

Teaching Large Classes

This Teaching Tips document was compiled from contributions from Ryerson faculty members at workshops hosted by the Learning & Teaching Office. Faculty members include: Stephen Want, Tetyana Antimirova, Noel George, Brennan Thompson, Brad MacMaster, Gosha Zywno, Steven Gedeon, Andie Noack, Paul Moore, Frankie Stewart, Eric Kam, and David Schlanger

Logistics/Class Management

Administering/managing large class, which includes attendance, ground rules, such as student code of conduct, policies on the use of laptops, cell phones etc.

- **Model all aspects of your course (group work, activities, participation, technology, etc.) in that first class**, especially if what is coming is different from the norm. Set the tone and the level of interaction and engagement for the rest of the semester. Make your expectations for students clear. Establish ground rules from day one and follow through on them consistently.
- **Prevention is always a better strategy than damage control.** Be organized and plan ahead – always bring extra whiteboard markers, chalk, erasers, and dongles to connect computers to displays. Have a backup plan if you are unexpectedly unable to display slides, use the Internet, or play media with sound.
- **Get student buy-in** by involving them in creating the class contract around norms, behaviours, etc. Make sure to cover lateness, disruptive behaviour, and distractions such as laptops and cell phones.
- **Reward students** for being courteous and prepared with bonus content, review questions, or fun activities.
- **Connect classroom behaviour to professional behaviour** – for example, checking your phone or slouching in your chair won't impress your boss in a boardroom.
- **Have class representatives** (e.g. one representative for every twenty students) that can help with classroom logistics, like distributing or collecting hardcopies or props. This work should not be done in exchange for marks, but volunteers could be rewarded with a pizza party or similar treat.
- **Remove anonymity** and students are less likely to be disruptive. To help learn student names:
 - Prepare name tents, distribute and collect them back after each class. In very large classes you can ask class representatives to handle these tasks.
 - Whenever possible, engage students in an “ice-breaker” activity where they reveal something about themselves that will help put their name into context.
 - Have students fill out a “get-to-know-you” short essay or survey.
- **Controlling laptop use** – if you are concerned that students are using their laptops for non-course related purposes and disturbing other students, there are a few things to try.
 - Get students involved in meaningful activities in general and they will have less time for their laptop. You can also consider involving the laptops in class activities. For example, asking students to research a topic, find an example, perform a computer simulation, do calculations, or use a relevant piece of software.
 - Create a laptop zone where students using laptops can congregate. Avoid making this area the back row – you may have students who need laptops for accessibility purposes and who also need to sit toward the front of the room.

- **Clickers** –
 - Avoid using clickers to mark attendance, but you can use the data from clicker participation to observe attendance trends and troubleshoot your course.
 - Clickers can be used to poll students anonymously about whether they find the class environment conducive to learning. This way they can ‘complain’ about other students’ disruptive behavior without being put on the spot.
- **Give students breaks during long classes.** If the course is in the late afternoon or evening, consider GO Train schedules and if the students might prefer to get out of class early instead of having a longer break.
- **Be clear about time limits for breaks.** Combine them with a small task to keep students from wandering too far afield. For instance, distribute an “attendance sheet” with questions on the lecture. During breaks, ask students to take a couple of minutes to fill in answers to the questions. They are motivated to complete the sheet because they know they will hand it in at the end of class.
- **To regain student attention after an activity or break, have a plan:**
 - Tap the microphone
 - Use clickers
 - Play an interesting video or audio clip
 - Project a countdown tool on the screen
 - Turn the lights on and off
- **Fairness and consistency** – avoid changing rules halfway through the course or creating punitive policies that you don’t have the power to enforce. Avoid giving students marks for non-academic tasks like attendance, or allowing them to negotiate grades. If there is the perception of unfairness or preferential treatment, morale and motivation drops and the class atmosphere can become adversarial.

Faculty/Student Contact

Policies on office hours, student emails, and other forms of contact with students.

- **Office hours**
 - Be accessible, but set rules for large classes. For example, no informal drop-ins outside of office hours, or have students schedule appointments
 - Consider virtual or group office hours
- **Electronic communication strategies**
 - Establish expectations for turn-around times for emails, and set boundaries as to when you will and will not be responding to messages (i.e. policies around weekends and evenings).
 - Provide guidance as to what messages should be sent to you via email and which belong on a discussion board. For course-related material, ask students to post to a thread in D2L to benefit other students who have the same question.
 - Only respond to student email from an official Ryerson email address. Let students know that any other email will be ignored. Explain why – the need to authenticate emails, security, academic integrity, etc.
 - When teaching large classes with multiple sections, ask students to use a subject line containing the course and section number when sending emails.

- Model professional communication in emails and discussion board posts – no slang, abbreviations, informal language, etc.
- If you have teaching assistants, delegate some administrative work to them, for instance having them moderate discussion boards.

Instructional Strategies

Learning/teaching strategies for the large class: student engagement, examples of active learning, collaborative learning, etc.

- **Provide an agenda** for each class not only on the first slide, but also on subsequent slides to show where the current topic is in relation to the entire lecture. Give students a sense of how the current lecture fits into the bigger picture of the course or program. Backtrack to reinforce certain themes or concepts in subsequent lectures.
- **Try to avoid covering too much material in the lecture** and then rushing the last ten minutes, frustrating students with quick explanations. It is important to structure the lecture in priority sequence with respect to material that needs elaboration or emphasis
- **To hold student attention, chunk the class in 15-20 minutes segments.** For each chunk, vary your teaching strategy, e.g. from lecturing to group discussion, from group discussion to problem exercise, etc. Make sure every activity meets the course objectives.
- **Get out from behind the podium!** Move around the classroom and make eye contact with students – the wireless microphone and slide remote are your best friends.
- **Use technology to expand the range of strategies.** For example, showing videos, running interactive simulations, using clickers or other classroom response technology (PollEverywhere, Kahoot), or having students work with laptops on collaborative Google Docs.
- **Acknowledge the textbook, handouts, readings** etc. within the lecture to make a clear connection and assure students that you are aware of what they should have prepared prior to attending the lecture.
- **Discuss strategies to support learning outside of the classroom** – e.g. how to get the most out of assigned readings, how to set up study groups, where to find course materials in D2L, how to effectively communicate on discussion boards, how to complete collaborative projects, or what supports are available from Student Learning Support.
- **Keep students engaged:**
 - Use story-telling – share examples of problems solved, personal experiences with professional matters, how course content will be relevant to their future professional lives, famous case studies, etc.
 - Deliver difficult concepts in many formats – video, demonstration, textbook chapter, mini-lecture, activity.
 - Flip the classroom – have students watch a recorded lecture or complete a reading and use class time for discussion and problem-solving exercises
 - Divide students into small groups to work through a question or set of questions. Have them discuss the question and nominate one person to report back. You could also have them solve problems in their groups and submit a group solution.
 - Play competitive games in groups like Jeopardy or Family Feud as a way to review topics.
 - Have students post links or articles to a discussion board that are relevant to a class topic. Use these contributions as the basis of your next class discussion.

- Create a “burning question” list or a “parking lot” for ideas that are worth returning to but that would distract from lesson objectives. Address them at the end of class, the start of the next class, or at the end of the unit.

Assessment

Grading, providing feedback, assessing higher-level learning, matching assessment with instructional objectives and methods, etc.

- **Create assignments that will not lend themselves to violation of academic integrity.** Be careful with attaching grades to activities that you cannot monitor closely. To minimize pressures and temptations:
 - No marks attached to online quizzes, treat them for review only
 - If you want to run a quiz in a large class, an effective strategy to prevent students from “rubber-necking” is to allow students to solve the quiz in pairs
- **Allow students to submit drafts of their assignments and get the Turnitin report back as feedback** on their use of dubious quotations, etc. The students have a chance to fix their assignments based on the report and resubmit them without any penalty. This is a way to use Turnitin informatively, rather than punitively. This will also reduce the number of academic misconduct cases.
- Depending on the size of your class and whether or not you have TA support, asking for individual homework submissions may not be realistic. Instead, be creative about assessing group efforts instead. **“Individualize” group marks as much as possible**, such as through the use of self- and peer-assessment, group contracts and task breakdowns setting clear expectations for group members, and weekly reports on the work being done
- Creating assessments to measure meaningful learning can be challenging in large classes:
 - **Match assessments to objectives and strategies.** If the course focuses on group work, case studies, or tackling problems with multiple solutions, an individual multiple-choice exam will not necessarily assess the learning that has occurred. Consider alternative forms of assessment other than tests and exams. If a final exam is required by accreditation body, consider having another large component of assessment to correspond to group work, presentations, peer teaching etc.
 - **Ask for support from your department** – is it possible to hire exam markers so that you use more complex exams?

Improving your own teaching

Inviting feedback, both formative and summative, instructional design, formal training, etc.

- **Get formative feedback on how your course is going:**
 - Keep track of questions that come up often or during office hours. Most likely, the whole class is having the same problem.
 - Use a one-minute paper to “check the class pulse.” One simple way to do this is to ask them to write one concept they understood very well on one side and one thing they still don’t understand on the other. You can do similar polling with clickers, other classroom response software, or Google Forms. Follow-up on responses in the next class, otherwise students will disengage. You can also display the distribution of answers or

- the most common difficulties so that students get a sense of where they stand with respect to the rest of the class.
- Consider using Start-Stop-Continue in week four and eight to assess the teaching methods you have been using.
 - Where possible, a useful strategy can be to plan for 11 weeks of classes instead of 13 to accommodate situations where reviews are necessary.
 - Summative feedback can be in the form of exit surveys or through the faculty course survey. Review the survey options and tailor it with extra questions to assess new techniques you've tried that semester.

Work Cited

Learning & Teaching Office. (2011). "Ways to Better Engage your Students" March 4, 2011. Ryerson University. Retrieved from:

<http://www.ryerson.ca/lt/resources/teachingstrategies/largeclasses/EngagingStudentsPanel.pdf>

Learning & Teaching Office. (2011). Notes "Teaching Large Classes" Workshop/Discussion Panel. Ryerson University. Retrieved from:

<http://www.ryerson.ca/lt/resources/teachingstrategies/largeclasses/largeclasses2011.pdf>

Learning & Teaching Office. (2009). Notes "Teaching Large Classes" Workshop/Discussion Panel. Ryerson University. Retrieved from:

<http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/teachingstrategies/largeclasses/teachinglargeclassesworkshop2009.pdf>