

Combating Passivity in the Classroom



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The university can be an exciting and stimulating place, but at times it can also be overwhelming and intimidating, particularly for students participating in large-enrollment courses. Big lectures create serious challenges for those who care deeply about undergraduate education and who are committed to providing an intellectually rewarding environment for students.

With enrollments sometimes reaching as high as four hundred, class size and the formal lecture format can sometimes thwart students from becoming active participants in the learning experience. A tutorial ratio of one to four hundred, after all, is not ideal. Indeed, conventional wisdom holds that large classrooms are by definition impersonal. But can such “wisdom” be challenged? My experience suggests that it can.

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From my perspective, the most serious problem with large, lecture-format courses is that students learn to be passive recipients, rather than active participants, in the learning experience. Granted, it *is* difficult to be active in large lecture courses. The class size may seem to necessitate a format in which the instructor lectures and the students take notes. And it can be embarrassing to ask questions. So, students listen, write down what the lecturer says, and take multiple-choice exams. Aside from the issue of whether this approach promotes the best type of learning, I’m convinced that it leaves students ill-prepared for small-enrollment courses, in which they are expected to think critically and actively participate.

I believe that the critical goal for faculty is to challenge the standard lecture format and construct every classroom experience

so that students can be *active in the learning process*. In my large lecture courses, I enter into a dialogue with the students. I structure my lectures around questions that we will address and ask those questions in such a way as to encourage all students to volunteer answers. For example, if I’m describing a study and setting up the predictions, I do not simply summarize the predictions for them. I present the design, number the cells in the design, and ask the students to identify which cells will have higher means than the others.

I follow up with a “why that prediction?” question, and allow students to raise their hands to respond. If they are actively participating, each one can generate an explanation and compare it to the response volunteered by a classmate. At first, the students are stunned that I expect them to speak in a large lecture course, but they soon realize that I will not proceed until they answer. They come to see participation as an inherent part of taking one of my classes.

One of the primary goals I have for my classes is to create an environment — even, or especially, in large lectures — in which every student will feel comfortable enough to ask questions. Then, whether they ask those questions out loud in class or silently in their minds, they will be mentally active in searching for answers and processing the lecture and reading material.

In addition to creating this environment of inquiry to encourage active participation, large lectures can be successful formats for learning if the material is specifically prepared with the large class in mind. I use a multimedia approach — from PowerPoint graphs and charts projected from my computer to slides and videoclips, as well as a range of props — to make my lecture material more dynamic.

In my introductory psychology course, for example, I’ve use imagery and a prop to give my students the experience of a Pavlovian response. I ask them to recline in their seats, tilt their heads back, close their eyes, and open their mouths. Then I turn on a power tool and amplify the sound. As one would expect, the students jump as if they are in dentists’ chairs — and then laugh together over their conditioned responses. Hopefully, then, they will learn to see examples of psychological principles in their everyday lives, as well as generate new examples, building on lecture material.

In these ways, I try to get my students to see active participation and inquiry as possible and necessary components of their educational experience. By applying this approach to all of their courses, they will take responsibility for ensuring that their efforts at the university are productive and rewarding. They will have the empowerment and skills to take control of their educational destinies, no matter what the size of the class. □

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