

Faculty Forum
Relating to Large Classes: Another Visit
June 11, 2003

List of attendees and their answers to “What is a large class for you?”

Hrach Bedrosian, Management – More than 35 students
Larry White, Economics – 30+
Chris Packard, Stern Faculty Development Consultant – 26+
Sergio Meza, 5th year PhD student, Marketing – 20+
Jeanne Calderon, Business Law – 60+
Kim Corfman, Marketing, CITL – 70+
Cheryl Cappiello, Assistant Director, CITL – 60+
Stephanie Nickerson, Faculty Development Consultant, CITL – 65+
Keith Adams, Associate Director, CITL – 40+

General consensus that when an instructor doesn't feel able to distinguish individuals, when they start to blur, is when a class starts to feel “large.” (It may change over a faculty member's career.)

Kim: At 70 students, I cannot get a sense of individuals; students can hide.

Steph: What are some problems with large classes?

Three parts: Preparing for class; conducting a large class; grading, assessing and giving feedback

Issues: (Put on flip chart)

- Learning names
- Tend to focus on lecturing because it seems to be so hard to get student participation
- Grading
- Disruptions, classroom management
- Anonymity of students (they feel it; instructor feels it)
- Lack of individuality
- Hard to track progress; monitoring progress
- Distinguishing people—hard to know everyone even by sight, let alone their names
- Writing—how do you do it in a large class?
- Acoustics/line of vision in large classrooms
- Class participation

Learning Names/Class Participation: Also starts to address the anonymity problem too.

Steph: It helps to use however many names you do know, even if it is only 2 or 3 at first.

Kim: I always ask MBA students to use their nameplates. For undergraduate students, I bring in tent cards and ask them to bring them every week. I always bring extras just in case.

Hrach: When participation is a requirement, how can one give grades when one doesn't know students names?

Most faculty agree that they are not good at learning names, but they try anyway. If they make sure students always put up name cards, all the instructor needs to do is read the name. It makes a positive difference, especially in large classes.

Kim: I tell students they must come to class to get graded for participation. I bring a seating chart for every class session with the students' names; I make notes of class participation (quality before quantity), and I tell students that I am doing this.

Jeanne: I also grade participation on quality before quantity, and I define participation criteria in my syllabus.

Kim: Online discussion board (on Blackboard) helps because everyone can be "heard" in a large class.

Steph: It's good to keep track of class participation in class (by making notes) either during class or directly after. It's not something to trust to memory.

Hrach: Does participation include asking a question?

Kim: If they're intelligent questions.

Steph: Caroline Bartel told us in a recent workshop that she emails students who do not participate in class during the semester and nudges them to participate. She also learns something unique about them the first day of class to help her "know" the student a bit more. (See sample background information sheet handout.)

Kim: I use an information form with the undergraduate students that goes deeper than the traditional "biosheets." My last question used to be "Tell me something that makes you an individual." You can also use the Personal Homepage function in Blackboard; students can use it to get to know one another and form groups.

Sergio: In my class's Blackboard discussion board, I have trouble closing discussions or acknowledging individual contributions because there are too many students. It might be easier to manage discussion boards in groups of 5 or 6 rather than 40.

Keith: You also might try bringing the best comments from the discussion board into the live classroom and get the closure to the discussion in class.

Classroom Management

Steph: Any thoughts about classroom management?

Larry: Prof. Silber fines a student \$10 if their cell phone rings.

Kim: Cell phones are not ringing much anymore; students are learning, and they are embarrassed when it happens.

Jeanne: Why do students go to the bathroom so often?

Steph: My hypothesis is that because there are only 10-15 minutes between classes and there is often a long line in the bathrooms, they wait until they are less crowded. If students go to the bathroom, they tend to go out politely and quietly and one by one if they respect the professor.

If something is really important to an instructor, they need to let students know the first day of class and on the syllabus. Build it into the “contract” with students.

Kim: Have a place reserved for latecomers so they are out of the way. Classrooms are poorly designed with the doors in front and students have to walk up the center aisle.

Steph: Another classroom management issue: A student in the front row asks a question, and students in the back can't hear, and the professor answers the student, without repeating what the student asked, leaving out the others. When this happens there is a tendency for students in the back to start having conversations with each other. This can be very disruptive to others, especially in a large class. Instead, repeat the question, encourage students to speak louder for the class.

Kim: But for class discussion, you cannot repeat everything.

Sergio agrees.

Steph: When faculty walk toward a student who is speaking, that student will lower his or her voice. Try walking away from the student speaking instead and cup your hand behind your ear, staying oriented to the question asker.

Kim: I've tried that; it's a conscious effort, and it works.

Steph: If you want to make sure everyone in your class gets to hear everyone else, make it a norm the first day of class and reinforce it every class.

Anonymity

Steph: Students need to feel connected to each other in addition to each having a connection to the professor. The Enhanced Lecture activities can address this issue, and they are easy to do in a large class (see “Enhanced” handout).

Kim: You can do it with any size class; rather than just your talking to them; give students something to do with each other.

Participation

Steph: Any thoughts on participation?

Larry: For Firms & Markets, we're grading participation (10%). I don't usually grade participation. The subjective assessment concerns me—how to control loudmouths.

Sergio: Often students with the top grades on the exam and case never speak in class. They are smart students, but when they are working for a company, they must know how to speak up. In the business world, there are no exams or grades. They need to learn this skill.

Hrach: Requiring participation counters the comfortable environment I like to create.

Kim: My environment is comfortable; I make it non-threatening. I love the discussion board for that – “shy” students can participate there.

Hrach: Why require participation?

Kim: Students' participation helps me guide the class, get examples I hadn't thoughts of. It helps the class.

Jeanne: Makes the class more lively. I cold call, and students almost always come prepared. Otherwise, they are not prepared for class. I make it pretty unthreatening. I ask them to let me know beforehand if they are not prepared, and then I don't call on them that day.

Cheryl: One faculty member cold calls; and he gives students one “free pass” per semester.

Sergio: How does he keep track of who uses their free pass?

Cheryl: He doesn't; he works on the honor system.

Steph: Cold calling is great if done in a gentle and respectful sort of way. Robert Whitelaw “warm calls” – he lets students know ahead of class that they will be called on.

Jeanne: But are other students prepared? Not likely.

Grading

Larry: My TA grades midterms and finals (short essay questions); I give my TA a set of alternative answers – e.g., this is a 90% answer, 80%, 70%, etc. I also give my TA previous exams and answers as examples.

Jeanne: Grading for a large class is awful. I have one group project and 3 other papers (8 pages each). I can't rely on my TA to grade those.

Steph: Does all writing need to be graded?

Jeanne: I grade the first paper, but don't count it. I want them to learn what I expect from them.

Kim: I tell students I will grade X% of the assignments but don't tell students which ones.

Sergio: I delegate grading to my TA, but I manage the process.

Steph, Keith and Cheryl briefly discuss the resources on the Large Classes page on the CITL Web site: <http://www.stern.nyu.edu/Faculty/citl/articles/large.html>