

Transitioning to Large Classes: A Best Practices Document

Transitioning to large classes brings with it a series of unique challenges and opportunities. What follows is a brief inventory of interests and obstacles associated with this transition, and advice for teaching, learning, and transitioning effectively.

ISSUE I: Engagement

Keeping students involved in a class of any size is a challenge, but as **the class size grows, so does the difficulty of engagement**. And it cuts two ways:

- In class
- In-between class sessions

Problem 1(a): Student Inclusion in the class

The perception of anonymity increases with class size. Some students wish to remain off the radar screen while others seek to dominate it. It is easy in a class of 100 students to have an apparently lively discussion among a small handful of students. While the experience may be very enriching and rewarding for them, it may be less so for 90% of the rest of the class.

Solution 1: Use technology to your advantage:

Personal response systems (AKA, clickers) may be used to conduct planned or spontaneous surveys of student opinions and knowledge. Used in a well-timed manner, personal response systems keep students behaviorally and cognitively active, and the instant display of responses can be used to illustrate the diversity of ideas, modalities of reasoning, and even promote sense of inclusion in the class.

Several textbook vendors provide these devices (which are often tethered to the book's content). The CSTL has a universal 300-unit set on-hand for faculty use, with another 300 on order. These devices can be used in two ways: (1) integrated into a pre-planned PowerPoint presentation, with the results displayed in real time on the screen; and (2) to record spontaneous class-wide opinions and feedback on the instructor's hand-held receiver.

The overall value of clickers is that they can generate 100% participation and display the diversity of student opinion in real time. The device itself is a prompt to remain alert. With a pre-developed presentation, students can report their opinions and the instructor can use that information for class discussion. By developing questions ahead of time, the instructor has control over the content and direction of the class.

But what if the instructor prefers to be less scripted? What if he or she desires feedback on issues emanating from, and not simply determining the direction of, class discussion, on the fly? Then the hand-held device is remarkably useful. It enables the instructor to spontaneously solicit anonymous student feedback and to use that information to reveal "what the rest of the class thinks" and to stimulate discussion. It can also assist in efforts to determine how clearly or how well information has been conveyed to students.

Tip: Test and retest to reduce disingenuous or simply obligatory answers. Do not overuse. Maintain perspective.

Solution 2: Discussion: Whether technology is used or not, it is important for students to know that they are expected to learn from discussions, even those in which they do not play an active role. Discussion is not “just talking” in class. Instructors should remind students that the goal of a class is not to see how many notes one takes, but to see how well material was learned. Discussions help the student’s minds to fire on all (or at least more) cylinders. To learn from discussions, instructors must periodically point out the really good arguments, discuss why poor arguments are just that, and strike a balance between staying on-task with the topic of the day and the alternative route discussion might take. Regardless of the route, the instructor must synthesize the material carefully and thoroughly.

How?

- Have students report on the muddiest and clearest points.

How?

- Ask them to write them down, then discuss
- Ask them to verbally articulate, then discuss
- Ask them to anonymously vote, then discuss
- Think-Pair-Share
- Group work

Example: Class discussion raises an issue the instructor or the students consider interesting, debatable, or confusing. The instructor asks the students to register their answer to a specific question through their clickers. The instructor shares the anonymous snap-shot of student feedback with the class and asks them to make sense of the dispersion of data (diversity of opinion). This can be done through open discussion or through a group activity, asking people with similar responses to develop and present a well-developed argument to the class.

Problem 1(b): Session-to-session engagement

Solution: Intellectual bridges. Developing and implementing tasks and activities that bridge the material covered one day to the next. Specifically: Content-relevant Forum assignments.

Method: Consider the learning objectives for each session and how they relate to subsequent sessions. Develop a question—a Topic—that requires students to reflect on the day’s accomplishments and to continue thinking along a path to the next class session. A well designed Topic can foster critical, analytical, creative, and independent thinking, while at the same time stimulating a productive and rewarding group dynamic. Add rules for credit. Specify the number and type of responses required for each Topic, and make these relevant to the content and the development of ideas and arguments, and not simply the accomplishment of X number of tasks for the purpose of earning credit.

Example: A class meets on Mondays and Fridays. Ninety-four and a half hours elapse between the end of the first class session and the beginning of the next. That’s a lot of time to lose traction. After the Monday class session, the instructor reflects on the day’s accomplishments and where the class is heading. A “good” question is developed that links existing knowledge to new knowledge, filling the space with independent, critical thought and creativity. This question may require three separate responses: one to the original post, one to another student, and one to still another student. These responses should be separated by time, so that a student cannot “do it all at once”. The Topic rule may be to reply to the original post by Tuesday night, to the response of another student by Wednesday

night, and to a second student by Friday morning. Depending on the assignment, a student may be given the latitude to address the same student in a continuing line of reasoning or debate, or the students may be required to address one student with whom he or she agrees, as well as one with whom he or she does not. The Forum posts are read by the instructor and selected arguments are used to introduce discussion the next class session.

ISSUE II: Attendance and Participation

Under even optimal circumstances, it is very easy and probably very tempting for students in large classes to “get away with missing a day”, thinking “the professor will never even notice”.

More problematically, students may feel lost in the crowd or completely anonymous and unknown to the instructor.

- If students feel anonymous then they may lose interest in the class.
- If they lose interest, they may completely disengage.
- When they disengage they will simply go through the motions of being a student or stop attending class altogether.

While attendance is the responsibility of the student, as concerned faculty we should be interested in learning. We should, therefore, make the class one students want to attend, and structure the class so that students cannot easily miss sessions and compromise the learning process. There are a number of things we can do in furtherance of this:

- Utilize the student photographs available via the portal and OIS
- Rely on the class GA, TA, UTA, or RA to observe who is present and who is not
- Rely on the class GA, TA, UTA, or RA to observe and record who participated and how frequently
- Recall that attendance per se cannot be used in the calculation of grades, but that work conducted in a class can. Therefore,
 - Provide flexibility in your syllabus for unannounced in-class work.
 - Consider including points-earning assignments in each (or various) class sessions.
 - Recall that a good syllabus is vital
 - Look at it as a document by which you teach and students learn.
 - There should be no surprises for the students. Clarity counts, and students deserve that
 - It’s also the instructor’s safety blanket. The instructor should make sure he or she can point out where in the syllabus the authority to require assignments, subtract points, etc., is derived.

ISSUE III: Grading and Prompt Feedback

Grading is one of the most time-consuming aspects of the teaching process, and **prompt feedback is essential for students to learn from their mistakes**. Transitioning from a class of 30 to a class of 100, for example, will require a greater –or modified-- investment of time. What can we do?

- Avoid sporadic, all-at-once bombardments of student work
 - Spread out the assignments
 - This works to the intellectual and academic advantage of the student as well as the learning-centered interests and efficiency of the instructor.
- Make wise choices about what a TA or a computer program, for example, may be able to do in the assessment process.
 - Think “objectivity”
- Make wise choices about the types of assignments the TA, for example, may be able to handle.
 - Posting approved Forum questions
 - Stimulating student participation and responses
 - Generating reports on student performance
- Rubrics: Design and abide by them. Share them with students ahead of time.
- Do NOT be tempted to take the easy way out.
- Do NOT “drop” certain types of teaching, learning, and assessment methods because “it can’t be done in a large class” or because “it would be too time consuming to grade”.
- Do NOT suspend normal expectations of student effort because of the class size.

Advice for making the transition:

- Choose the right room
- Master and make use of the technology
- Revise your syllabus
- Think carefully about learning objectives and specify them clearly and often. Link the assignments to the objectives.
- Think about teaching styles and learning styles. Who should adapt to what and how?
- Work with your UTA/TA/GA/RA and CSTL to figure out how to use GradeA, Forum, DropBox, etc., most efficiently, effectively, and appropriately.
- Get to know your students
- Keep a journal.
- Recall that Active Learning is a broad concept that includes, but is not limited to:
 - Discussions, which can occur in-class and in-between class sessions
 - Think-pair-share activities
 - Brief reflective writing assignments
 - Debates, games, and simulations
 - Collaborative learning groups