class in a narrative format.

## 12 Monitor Your Own Performance

Consider the example of stand-up comedians and how they master their craft. The funny, well-timed comedy sets that you find so amusing and well-orchestrated are the product of a series of trial-and-error rehearsals. The 10-minute set of sidesplitting jokes has been culled from hours and hours of jokes that just weren't funny. As a faculty member, we can practice the same discipline. Part of that comes from taking the time and effort to reflectively review each lesson and class with the purpose of keeping what worked for communicating the identified content and deleting what didn't work.

Gray, T., & Madson, L. (2007). Ten easy ways to engage your students. *College Teaching*, 55(2), 83-87.

Smith, K. A., Sheppard, S. D., Johnson, D. W., & Johnson R. T. (2005). Pedagogies of engagement: Classroom-based practices. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 94, 87-101.

Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: Findings and insights from twenty years of research* (Volume II). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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Author: Brad Garner  
Telephone: 765.677.2452  
E-mail: [brad.garner@indwes.edu](mailto:brad.garner@indwes.edu)  
Address: Indiana Wesleyan University  
4201 South Washington Street  
Marion, IN 46953

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### Publication Staff

Editor: Toni Vakos  
Graphic Designer: Erin Morris