Large-group teaching need not be stressful for teachers or boring and inactive for students. At its best, learning in large group contexts can:

- give teachers an opportunity to convey basic and necessary information to students
- help students gain a big-picture understanding of a course and make links between its different components
- help students to see the relevance and applications of what they are learning
- help students consolidate their learning
- give students the opportunity to meet and mix with more peers.

To achieve these outcomes, make your large-group teaching Student-Centred, creating opportunities for students to be active learners rather than passive recipients of information.

Challenges of teaching in large classes

The research of McInnis et al. (1995, 2000) into the first-year student experience across Australia suggests that students, particularly in their first year of study, need to:

- understand what's expected of them at University in terms of thinking and writing (academic integration)
- have a sense of purpose (goal orientation)
- identify with the institution they study at (academic identification) and
- experience a sense of belonging in the community of the institution (social integration).

In a larger class, students are less likely to understand what is expected of them and more likely to feel socially isolated. This may lead them to adopt a surface approach to learning, rather than attempting to develop a meaningful understanding, or deep approach, to the subject content.

How can I address the challenges?

Although you may be daunted by the thought of incorporating some kind of active learning into your large classes (e.g. asking the students to discuss an issue in pairs or solve problems and share solutions), active learning is one of the most effective ways to keep students engaged in large classes.

- Our useful 2-page printable resource discusses Ideas for Effective Large Group teaching.
- The Lectures page discusses a range of active learning strategies you might want to integrate into your large
Ideas for assessing large groups

Assessment in large classes presents a particular challenge for teachers. Try the following ideas.

- Develop clear explanations of assessment tasks, and clear assessment criteria, then communicate these to students. This can help limit the number of student enquiries. You might consider doing this via a pre-recorded lecture and making it available online.
- Provide students with a list of frequently asked questions and answers about assessment in your course. You could use the learning management system (e.g. Moodle) to do this.
- Provide students with models or examples of tasks that meet various criteria and that have received grades across the marking spectrum.
- Provide students with a list of the most common difficulties encountered or errors made by students in a particular assessment task.
- Use online quizzes that provide automated feedback.
- Devise tasks that use self-assessment and/or peer-assessment. This may reduce your workload. You do not have to be the only source of feedback for students on their assessment tasks.
- Use standardised marking and feedback sheets that list the assessment criteria. This can speed up the marking process and create greater reliability across different markers.

Further resources

- Felder, R. Beating the Numbers Game: Effective Teaching in Large Classes, Department of Chemical Engineering, North Carolina State University.
- Race, P. Notes on Lecturing, DeLIBerations.
- Davis, B. Preparing to Teach the Large Lecture Course, University of California, Berkeley.
- University of Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education, Assessing Large Classes.

References

McInnis, C. and James, R. (1995) First year on campus: Diversity in the initial experiences of Australian undergraduates, Canberra, AGPS.
