

Engaging Students in Large Lecture Classes

The first day of college for a freshman can be intimidating and may negatively impact retention. Student success is imperative to not only the student and their parents, but to the entire university. Chances are the most sought after instructors can be found teaching freshman courses, because this first year is critical for all the reasons mentioned previously. We believe one way to help transition first year students into college is by clearly establishing the expectations and creating a personalized approach to learning. The importance of establishing these expectations resides in the differences we know to exist between high school interaction with students and what they might experience in college; that is, communicating the details of student conduct such as cell phone use to final grading is important. Next, the students need to gain interactions with a well-planned, thoughtful, fair minded, organized and enthusiastic instructor. Additionally, there is value in the instructor arriving early to have some 1:1 dialogue with students and to quiz them not only on instructional materials, but ask how things are going in their new world.

We know through experience, students appreciate knowing details which may not be apparent to a new freshman such as the last day to drop a class without a grade penalty or Spring/Summer/Winter registration. We believe the aforementioned attributes are great starting points for instructing a large freshman class, and secondly we have to engage them during the classroom period in a way that facilitates academic growth and interest.

In college classrooms keeping the attention and focus of students can be a challenge and below are some approaches used:

1. Stimulate engaged learning:
 - a. By using clickers for instant feedback the instructor is able to determine if the students are comprehending the material, and students are actively engaged in considering and answering the items of interest.
 - b. Design lectures with engaging problems; for example, at various points in the PowerPoint lecture the word BONUS appears and all students know there will be a math problem relative to the concepts covered. Students break out a calculator anticipating the question and engage in the concept at hand.
2. Personalize the instructional approach:
 - a. When establishing expectations for the class, we alert them anyone may be asked a question relative to the materials on any given day so be prepared. In order to do this, come to class with five random names and call on them. In turn, this will allow you an opportunity to place names with faces and the student feels engaged in the conversation by naming them.
 - b. Allow students to submit possible test questions, a very engaging activity for the student and at the same time, the instructor has the opportunity to determine if anything has been miscommunicated, so corrective actions can take place before the actual exam.
3. Do the unexpected:
 - a. Utilize funny or controversial videos or music during transitions to create a memorable experience.
 - b. Address controversial topics as a mediator, or as the proponent of an unpopular approach (i.e. whale harvest). It stimulates conversation and consideration of various points of view.

In summary, engaging first year students is very important to not only the student but the institution. More specifically, institutions are becoming more committed than ever in retaining these students and ultimately realizing them at graduation. Therefore, getting freshman students off to a great start is important to both sides. The actual approach for beginning freshman may be different when

compared to older students in college, e.g., Juniors or Seniors, but that would be expected for they have experienced college for a few years vs. the abrupt transition from high school to first semester of college, so doing some highly engaging activities may be a good option for new freshman students.

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