Overview

The student cohort is becoming ever more diverse and more active, and student class sizes are increasing. For some Faculties, classes of 1000-2000 are becoming more common; for others a class of 80 would seem to be a large class. When student-centred learning is the University’s expectation, doubling or tripling class numbers can present real challenges in the design, management and fairness of assessment practices.

Teaching and Assessing Large Classes

Compilation of 8 videos with Patricia Strong.

When to use

This toolkit is not only focused on large lecture classes, so if you are challenged by the number of students in your classes, whatever your disciplinary context, this topic is for you.

Benefits

Large student numbers can have some benefits. They can, for example, shift the focus from teachers to students. A large class presents a great diversity of experience and prior learning; group activities and assessments can be devised to take advantage of this resource.

In a large class, students cannot rely on the teacher’s close attention to their progress, and must also shoulder more responsibility for their learning. This leads to the faster development of their independent learning skills.

Challenges

Large classes present assessment challenges, for teachers and for learners. The table below lists some of these.

Figure 1: Challenges of assessing large classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues for staff</th>
<th>Issues for students</th>
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<tr>
<td>Engaging students and encouraging deep learning</td>
<td>Feeling included in the discipline, relevance of tasks to program</td>
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<td>Difficulty giving high quality, individual feedback</td>
<td>Inadequate opportunities for feedback, and timing of feedback</td>
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<td>Ensuring consistency in marking</td>
<td>Unclear about assessment methods and marking criteria/standards</td>
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<td>Heavy workload in managing assessment</td>
<td>Inadequate support for completing assessment tasks</td>
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<td>Assessing graduate attributes</td>
<td>Lack of diversity in assessment tasks</td>
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<td>Avoiding plagiarism</td>
<td>Managing assessment workload</td>
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Some of these issues arise from the fact that teachers tend to use traditional assessment methods—such as examinations and lengthy written assignments—in large classes. They do this because they perceive difficulties in personalising the learning experience in large classes. For smaller classes, providing student-centred activities and tasks, and giving frequent feedback, look manageable; for larger classes, fear of increased workload tends to keep teachers conservative.

**Strategies**

**Engage students**

- Clearly align assessment tasks with learning outcomes for the course and program, and ensure that students have a clear understanding of the learning they will achieve by undertaking the tasks. If they perceive tasks as relevant and authentic they will be more motivated to (for instance) review the work of their peers, engage in a group project, or develop a course wiki.

- If you require students to be proactive (e.g. in giving you feedback) and responsive (e.g. through class polling or online discussion), you will help them feel part of a learning community.

- Online feedback to students does not have to be individualised. For example, you can provide audio feedback with general comments about a class's performance on an assignment. Students will still feel that you are speaking to them.

**Give feedback on formative assessment**

- Use online quizzes with automated feedback.
• Don’t be the only source of feedback for students on assessment tasks. Use **self-review** and **peer assessment** too.

• Use a polling tool (e.g. clickers) during class to get and give feedback and promote interaction.

• Give students a list of the most common difficulties encountered or errors made by students in a particular assessment task.

• Develop clear explanations of assessment tasks and assessment criteria and then distribute these and go through them with students. To limit the number of student enquiries, develop a list of FAQs about assessment in your course, and provide an online forum where they can answer each others’ questions.

• Ask students (in small groups) to take turns at moderating a feedback forum where students can ask topic-related questions.

**Manage workload**

Make large class management easier for yourself in the following ways:

• Devise tasks that use self-assessment and/or peer-assessment.

• Wherever feasible, include the students as tutors to give feedback to each other, moderate discussion etc.

• Use online technologies such as computer-marked quizzes to provide regular feedback.

• Use online marking and annotation (e.g. GradeMark) to reduce time spent collecting, printing and collating student assignments.

Make large classes easier for students in the following ways:

• Build assessment tasks into learning activities rather than as add-ons.

• Include collaborative and group work for tasks that may be laborious for an individual.

• Provide opportunities for students to test their own level of achievement and identify their learning gaps.

**Options for assessing large classes**

• **Multiple choice questions (MCQ)** are often used to assess learning in large classes, and this is sometimes the most efficient way to conduct assessment. But it should not be the only method. With careful design, MCQ can assess deep learning and give valid and reliable results, but they can also encourage students to focus their attention on examination procedures rather than learning activities. MCQ can be very useful in formative assessment by giving students opportunities to test their own understanding in online quizzes. Students can also contribute to developing a question database. (See [Multiple Choice Questions](#) for more information.)

• **Extended writing** allows for the assessment of a broader range of learning outcomes, particularly in research and critical thinking, as well as written communication skills. However, it can be laborious to mark, students often don’t value the feedback given, and plagiarism can be an issue. Try staged submissions, with students giving each other feedback on a draft, prior to final submission. Ask the students to self-assess against a set of criteria prior to submission. Or give students the opportunity to resubmit for bonus marks following feedback. Online grading systems can streamline the submission, grading and feedback process, and help students learn academic writing skills to minimise plagiarism. (See "Use technology" below.)

• **Group work** can be difficult to manage in a large class, but there are benefits to both teacher and student. A
group project requires less marking time than an individual task, and helps students develop important graduate capabilities such as working in a team, giving and receiving feedback, communication skills and leadership. A learning management system (e.g. Moodle) can make group management easier, providing communication tools, group set-up, assignment submission and help forums. Given adequate guidelines and procedures to scaffold the process, groups are able to self-facilitate with little input from the teacher. (See Group Work for more information.)

**Use assessment rubrics**
Most assessment types benefit from the development of a marking rubric, which not only promotes consistency among different markers, but also informs the students what performance is expected and supports them in self-assessing their own progress. (See Using Assessment Rubrics for more information.)

**Use technology**
Technology helps you manage tasks in large classes in lots of different ways, and to engage students in facilitating their learning. A learning management system such as Moodle will support:

- computer-marked quizzes/self-tests
- gradeable blogs, wikis and journals
- online discussion for help, feedback or assessment
- group assignment tools
- a Grade Centre/Gradebook for managing marks.

Take a look at the support pages for Moodle on this Teaching Gateway, for some ideas on how you might use these systems with large classes.

Another important technology is Turnitin, a similarity detection tool which also includes GradeMark (for online grading and feedback).

**Additional information**

**External resources**

- Assessing Learning in Australian Universities. Australian Universities Teaching Committee - Assessing Large Classes
- Text Message (SMS) Polls and Voting, Audience Response System - Poll Everywhere
- Turnitin Similarity Detection Service

**Further readings**

Davis, B. (1993). Preparing to Teach the Large Lecture Course, University of California, Berkeley.

Felder, R. (1997). Beating the Numbers Game: Effective Teaching in Large Classes, Department of Chemical
Engineering, North Carolina State University.

Acknowledgments

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