

Strategies for Engaging Students in Large Classes

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Interactive classes allow students and instructors to “do the work” of learning together

- Professors can’t “do” the learning for students.
- Students’ opportunities for learning are reduced when their role is mainly that of spectators in large lecture classes.

Use teaching strategies that maximize the chance for successful interaction

- Try having students discuss questions, ideas, and data with peers in small groups or pairs first. Starting with small group discussions reduces the sense of risk students feel about talking in front of a large class, and allows them to share ownership for the ideas they present to the full class (“In our group, we said...”).
- Choose questions and activities that encourage students to engage with and think critically about course material in class rather than only taking notes.
- Pose questions that offer a legitimate reason for students to have a discussion (not questions for which there is a single right answer).

When teaching a large class, think about how to try to “see” the students

- Make eye contact and circulate around the classroom as a way of drawing students in and reducing the feel of a large classroom environment.
- Call on students in all parts of the room, not just those seated directly in front of you.

Be willing to wait for students to respond to your questions (doing so always pays off)

- Don’t call on the first hand you see. Wait patiently for students to respond to your questions.
- Be straightforward about why you are waiting for more students to respond. For example, you can say, “I’m interested in hearing what other people may think, so I’m going to give you another minute to think about the question.”

Integrate students’ diverse perspectives, experiences, and knowledge into the classroom discussion.

- Pose questions and assign tasks that profit from the diverse experiences, perspectives, and knowledge that students possess.
- Encourage students with different views to share their perspectives.

Use student participation to further your goals for the class session

- Structure interactive tasks to help you cover material (rather than relying solely on lecture).
- When restating student comments, add or elaborate any essential details you think are not clear enough or are missing.
- Summarize key take-away points as a means of synthesizing “for the record” what has been said during class discussions.

Some suggestions for how to get started engaging your students in a large class

- Start small: Ask students to talk with their neighbors about a question. It is not always necessary to elicit responses. Instead, try showing a slide summarizing points that usually come up in such discussions and ask students if they came up with anything that is not on the list.
- Spend time figuring out your questions in advance, rather than thinking them up on the fly. Good questions precipitate better active work by students.