



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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Little Things Matter in Large Course Instruction

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As the first day of class rolls around, many of us find ourselves face to face with 100 or more students. Whether you've "been there, done that" or are experiencing large course instruction for the first time, the challenges associated with teaching a large enrollment course can be daunting. The often heard advice – to teach such a course as you might a smaller one – sounds easy enough to follow. Unfortunately, the added level of complexity that accompanies the addition of a score or more people cannot be easily ignored. To teach a large enrollment course well, you must carefully consider every feature of the course, from the method of teaching and the means of assessment to the day-to-day administration. Before your stress levels shoot up, here are three points to consider which will help get you off to a great start and carry through the semester.

Organization. Recent research on teaching large enrollment courses is scant – such research is complicated to conduct and even more difficult to interpret – but one thing is clear: students asked to rate their best classroom experience report that organization effects the quality of large enrollment courses more than smaller courses (Stanley, 2002). Whether or not you consider yourself organized, early planning and preparation as well as a close attention to detail are necessary to help the course run smoothly. If, for example, you plan to use multimedia during your lectures, be sure to reserve equipment well in advance, test the equipment and media in your classroom a day or so early, and have a back-up plan. If you incorporate group activities into the lesson plan, consider early on how you will form the groups, how you will

monitor them, and how you will assess learning goals. Of course, you would consider these details in a smaller course as well. But, the frustration and headache that can result when a seemingly insignificant component is ignored or forgotten is magnified for a large course, particularly when you have over 200 eyes staring at you. In the end you will find the time you spend planning and preparing to teach a large enrollment course well worth the investment.

Communication. Student-instructor communication can be the single most time- and energy-consuming aspect of teaching a large enrollment course. The problem is exacerbated by today's techno-reliant students who communicate almost exclusively by email. In a 300-student course, you might receive an average of three email messages per student over the course of the semester. If you take three minutes reading and responding to each of the 900 emails you receive, you'll spend 45 hours – a full work week – just handling email! While most instructors feel an "open door" policy is important, clear parameters are a necessity. In order to help manage student-teacher communication, consider the following:

- Use the Instructional Toolkit or a course website to make announcements and post answers to frequently asked questions. Be sure to update the FAQ page from semester to semester.
- Create and save email templates for use throughout the semester, and more importantly, in future years. If, for example, you always send your students an email about a particular assignment, save the email so that you can simply edit dates, assignments, or point allocations before resending.
- Establish email guidelines, such as naming conventions for subject lines, formats for

attachments, and your likely response time (e.g., within 24 hours).

- Utilize a chain-of-command approach, asking students to contact their discussion or laboratory section teaching assistant before turning to you for help.

Connection. Research indicates that the single biggest complaint by students and faculty about large enrollment courses is the impersonal nature of the teacher-learner interaction (Stanley, 2002; Weimer, 1987). The scene is this: anonymous students hide in a sea of faces, hoping to absorb all of the day's material; the exposed professor stands before the students hoping they will learn the day's material. Allowing the scene to play out as scripted leaves both parties unsatisfied; however, taking time to connect with your students in and out of class can turn the sea of faces into individual students and, ultimately, everyone's hopes of learning into actuality. Why? Research has shown that students who make personal connections with the instructor are more likely to take an interest in the material, become actively engaged in discussions, and take greater responsibility for their own learning (Weimer, 1987). Here are a few suggestions for fostering meaningful connections with your students:

- Learn as many student names as possible and use their names every chance you get. A number of suggestions for name-learning strategies can be found on the TRC website at http://trc.virginia.edu/Publications/Teaching_Concerns/Misc_Tips/Learn_Names.htm.
- Come to class a few minutes early and talk to your students – about the weather, baseball, or the assignments. Be sure to linger a few minutes after class as well.
- Invite students to meet with you one-on-one to talk about how the course is unfolding from their perspective and how you can help them better learn the subject matter. Your invitations may go unanswered but they won't go unnoticed.
- Encourage attendance during your office hours and review sessions and consider accommodating special requests for extra help. Make appointments with those students who are struggling with the material to identify reasons for their difficulties and

devise a strategy to rectify the situation. Point out additional resources which may be of value, such as tutoring options and University centers (e.g., the Writing Center) that help students with a variety of learning skills.

- Become a participant in small-group activities. Spend a few minutes with each group, not as a teacher but as an active learner.
- Listen to the class, not just with your ears but with your eyes and with that little feeling in your stomach which says something isn't quite right. In most cases, you can easily adjust to correct a misunderstanding or clear up confusing material. If you can't put your finger on the problem, though, ask a few students. You might be surprised at the candid, precise feedback you get. Just as important, the students will appreciate your concern for their learning.

Careful planning, prudent communication management, and meaningful student-instructor connections can go a long way toward lowering your stress levels and toward helping the students learn what you are teaching.

References

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