



Engaging First-Year Students in Large Classes: What Works, What Doesn't and Why?

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Institutional Profile (slide not in handout)

- 42,000 students
- 5600 first-year students
- 52.1% women
- 12.5% targeted minorities
- 56.4% from Wisconsin
- 10% international students
- Average ACT entering class = 28
- Average age of undergraduate = 20
- 95% of students are full-time
- 90% of first year students live in University Housing

Project Overview

- What is the Center for the First-Year Experience at the University of Wisconsin- Madison?
- Why did the project start?
- What were the desired outcomes of the project?



The Subjects

Since September 2008 met with 41 instructors from the following Departments :

- African Languages and Literature
- Anthropology
- Atmospheric and Oceanic Science (2)
- Biology-like courses (5)
- Business
- Chemistry (5)
- Communication Arts (2)
- Computer Science
- Economics (2)
- Geology
- Journalism
- Life Sciences Communication
- Math (2)
- Nutritional Science and Food Science (2)
- Philosophy
- Political Science (3)
- Psychology (2)
- Sociology (2)

The Interviews

- 32 full interviews
- 30-90 minutes
- Most often in their office
- My introductory comments
- Three main areas of discussion:
 1. Lecture
 2. Out-of-Class Interactions
 3. Teaching Assistants (TAs)



The Lecture - Personal

“I try to look like a tough guy on the first day”

“I am nervous before every class”

“I am a talking textbook, with more energy”

“My class is a 75 minute stand-up routine”

“I sing a hymn to fire myself up”

“I wear a mic. because it is fun to do different voices”

“I always wear a tie when I lecture”

Lecture: Making it personal

- Sharing personal anecdotes
- Making fun of self
- Connecting material to current events
- Arriving early and chatting with the students
- Walking around in the aisles
- Leaving a question box in the back
- Sharing personal viewpoints on sensitive issues



The Lecture: Student Engagement

- “Anonymous participation isn’t possible in my class”
- “Sometimes up to 1/3 of the class doesn’t show up”
- “Lecture halls are loud, unruly, students are chewing gum and popping bubbles”
- “Students put more effort into challenging grades than preparing for the course”
- “What do I do in lecture? I shout at them!”

Lecture: Engaging Students

- Demonstrations
- Clickers
- Small group activities
- Calling on people randomly
- Working problems
- Using peer facilitators
- Bringing students to the board
- Student Advisory Board
- Minute papers
- Anonymous question box
- Asking questions... and waiting for an answer
- Staging contests for candy
- Putting students in base groups for the semester



The Lecture: Addressing Behavior: Instructor Tips

- Embarrass people when they come in late
- Call people out when they pack up early
- Station a TA at the back of the room to check for Facebooking and other laptop surfing
- Send e-mails to students who are behaving inappropriately in the classroom (identified by TAs)
- Set expectations early, verbally and in syllabus
- Allow computer use in first two rows only



The Lecture: Using Technology

“Students pay better attention to the chalkboard”

“I don’t have time to put my lectures on PowerPoint”

“When I use PowerPoint students stop listening and scribble down the entire slide”

“PowerPoint serves as an exact record of what was covered in lecture”



The Lecture: Using Technology: A Summary

- Entirely mixed opinions on use of PowerPoint
- Entirely mixed opinions on providing slides; before or after class, complete or incomplete
- Entirely mixed opinions on use of clickers
- Some classrooms are a barrier for effective use of technology
- Some still use overheads and slides
- All allow laptops in class



Connecting with students out of class

“I wish students weren’t so afraid of faculty”

“About 5% of students come to see me in office hours”

“I am frustrated that I don’t know more students”

“I don’t really want to shoot the breeze with students”

“I receive 100s of e-mails”

“I had a Facebook page, but then I felt creepy about it”

“It is pitiful that I don’t know more students”



Connecting with students out of class: Summary

- The majority do not see many students out of class
- Students send a lot of e-mail
- Most hold review sessions
- Few do anything with students outside of typical activities
- Many are concerned about role definition with students
- Most will not become Facebook friends with a student until class is over



Connecting with students out of class: Bright Ideas

- Students are assigned to e-mail the professor and TA to introduce themselves after first class
- Professor holds a weekly bridge game with students in the dorms
- Students are invited to come to office hours in groups
- If a student sends a complex question via e-mail, instructor will only respond in person
- Be nice and show interest in student's lives
- Hang around before and after class



Teaching Assistants

“I have no TAs; I don’t want to distance myself from the students”

“Care and feeding of the graduate students is important!”

“This is a training ground for future faculty”

“The TAs are inspiring”

“One of my TAs is a train wreck”



Teaching Assistants: Summary

- Most TAs receive some preparation for teaching subject matter, less for pedagogy and student relations
- TAs are playing a critical role as the first line of response for students
- Involving TAs in course related decision making helps with their professional development
- Some, not all, instructors observe their TA's sections



Best Advice from the Instructors

- Study improv and theater
- Make the implicit explicit
- Have a college-age son or daughter
- Care about first-year students
- Recognize your role in the transition from high school to college



Instructor Role in College Socialization

Instructors deliver mini lectures on transition

topics:

1. Selecting a major
2. Redefining relationship with parents
3. Figuring out what you are passionate about
4. Study skills
5. Classroom behavioral expectations
6. Managing stress, asking for help
7. Discouraging binge drinking
8. Differences between high school and college learning



My favorite ideas

- Acting out a plant life cycle to music
- Drawing pictures of the worst thunderstorm they've ever been in
- Student Advisory Board
- Photo of the week contest
- Sending individuals an e-mail congratulating them on improvement between 1st and 2nd exam
- Allowing students to attend any TA section they want- vote with their feet



Favorite Quotes

“In 1991 my son’s girlfriend was going to be in my class and it completely changed the way I teach. I didn’t want to look bad in front of my family”



Favorite Quotes

“Faculty need to CARE about first-year students. If we could find a way to measure caring it would highly correlate to satisfaction and learning”



Favorite Quotes

“I am not teaching in class,
but before, by preparing
the environment and
weaving a thread through
the course”



My Observations and Learning

- Intentions vs. reality in the life of an instructor
- Campus needs to focus on Teaching Assistant development and preparation
- Instructors can play a critical role in the socialization of first-year students
- Participating in the interview was a valuable experience for the instructor



Value of Project to Center for First-Year Experience

- More faculty willing to speak at orientation programs
- CFYE staff invited to participate in Teaching Assistant training programs.
- Interviewees attended presentation about project
- Interviewees attended CFYE focus group about orientation
- Interviewees filled out CFYE survey about orientation
- Interviewees attended First-Year Conference
- CFYE staff viewed as experts on faculty relations



Next Steps

- Complete additional faculty interviews
- Conduct interviews of Teaching Assistants
- Conduct interviews of students
- Continue building relationships with faculty, perhaps by interviewing them again.
- What else?