

Teaching Large Groups

INTRODUCTION

The number of students in Higher Education (HE) has increased dramatically in recent years and art and design, being such a popular subject area, has seen more than its fair share. Traditionally, arts subjects were taught in small groups, with a great deal of one-to-one teaching and an apprenticeship approach. When institutions began to move from vocational training to academic qualifications such as degrees, the old methods began to lose their effectiveness. Recent research has shown that favourite teaching styles such as 1:1 tutorials and the studio crit lead students to take a “surface” approach to their learning, aiming to please the tutor rather than demonstrate learning.

These issues predate recent increases in group sizes, but have been brought into sharper profile recently as more students make it difficult, if not impossible, to use traditional teaching methods. This poses two types of challenge: finding new and interesting ways to teach our subjects (which can be a positive challenge), and finding alternatives to seemingly essential methods such as demonstrations of darkroom techniques, ceramic glazing, and health and safety inductions.

Space and resources are not the only issues surrounding large groups. Widening participation (which is not the same as “mass participation”) means students today are vastly different from when most teachers were students themselves. This calls for sensitivity: you will undoubtedly find yourself teaching students who are holding down a job that means they get little sleep, or who are looking after sick relatives, or are single parents. As a part-time teacher your only clue will be that the student is often late, tired and irritable, or absent

Teaching Large Groups

altogether. Being patient and avoiding jumping to conclusions is an essential skill.

All learning needs to be evaluated in order for the student to know how they are progressing, and for you to know if you succeeded in your job – and to plan changes to the next session to make amends if something went wrong. Large groups lead to large assessment burdens – but again, the question needs to be asked about what precisely is being assessed, and how that can be done validly without seeing every single piece of work a student does.

Large group sizes offer benefits: greater use of informal and formal team projects develops skills in these areas (but teamwork should be *taught* – don't simply expect teams to work well together). Quiet students gain confidence in large groups as anonymity allows them to take their time. Use of independent learning develops self-reliance, and students helping each other reinforces knowledge.

The case study below shows how one visiting lecturer deals with her large group. As you read it, bear the following questions in mind:

- 1. WHAT IS THE STARTING POINT IN PLANNING HOW TO TEACH?**
- 2. WHAT DO STUDENTS DO IN THE SESSION?**
- 3. HOW MIGHT THE PROBLEM OF GETTING FEEDBACK FROM EVERY GROUP BE DEALT WITH?**
- 4. HOW DOES THE TEACHER AVOID HAVING TO SAY THE SAME THING TO EACH AND EVERY STUDENT?**

Case Study

I was a teacher in schools for 10 years before becoming a part-time lecturer, and taught in Further Education before that. My main experience has been groups of 30 or so, with up to 45 in some, so it's similar to the size of a class in school.

I've used a lot of strategies in university that I used at school. When I first started I expected the students to be more sophisticated – but although they are in some ways, actually adults learn very similarly to children. You can't talk at them for an hour and expect them to remember!

My basic approach is to look at the content of the lecture or seminar and think how to break this down to do the minimum amount of talking and the maximum amount of interacting. Sometimes you do have to impart information - stand at the front with slides – but I still try to make it interactive. For example, if we are looking at film genre, I might ask the students how many themes they can think of, not just say “there are six themes”. So I do lots of brainstorming. There are usually some who have the relevant knowledge – they make initial suggestions and I add detail if necessary.

The biggest issue is imparting information in a way they'll remember. The worst way is to talk at them. They may make notes but it's much better if they go away having had a real learning experience. I also provide handouts, but at the end or they'll just sit and read them! I have the basic points and terms on an overhead projector as well so that I don't have to spell things out, but I say much more than is on the slides – talk around them.

The main aim when I'm working with big groups is to impart information in an interactive way. To help the students understand a concept, I devise an exercise to do in pairs or a small group. I use activities, games, using an extremely hands-on approach, so that they'll understand what I'm talking

about, or sometimes just to engage them and make a point. So I'm using fun to make serious points. I always ask for flexible rooms, but if we have to be in the lecture theatre we still manage, I just have a maximum of four in a group then because they may have to sit in a line.

I have a big collection of products and materials, and I use them as much as possible. The students work in groups, for instance comparing products from different eras or manufactured from different materials. I also use a lot of newspaper cuttings and file them. I give each group a different cutting to précis for the whole group, and to pick out the key points.

For the more academic aspects, I used to give them a reading to do in advance, but most of them didn't do it. So now I give readings in sessions, but that can cause problems for people with reading difficulties so I try to shorten the extracts as much as possible and find really accessible stuff about the topic. I will give a more challenging extract to them to take away after the session, when they will understand it.

In many ways lectures are easier than seminars because you have more groups and can examine more aspects of a topic.

With very large groups time is an issue, because the feedback from individual groups would take ages, so you have to make it clear that only a few groups will get to give feedback, or you'll just pick out a couple of key points from each.

When the students have to give a seminar presentation at the end of the semester, again I break them up into groups; otherwise it would take too long.

I don't try to bring people in during lectures if they don't speak voluntarily – it can be quite intimidating speaking in large groups. I want people to feel comfortable. By the end of the semester most students will chip in and make suggestions.

You always get people who sit at the back – when I break people up into small groups they all have to participate. The best combination is either pairs or groups of 4-5, any bigger than that and some people won't join in. Students will offer their own experience in small groups; I encourage them to talk from a personal viewpoint, so a lot happens instinctively.

There is a huge range of ability from the most highly informed and intelligent students to those who are really struggling. You need to stretch the bright ones, as well as helping the others to understand. When you give them something in their groups the bright ones will draw more from it, while the others may approach it on a more surface level, but everyone will get something. Newspaper cuttings and products work well for everybody.

I tend to group people with additional needs or very shy people with more confident ones. If I'm saying something that's hard to understand, then I'll say it more than once in different ways. I make sure that definitions and key terms are in my notes. I had a group last semester with two deaf students, one had a signer and one had a note-taker. I had to be aware of them, face them and talk clearly. The impact on the other students was probably a positive one! It makes one more aware of how one is communicating.

There are some advantages to working with large groups. When the students are broken up into sub-groups you can get a very broad overview of topics when they feed back to everyone.

I guess the key message is to give the students lots to *do* – don't just rely on giving them information.

In Further Education I was teaching studio work – dealing with students as individuals. I taught some very large groups in adult education as well. It was almost all practical, I would demonstrate and they would do it. Many of them were struggling, so it was very important to take things a step at a time so that they could gain small successes and increase their confidence: firstly understand, and secondly come out with something they had learned.

I learned the technique of constantly moving, like being an actor “in the round”. You have to say things two or three times, but in different ways, and demonstrate things more than once, so that everybody can pick it up.

Teaching large groups for practical sessions, I would start going round the group, looking for common denominators, then call people together to talk (anonymously) about these aspects. So everyone would get a tiny bit of individual time, and then common issues would be addressed.

HAVING READ THE CASE STUDY, TRY TO ANSWER THE FOUR QUESTIONS.

<p>1. What is the starting point in planning how to teach?</p>	
<p>2. What do students do in the session?</p>	
<p>3. How might the problem of getting feedback from every group be dealt with?</p>	
<p>4. How does the teacher avoid having to say the same thing to each and every student?</p>	

Teaching Large Groups

PLANNING TO TEACH LARGE GROUPS

Now think specifically about your teaching situation.

<p>Are you brought in for a specific task (e.g. to demonstrate darkroom technique) or do you teach across a range of areas? Describe your situation.</p>	
<p>Do you find that your teaching is largely passive (e.g. sitting with students and talking about the work they are doing) or active? Describe a typical session</p>	
<p>What size of group do you normally take at one time?</p>	
<p>Is that the whole cohort or do you work your way through a large group in small subgroups?</p>	
<p>Do you teach your subject the way you were taught it? If so, why?</p>	
<p>How do you evaluate student learning a) at the end of the session and b) at the end of the course/unit/module</p>	

Think about the students for a moment, and ignore the subject and the teaching method.

Teaching Large Groups

<p>Do you feel they are bored? Too challenged? Is there a mix of abilities?</p>	
<p>If you said yes, do you think it is down to the students to motivate themselves or do you think you have a part to play in this? Explain your answer.</p>	

Now think about what exactly you are teaching (think of a specific session).

<p>Do you have stated learning outcomes for the session?</p>	
<p>If not, you need to produce some. If you do, think of three different ways in which students could demonstrate they have met those outcomes, and describe the "threshold" standard¹ they should have achieved by the end of the session, or by the start of the next one.</p>	

¹ Threshold is education-speak for "pass" – many teachers make the mistake of judging students by the "ideal" standards, but in fact this tends to produce lower results. Despite the view that asking for students simply to pass is "dumbing down", setting reasonable expectations actually helps students achieve better results. Why might this be the case?

Teaching Large Groups

Try to think of different ways you could help students to achieve the learning outcomes to the standards required. Consider how they could work together or independently. Also ask yourself how students could evaluate their own, and each others', progress, and how by the end of the session you could accurately evaluate the group and individuals within it? Be quite radical at this stage – if it helps, imagine you were unable to use the same methods you would normally use due to a problem like asbestos in your usual room. Write a plan in a grid like the example below:

AIMS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • 			
OUTCOME	THRESHOLD PERFORMANCE	TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES	FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT	SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT
1				
2				
3				

SIX IMPORTANT POINTS FOR TEACHING LARGE GROUPS

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO SEE EVERYTHING STUDENTS DO

Many teachers make the mistake of believing that if they do not see every single piece of work that students produce, they are not doing their jobs properly. The learning outcomes tell you what you are trying to check, and you can be selective in your sampling. In fact, asking students to indicate the work they feel best demonstrates the height of their understanding can be a productive exercise in itself, promoting reflection. Ask students to do this with each other and the potential increases – as the next two points suggest.

1

STUDENTS CAN TEACH EACH OTHER

80% of your time will be spent teaching the same things over and over. If a second year has passed the first year, they should be able to teach first year basics. Even pairing students up and encouraging discussion and sharing of knowledge can help – it not only relieves you of a large burden, it also helps students learn.

2

STUDENTS CAN ASSESS EACH OTHER

In HE we tend to produce graduates who, we tell employers, are ready for the big wide world in every respect – except that we don't trust them to evaluate their own work and progress. It is an odd state of affairs. Start students off early in the first year, ensure they have clear assessment criteria and make discussion of those central to your teaching. There will almost always be some things that students can assess, leaving you to focus on other things. For example, students can be asked to assess grammar, structure and presentation of essays while you focus on the content. If the grade doesn't count, it won't be taken seriously. Ensure assessment is objective, not subjective, and subject student assessment to the same checks that tutor assessments undergo.

3

4

COMMUNICATION IS ESSENTIAL

Make sure all students know what is happening and what is expected. Don't rely on notice boards – they never get read. Use email, text messaging and networking to get information across.

5

THERE IS MORE THAN ONE WAY TO TEACH EVERYTHING

That's right - *everything* can be taught differently. All it takes is imagination and a brave heart. Demonstrations can be put on video and stored in the library or online. Some workshop inductions can be given by suitably trained third years. Basics can be shown in a lecture theatre with close-ups projected on a screen, leaving hands-on small-group teaching to concentrate on details. And don't forget the web – many art and design staff think their subject does not lend itself to online learning, but ask students and they will come up with a long list of things they would like to see.

6

PLANNING IS THE KEY

Already mentioned, but worth repeating last of all – take time to plan your teaching with the learning outcomes as the starting point.

Follow up Notes

SUGGESTED ANSWERS TO THE FOUR QUESTIONS POSED BEFORE THE CASE STUDY ARE:

1

The starting point is the content. Or in other words, the “learning outcomes”. You may have been given learning outcomes for your session, or there may be ones for the whole course or module from which you have to interpolate. Identifying what students should know by the end of your session, and to what level, is the starting point for all planning. Most problems with large groups tend to arise because of the teaching method chosen. Planning takes time, but a well-planned session is far less stressful than the alternative.

2

The students are active most of the time. Earlier it was mentioned that research shows that traditional teaching methods result in “surface” learning. That is because they usually require the students to be passive, receiving information but not immediately experimenting or discussing it. Students learn effectively when involved in discussions with each other, and it can particularly help those who find it difficult to speak in front of a large group or even teachers.

3

In the case study the teacher tells students there will not be time to get feedback from every group. However, that could leave some groups feeling frustrated. Always plan time into your session for feedback. A snowballing technique would ensure that a spokesperson in each group summarises their discussion briefly. Alternatively, going around the room asking for feedback on one point per group, then changing direction, would ensure that every group feels it has contributed even if time runs out. Finally, asking individuals or groups to summarise points onto post-its or sheets of paper that they hand to the front would allow you to capture outstanding points and produce a quick summary sheet for the next session.

4

You do not have to say the same thing to every student, but many teaching methods force you to repeat yourself. A large group can be addressed together for general points, while specifics can be dealt with at sub-group level. Trying to see every student for an equal amount of time is something we tend to think is valuable – in fact, there’s no evidence that it is, and much anecdotal evidence that teachers find themselves flagging after a while and worried they have not said the same things to everyone. While students often say they value personal contact with the tutor, if enriching alternatives can be developed, then your time can be focussed on those who really need it.