

# Working with large classes

Working with a class with 50 or more students is definitely not an uncommon practice at UST. Discussions with faculty members teaching with large classes reveal some common problems like:

- Large groups are too heterogeneous with diversified needs and background knowledge of the subject matter;
- It's difficult to keep track of everything, and difficult to control such as late comers, students at the back doing unrelated work, etc.;
- Little in-class feedback and students don't ask questions;
- It's difficult to tell if students have understood;
- It's hard to mark consistently and objectively among several TAs;
- Marking essay-type questions or project reports is so time-consuming that becomes "unaffordable";
- Large discussion groups easily lose direction;
- Some TAs lack tutorial skills;
- Large classes always result in an inflexible schedule due to difficulties in changing meeting time and venue.

No study about students' perception of large classes has ever been conducted on the campus. But study in the States by Wulff, Nyquist and Abbott (1987) showed that quality of instruction, not size, determined how successful classes would be. Large-class instructors' student ratings could rival the ratings for the best small-class instructors. Some interesting findings were:

- There was no consensus of the size of a class to be identified as "large" class. Quite a significant portion of students in the study preferred to study in classes of 50-75 students which could be labeled as "large" as compared to small group learning of 12 to 20 students.
- Again, there was no consensus on what helped or hindered their learning in large classes.
- Instructor's competency, including his subject knowledge, organization of the content, use of examples and illustrations; concern for students; energy level and speaking ability were the four major aspects which were important to students' learning in large classes.
- "Other students" was most frequently quoted as a helping force in learning.
- Many students did not feel involved with the course and found big lectures uninspiring and impersonal. The lack of interaction between instructor and students was the most frequently quoted hindrance to learning in large class. However, some students mentioned that they enjoyed the "they-don't-know-who-I-am" atmosphere in large classes which fostered the sense of independence in learning.
- Students' ratings of the relevance and usefulness of course content in their best large class was not significantly different from that of their best small class.

With all this information, what can instructors do to make the best out of a large class teaching situation? This and the next issue of *Teaching-Learning Tips* will focus on ways to make the best of the job. This issue will talk about the logistics of preparing and conducting a large class whereas "active learning in large classes" will be the theme of next issue.

# Preparing for large classes

## *Basic Principles*

### 1. Provide a clear framework to help students learn

The larger the class, the harder it would be to get the message across to your students. They can easily “get lost” in a large class. One way to help students would be to structure their learning around a clear framework. The framework would serve as a succinct summary of the course contents thus enabling the students to have a concrete grasp of the “big picture”.

### 2. Choose the most appropriate teaching-learning methods

Lectures, tutorials, laboratory work, project, assignment are all different learning experiences serving various needs. What method to use for a particular topic area depends on what learning experience you think will best promote the kind of learning you intend, provided that adequate resources are available.

### 3. Prepare in advance and prepare well

Detailed planning of what to achieve and how to achieve the teaching-learning objectives, design and development of different teaching materials, evaluation procedures and regular tests and reviews are all necessary and have to be planned ahead of time.

## *Hints*

### Specify course objectives

A major issue here is to specify the overall objectives of the course and the expected outcomes in terms of students’ learning. The objectives and expected outcomes will, in a broad sense, dictate what strategies are to be employed in the teaching-learning process and the general format of the course. For example, assessment methods have to be tailored to the type of learning expected.

### Liaise with involved parties

Needless to say, it usually takes months for the school bookstore to order a particular textbook for a course. Also, early notice has to be sent to the library if certain books or reading materials have to be put on reserve (Do consider the number of copies in relation to number of students!). If guest speakers or field trips are involved, early planning becomes a must since it is always difficult to change meeting time of large classes.

### Prepare a detailed course outline/syllabus

This information will become absolutely essential during the first meeting to set the tone for the whole semester. The outline would normally include a description of the course including the learning objectives, a schedule of meetings and topics, the required readings for each meeting, assignments and assessment, the marking scheme, the role of the Teaching Assistant(s) in the course and other related rules and regulations, like whether make-up tests are allowed. Have the course outline nicely printed out and ensure sufficient copies for all students.

### Brief TA(s) of their roles and duties

Since most TAs are new to the roles and few have teaching experience in the past, detailed briefing of the TAs of their duties helps to ensure a smooth running of the course. Some initial training on some basic teaching skills like explaining and demonstrating, leading discussion groups, etc. would help the new TAs to have a successful start, followed by regular meetings to seek feedback in relation to their work and students’ comments. Should more than one TA be involved in marking assignments, there should be meetings to set grades and ensure consistency in the practice. Do let your TAs know if attendance to lecture is a must and ensure the TAs know what they are expected to perform and to what performance standard.

### **Prepare for the first meeting**

Effective communication is of the utmost importance in large class, especially during the first meeting in which rapport between the instructor and students has to be established. Make sure you have the course outline and other instructional materials ready for use. Check the classroom ahead of time to see if the required audio-visual equipment such as a cordless microphone, an overhead projector linked up with the computer, etc. are in good shape. If needed, rehearse and record your presentation beforehand for improvement.

### **Prepare effective instructional materials**

When in front of 200 to 300 students in a lecture theatre, sometimes an instructor becomes a performer who has to pay particular attention to the details of delivery, voice projection, use of visual materials, etc. Legibility of all projected images from the last row of the lecture theatre and audibility throughout the theatre are essential.

While the course outlines are usually handed out in printed form, other supplementary materials can be channeled through electronic forms, making use of our existing network system.

(Please refer to the discussion of “interactive handout” in Part 2. )

### **Marking and grading**

To mark objectively and efficiently in large class, objective tests like multiple-choice, right/wrong, true/false questions seem to be a popular choice. Well-written objective tests questions can be used to focus students’ attention on some basic features of the content of the course and help to provide quick feedback to both the instructor and students on their progress. However, they cannot substitute other forms of tests, like essays, projects, presentations, reports which aim to assess different kinds and levels of students’ learning. Self-assessment and peer assessment with well established assessment criteria can also be interesting options. Telling students in advance of their involvement in the assessment and enlisting their help in setting up the assessment criteria are important. The provision of a marking scheme or standardized feedback checklist can work well. A discussion of a model answer (essay, report or so) or a mediocre assignment (i.e. a “just-pass” ) can definitely help too.

A suggestion from McKeachie (1994) to re-direct students’ focus on the basic features being examined in objective tests: include an essay item on the final exam with the stipulation that the instructor would read it only if it would affect the student’s letter grade for the course. Since the majority of students are fairly clearly established as A, B, C, or D students on the basis of other work and the objective part of the final examination, the number of essays the instructors needed to read is not excessive in a class of 500. This coincides with Tang’s research findings (1991) that the inclusion of an essay question had much impact on the way students prepared for their exam.

Try to prepare one test/exam paper in several forms, e.g. questions in different sequences. It can help avoid cheating in large exam halls.

### ***The first meeting with students***

Arrive at the classroom a few minutes early and extend a warm welcome to students. To start with, you can tell them your name and some of your related academic or career background, and tell students how they can get in touch with you and your TAs. Go through the course outline in detail, to remove any ambiguity from such things as class attendance, assignment deadlines, grade composition, number of tests and exam, etc. Some students may not be interested in the subject matter at first. Show your enthusiasm and excitement about the field and share/explain why you are interested in the subject.

## *Some hints on delivering your message*

- Make sure everyone can see and hear you and the media you are using
- Explain the structure of your lecture at the very beginning and indicate where topics and sub-topics begin and end
- Highlight or emphasize key points, e.g. by pausing, using your voice to create emphasis
- Keep an eye on the time as you go along
- Establish eye contact and watch for reactions from the students
- Make sure there is a focus for attention: overhead transparencies, handouts, notes on board etc.
- Don't read from your notes and don't try to cover everything in detail
- Leave gaps and pauses between topics to relax attention, and to re-focus for next topic.

## *Concluding remarks*

Fairly detailed planning is needed for teaching large classes. Some common practices in small group teaching, like collecting homework in class, may become too time-consuming in large classes and has to be done in other ways, e.g. drop in a box before they leave the lecture theatre or send in electronically. Similarly, an oral briefing of an assignment alone may not be clear enough to all in a 200-student class. Prepare ahead of time and pay attention to all details in the teaching-learning process is the advice.

In the next issue, we'll focus our discussion on stimulating active learning in large classes, which involves, again, a lot of planning, organizing, and creativity from the instructor, but is most instrumental to effective learning.