Considerations for Teaching Large Classes[1]

The definition of a "large class" varies by institution, program, and discipline. For the purposes of this guide, "large" can mean a course with a student enrolment of more than 100, but also a larger enrolment than typical for a specific subject. The considerations for teaching large classes shared here can be useful regardless of the actual number of students in a course.

Large classes pose many challenges, both in and out of the classroom, for instructors as well as students. Large enrolments can make it more difficult to promote student engagement, leading to behaviours that reflect erosion of students' sense of responsibility. The increase in the number of student inquiries and assessments to mark and for which to provide feedback can be daunting. The logistics involved in daily administration and even physically navigating a large space can often feel intimidating. Often overlooked in preparations for teaching is identifying specific resources and approaches to maintain wellbeing for faculty and students.

Notwithstanding the challenges, teaching large classes has its benefits and joys! Depending on how a course is designed, students can collaborate with a larger number of peers contributing different knowledge, experiences, and perspectives. Working in groups or teams can expand peer networks and impart important skills. Some instructors find rewarding being able to positively impact so many students' learning and are energized when a large class buzzes with activity.

In this guide[2], we highlight strategies and tools for some of the main challenges and opportunities associated with teaching large classes. These suggestions were curated with the lens of reducing instructor workload and promoting student agency, but we acknowledge that some require more time and thought to implement. We invite you to skim the headings to find a starting point. Try one or two things that support your teaching philosophy and reinforce your strengths. Use the hyperlinks if you wish to learn more, access a resource, or read related research. The Centre for Teaching and Learning staff welcome the opportunity to support you in addressing the aspects of teaching large classes that you find the most relevant.

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[1] We express our sincere appreciation to the many instructors experienced with teaching large classes on our campus who provided input on an earlier draft of this resource. The at times conflicting comments and robust dialogue reflect the diverse perspectives on teaching large classes and teaching in general and underscore the many options and approaches available.

[2] This resource was inspired by the "Teaching Large Classes" guide by Adam Wilsman, Centre for Teaching, Vanderbilt University, licensed under BY-NC Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Considerations for Teaching Large Classes © 2025 by Centre for Teaching and Learning, UBC Okanagan is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0.

Designing for Larger Classes

Course design can more effectively address your instructional needs and goals when undertaken as a multi-step process. At the same time, there are some changes to a course's structure and delivery that can be adopted more easily. Identifying where students might face barriers to learning and making adjustments can minimize a deluge of emails later.

Design & Planning

FAQs: How do I structure my course and class time to effectively teach a larger number of students? How do I design for inclusion and remove barriers to learning?

- **Structure your course**: Break down content into manageable units informed by learning outcomes with assessments aligned and distributed as milestones. If using Canvas, these units can be organized as modules with corresponding activities and assignments.
- **Design for scale:** Make materials clear and easy to present to large audiences and assessments efficient to create and evaluate. Refer to "maximize access" below.
- **Maximize access:** Learn about the built-in features in Canvas, such as the Accessibility Checker, to help you design well from the beginning. Browse other teaching and learning resources to help you increase the accessibility of your course materials. The Accessibility 101 resource for creating digital content and the CTL Accessibility Tips make great starting points.
- **Design for inclusion:** Familiarize yourself with the Universal for Design for Learning (UDL) guidelines and identify what you could adopt to reduce barriers and increase learner agency. Inclusive design impacts engagement; e.g., allowing students to choose topics that interest them, provides a sense of ownership and motivation.
- **Design for collaborative learning:** Incorporate ways for students to learn together and from one another without relying exclusively on the instructor. Explore pedagogical approaches, such as flipped learning and team-based learning for ideas to structure a course to maximize the time learners spend engaging with content and one another.
- **Incorporate real-world connections**: Relate course content—both in choosing materials as well as in-class examples—to real-world issues and applications to make it more relevant and engaging.
- **Use a lesson plan template**: Adopt a lesson plan template to help align the class activities with the learning objectives and note time estimates and materials.

Communication & Expectations

FAQs: How do I effectively communicate with a large group of students? What are ways to maximize student awareness of expectations?

- **Set and reinforce clear expectations**:
  - Use the Syllabus Generator on the UBC Curriculum MAP tool to ensure all policies and expectations are included.
  - Communicate your preferred method of contact and where to look for information before contacting you and/or TAs.
  - Explain expectations regarding student emails & file-naming (e.g., include course code in the subject line, appropriate tone, clarity in ask from the instructor).
  - Specify how often you will check and respond to emails, and whether certain inquiries are best addressed through a conversation.
  - Consider that attendance isn't meaningful without participation, which in turn doesn't capture all engagement. Explain the role students play in their own learning and explore ways to motivate students to actively engage in activities.
  - Supplement written expectations with mentions in class/on recorded lectures.
- **Schedule regular updates/check-ins**:
  - Use the Announcement feature in Canvas for timely updates. Advise students to set their Canvas Notifications preferences to receive Announcements "immediately" or as a "daily summary."
  - Regularly post a weekly announcement highlighting what's opening/closing, and where to focus.
  - Re-envision "office hours" as "drop-in hours" to say "hello," as "tea/coffee with your instructor," or group sessions either in-person or virtual. If you have capacity, ask students to sign up for a 5-minute meet-and-greet in groups of four that double as study pods to discuss material prior to subsequent visits.
- **Incorporate student autonomy:**
  - Consider whether creating an alternative syllabus to accompany the official format can provide an interactive way for students to navigate important information in your course.
  - Consider whether the HelpMe Chatbot is a good fit for your course to offer automatic, course-based responses to questions and help reduce the number of student emails.

Promoting Student Engagement

Getting to know your students

FAQs: How can I build relationships with students in a large class? How can I learn about their needs and interests?

- **Personalize your roster**: Access information about students, including photos and majors to get a sense of who will be in your class. In Workday go to: Apps > Teaching > Final Grade Submission Tool > Choose your course > Click Class Roster or Student Photo Roster at the top of the page > Click the blue Export PDF with Student Photos button. Note preferred names/pronouns and look up how to pronounce unfamiliar names.
- **Gather info early**: The first week, use an online pre-instruction questionnaire (Canvas, Qualtrics) or polling (iClicker) to gather information about students' backgrounds and interests, such as familiarity with the main course topics and goals for the term. Be sure to share similar information about yourself and share synthesized results to build trust
    - Adding a short knowledge check can also help identify any gaps in foundational knowledge so you can direct them to additional resources to be ready to build on those concepts.
    - Later in the term, a midpoint survey can provide insights into what is working well/needs adjusting and communicates that you care about students' learning.
- **Break the ice**: Start the term with activities, either in-person or online, that help students get to know you and each other, fostering a sense of community; incorporate more activities throughout the term.
- **Learn names**: It may be daunting to learn even 50 new student names, but your attempts will be appreciated even if you don't succeed.
    - Provide students with tent cards on the first day of class and ask them to write their preferred name and pronouns. Have students bring the tent cards with them to every class and place them on or hanging off their desk.
    - In a large-class discussion, ask students to state their name before they ask a question or share. Encourage students to refer to one another by name when working in groups or acknowledging a classmate's idea.
    - Take the time (with TA help) to personally hand back the first mid-term exam or other major assignment, to attach names to faces, and provide encouragement.
    - In a **synchronous online** course, ask students to display their preferred names in Zoom and welcome them into the space by name as they sign in. Be strategic in asking videos to be on for short periods to help you connect names to faces.
    - In an **asynchronous online** course, invite students to record a 15-30 second video with the pronunciation of their name, a fun fact about them, and what they would hope to learn in the course that can be shared with small groups.

Navigating the classroom & relational spaces

FAQs: How do I create a positive learning environment in a large class? What are effective classroom management strategies? How can I ensure all students feel included and supported?

- **Shrink the space:** Consider how you can make the classroom or Zoom room feel smaller and more personal.
    - Choose meaningful images or backgrounds to project to communicate that you are learning together, perhaps emphasizing a place-based aspect of a lesson.
    - Invite students to arrange themselves into smaller groups that they sit with regularly, e.g., form neighbourhoods with neighbours taking on different roles during activities.
    - Use tools like AirMedia that enable learners to project to the main screen from anywhere in the room. Audience participation tools, such as iClicker or Slido allow for quick, anonymous input by everyone.
- **Move into learning spaces:** To get a sense of the conversations going on with pairs/groups, walk up and down the aisles and to different corners of the room, making eye contact with students; on each occasion start at a different area of the room (or jump into different break-out rooms if you are online).
    - Join the discussion only if asked to clarify a point, focusing on taking mental note of key ideas to share back with the larger class at the end of the activity.
- **Co-construct community agreements**: Taking time to develop a class community agreement can make expectations around interactions explicit, such as sharing the air in discussions and actively listening and valuing different perspectives. If your course deals with potentially contentious issues and/or has content likely to challenge students' beliefs and worldviews, then engaging the class (and later any groups involved in a shared project) in constructing a community agreement would be essential to foster a safe, supportive, open, and trusting learning space.
    - Note that creating an agreement is just the first step and maintaining a class or group's commitment to it is what determines its success.
- **Low-touch outreach:** Strategically timed personalized outreach from the instructor in large lecture class increases positive perceptions of the course and higher grades.
    - After a midterm or other summative assessment, identify students below the average score. Use Canvas to generate emails with each student's current standing in the course plus tips for success in the class, and a reminder of available supports, such as "student hours."

Engagement Strategies

FAQs: What does engagement look like in a large class? How can I make my lectures more interactive?

- **Reimagine engagement:** Lecturing can be used to pique curiosity and inspire learners, but the instructor does not have to be an entertainer to engage learners.
    - **Shift the focus onto learners** and invite them to make sense of new concepts and skills from the lecture by being the ones to demonstrate, explain, solve, etc.
- **Lecture in chunks:** Divide your lecture into 10–15 minutes to align with learners' attention spans and available working memory and incorporate activities in between.
    - Activities can be done individually, in pairs/groups, large class, or a combination to help learners "actively" make connections that are harder to do through listening and watching alone.
    - There are many techniques on a spectrum in terms of time and complexity; some are particularly designed for large classes.
    - Well-designed active learning and formative assessment raise exam performance and reduce failure rates, and increase attendance and engagement.
- **Ask with purpose:** Perhaps the most common question during a pause in a lecture is, "Any questions?" but its purpose can vary from the instructor needing to take a breath, wanting to check understanding or inviting conversation. Students don't recognize the difference and may respond with a shake of the head, 1-2 raised hands, or silence.
    - Be specific (and avoid yes/no questions) in communicating what you are asking, such as "Let's all take a moment to reflect." "What can I clarify at this point?" "Who has an example that they can share?"
    - Count to 20 slowly in your head for students to realize that you are expecting to hear from them. Resist the urge to give in to the discomfort of the silence!
    - Be mindful of the direction of your gaze as you ask a question so that the back or left side of the room recognizes that you want to hear from them, too.
    - Be prepared to redirect questions to discussion avenues outside of class if they go off topic or require more time to address than available.
- **Be creative with invitations to share**: Not all students feel comfortable responding to spontaneous questions, especially in front of a large group of their peers, so refrain from cold calling. Even offering bonus points for answering or posing a question during lectures will likely result in the same students participating in instructor-led discussions.
    - Offer opportunities outside of class for students to submit not only questions, but also images, gifs, puzzlers, video clips, etc. that directly connect to course content with their explanation of the connection or inspiration.
    - Decide if you would like to receive submissions directly to be able to showcase them at the beginning of the next class or if you prefer to build community by offering an online space (discussion board, Padlet) for students to post. Either way, share that you value and appreciate their contributions.

Group & pair work/team-based projects

FAQs: How do I facilitate group work in a large class? How can I ensure fair participation and assessment?

- **Group with purpose:** There are different approaches for determining group composition from letting students self-organize to pre-selecting members. Your approach will likely vary depending on whether the activity is specific to a lesson, connected with an assignment or project, with additional considerations for online courses.
    - Pairs can be more manageable than groups. If students pick a partner to do assignments together, they can join another pair for a larger group project.
    - For groups, aim for 4 members (and stay in the 3-5 range) to maximize diversity of perspectives and support equitable distribution of workload.
    - Diverse teams can improve creativity, problem-solving and decision-making, but inclusive practices are important to safeguard against marginalization.
    - Teamable Analytics can help with the logistics of assigning team members.
    - For recurring activities, assigning groups that change about three times a term gives students opportunities to know more classmates, which fosters belonging and supports engagement. Canvas groups can help with logistics.
- **Define goals & roles**: If working effectively in teams is a learning outcome, then make that clear on day one and incorporate activities for students to gain relevant skills.
    - Provide rationale, expectations, instructions, and evaluation criteria for group projects; differentiate between individual and shared work.
    - Define "roles" for the activity or project (e.g., conceptualization, data curation, project management...; facilitator, recorder, reporter...) and have groups collectively assign roles, switching roles when the activity or group changes.
    - Have students create contracts outlining roles and responsibilities to ensure accountability. Revisit community agreements for managing group dynamics.
- **Centre ethics & values:** Communicate that group work is a professional practice grounded in integrity, respect, inclusion, and shared accountability.
    - Ask students to commit to contributing original work and properly citing sources, e.g., being transparent about tool use (including AI) under the course policy.
    - Share expectations that credit should be shared fairly among all the group members; free riding, dominance, and exclusion are unacceptable.
- **Structure activities**: Students have different experiences and expectations with working in groups so explain your goals/outputs for the activity and provide clear instructions.
    - Provide a slide deck, Padlet, or shared document for each group to work on collectively or assign one slide per group for them to report back to the class.
    - When providing a list of questions or problem sets, begin with a couple non-content questions to start with (e.g., What is one good thing that happened today?, What is your favourite type of puzzle/challenge to solve for fun?) to activate a positive mindset and foster peer relationships.

- **Target assessment & feedback:** To support equitable assessment and a sense of fairness, create a rubric that 1) assesses the individuals in the group, not the whole team, and 2) measures the quality of a process, rather than the quality of the final product, which does not provide insights into team functioning.
    - Include in the final assessment at least one of the following sources for insights into a team's functioning: a) students' own reflections about their contribution; b) feedback about other members' contributions, or c) the evaluation of an outside observer regarding students' contributions.
    - Leverage digital peer assessment tools to support logistics.
    - Help students to recognize how their individual efforts contribute to a larger outcome. One way could be to aggregate the student input to provide personalized feedback, which would reduce the grading burden while simultaneously strengthening instructor-student connections.

Rethinking Assessment

FAQs: How can I ensure that assessments are meaningful but also manageable for a large class? How can I design with academic integrity and generative AI in mind?

- **Identify intended learning:** Regardless of class size, the foremost consideration for selecting assessments is what students are expected to be able to do by the end of the course and the best ways in which they can demonstrate that learning. Review the alignment of assessments with the learning outcomes to identify redundancies and potentially reduce the number of assessments.
    - Pointing out to students how an assessment aligns with the intended learning in the course and supports valuable skills supports academic integrity and garners buy-in, especially for innovative assessments.
    - Be clear on acceptable AI use for every assignment and emphasize what they will miss out on learning if they offload their thinking.
- **Differentiate purpose:** Formal grading is not necessary for all types of assignments; for example, feedback can frequently be more valuable than a percent score. Consider what you want to reward with grades, points, checkmarks for completion, or feedback only.
    - **Formative (low-stakes) assessments** can be aligned with **summative (high-stakes) assessments** to provide students with practice and feedback that helps reduce anxiety and the pressure associated with academic misconduct.
    - Formative assessment can be incorporated into a lecture or an in-class activity. You can use polling tools or anonymous audience response systems (e.g., iClickers, interactive presentation tools, online visual collaboration (e.g., Padlet), and online engagement and gamification platforms (leaderboards and badges) to check understanding and for learners to self-assess in fun, interactive ways.

- **Scaffolded assignments:** Break larger assignments into smaller, manageable tasks and focus attention on the process. Decide which parts can be assessed by students using a rubric as part of a groupwork activity with a report-out to the larger class on lessons learned and remaining challenges.
- **Distribute deadlines and assignment weight:** Spread assessment due dates to avoid student overload and manage grading workload, especially in the last two weeks of a term. Encourage and reward effort throughout the term by associating greater weight to parts of a longer assignment than the final product.
- **Include collaboration:** Having students work on weekly homework assignments in groups reduces the marking load while still giving students a chance to practice their skills and receive feedback. Review "group & pair work/team-based projects."
- **Increase relevance:** Assessments that reflect real-world tasks and challenges make them more relevant and engaging. They can also reinforce academic integrity and shift the use of GenAI to a more collaborative approach. There are many types of authentic or alternative assessments, and you can adapt them to reflect your disciplinary context.
- **Reuse exam questions:** Access open education resources for databanks of questions organized by discipline.

Exams & Testing

FAQs: How do I conduct exams in a large class setting? What are the best practices for ensuring academic integrity?

- **Provide transparency:** Provide detailed guidance for test-taking procedures and clarity around grading criteria to reduce test-taking anxiety and misunderstandings.
- **Design for high-order learning:** Create exam questions that rely on knowledge application rather than memorization; e.g., provide examples or scenarios and ask to identify variables or interpretations.
- **Create multiple versions:** Avoid relying exclusively on test bank questions from textbook publishers that may be accessed on the Internet. Build and continually revise your test banks using Canvas to randomize the questions and order of answer choices.
- **Double the exam:** Two-stage exams, successfully implemented in large classes, provide students with immediate feedback and two opportunities to demonstrate their understanding. They have been shown to increase retention of course material and foster positive peer relationships.

Grading & Feedback

FAQs: How can I efficiently mark a large number of assignments and exams? How can I give meaningful and timely feedback?

- **Establish consensus with TAs:** Meet early on with TAs to discuss assignments and marking. It can be helpful to provide a rubric with an example pre-marked and annotated assignment.
- **Automate grading**: Use Canvas Quizzes to score assessments and show the correct answer to students for immediate feedback. Quizzes can also be set up to allow for multiple attempts for more opportunities to self-assess.
- **Grade in batches**: Use Canvas Gradebook to sort by groups (based on class groupings, lab sections, or student ID) to divide up the marking and align with any assignment of TAs to specific sections. Within the groups, mark the same question for all students before proceeding to the next question for greater consistently and efficiency.
- **Maximize rubrics**: Create rubrics specific to each assignment to support consistent and efficient grading that can also be used with Speedgrader. Offer an opportunity for students to self-assess using the rubric prior to submitting their work.
- **Simplify the scale:** For rubrics, use a 3-point scale or a check/check-minus/check-plus system with associated criteria to make marking faster and feedback more targeted so that students know whether they meet criteria, almost meet them or have work to do.
- **Plan feedback:** Consider that feedback ought to be frequent and at consistent intervals to help students maintain their connection to the course, instructor, and their own learning. Canvas Analytics can help identify the areas on a quiz where students are having difficulties and address those in class and/or post to Canvas Discussion.
- **Differentiate feedback:** Provide high-level feedback to all students based on common misconceptions, gaps, errors. If you would like to use GenAI-supported feedback practice transparency and ask students to opt in.
- **Give feedback that matters:** Responding to written work is time intensive, so use a rubric for general feedback and choose no more than 2 aspects to address in comment form. Alternatively, ask students to indicate at the end of their submission what specific type of feedback they would like. Feedback can be minimal on final drafts where there is no expectation to revise. Audio recording your feedback is also an option.

As you reflect on the design, engagement activities, and assessments of your large enrolment course, keep in mind the approaches and strategies that have worked for you in smaller classes. Consider how those could be effectively and efficiently scaled and reach out to your CTL team to support your technical, pedagogical, and instructional design challenges and innovations.

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