



IMPLEMENTING ACTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES IN LARGE CLASSES



Implementing Active Learning Strategies in Large Classes

Traditionally the majority of classes in universities have been conducted in large lecture halls, sometimes with hundreds of students. Although this is a cost-effective way for universities to provide classes for students, and a time-effective way for faculty members



to share their knowledge, there is increasing evidence that this may not be the most effective way for students' learning (Freeman, et al., 2014).

Below are some ideas to encourage active learning when teaching large classes:

Provide a brief overview of your expectations. Students' experiences of large class teaching are often associated with passive learning. Let students know that they will be expected to actively participate in activities during your class and say why you are doing this to support their learning.



Start small with low stakes activities. Low-stakes activities is less prep-work and grading for instructor, easy for students to understand and complete in class. Incorporate at least one active learning strategy into each lecture. It doesn't have to be something that takes a lot of preparation; a simple think-pair-share, concept map, brainstorming, one minute paper, questioning can go a long way. (Allen & Tanner, 2005; Wood, 2009; Mulryan-Kyne, 2010)



Using small groups is a great way to get students involved with their own learning. It allows a safe place where students can work through their ideas with their peers before sharing their ideas in a large class. This helps students teach each other as well as identify and address any misconceptions. Additionally, small groups capitalize on the diversity inherently found in large classrooms. If you give students a controversial prompt, you'll likely find that students will discuss all sides of the issue, leading to a rich and lively debate. (Allen & Tanner, 2005; Deslauriers et al., 2011; Mulryan-Kyne, 2010; Wolfman, 2002; Wood, 2009)



Encourage students to use in-class writing activities like “One-Minute Paper” or “Half-Sheet Response.” to allow students to practice summarizing information. According to Meachie et al., (1999), a quick writing assignment is to ask each student or group to write a self-assessment by asking *“What was the most important point that I learned today?”* or *“What two things do we not understand about ____?”*

Be realistic in the number and type of activities you embed in your class. Activities can sometimes take longer to work in practice and it's better to use one or two activities to begin with to build students' confidence. You can try to include at least one activity every class day.



Incorporating technology. Discussion board, web-based software, online adaptive labs can make active learning in large classrooms more manageable. Using technology may also encourage students to



stay on task because they'll be using their devices for in-class activities rather than texting or surfing the web (Deslauriers et al., 2011; Knight & Wood, 2005; Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). iClickers and similar classroom technology, such as Mentimeter and Kahoot!, provide both instructors and students with immediate feedback on student understanding of class material. In a study by Armbruster et al. (2009), students ranked iClicker questions as one of the most helpful active learning strategies for their own learning.

Use classroom polls to ask questions that review the lecture's main ideas. Polling is an active learning technique that can be used to engage students in thinking about course content as well as assess their opinions, knowledge, and skills in real time. Classroom response technologies such as Poll Everywhere facilitate the collection of student answers electronically allowing for immediate feedback.

Personalize the large class. Walk around the room, move towards students when they speak, encourage group work, and use active learning techniques. Encourage questions from the students. When you pose a question, allocate time for students to answer and use positive responses. Be accessible to the students (i.e., arrive early, stay late, chat with students, answer e-mails promptly).



References

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- Wood, W.B. (2009). Innovations in teaching undergraduate biology and why we need them. *Annu. Rev. Cell Dev. Biol.* 25:93- 112



Encouraging active learning in large class teaching. Centre for Teaching and Learning.
University of Oxford.

<https://www.ctl.ox.ac.uk/large-class-teaching>

Virginia Commonwealth University Center for Teaching Excellence.

http://www.vcu.edu/cte/resources/online_resources.htm.

Further Reading and Resources

- [Active Learning Ideas for Large Classes. CTL University of Alberta.](#)
- [Active Learning In Large Courses: What's Possible, What Works? Center for Teaching Excellence. University of South Carolina.](#)
- [Active Learning for Large Classes. Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning. Northern Illinois University.](#)