# Teaching Toolkit

Large Class Teaching:

Tips from an 'Old Pro'

Author: Dr. Patrick J. Purcell

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This is a short note describing the experience of the author who lectured a large class of first year students (circa 300) for approximately 17 years. Some practical 'tips' are given, as well as some *dos* and *don'ts*.

I was assigned the task of lecturing First Year Engineering in my second year of employment as an assistant lecturer. It was, and certainly felt, a daunting task for a relatively novice lecturer. Looking back on my first year teaching this group of students I now realize I certainly made many errors in my lecturing style. Bear in mind that this way an era pre-POWERPOINT and the use of the (physical) blackboard and overhead projector were the norm.

In my first year with these students, I used what might be described as a 'dynamic' style of lecturing, writing out notes on acetates as I spoke to the students. With this approach, it was very difficult to engage with students since I was pre-occupied with trying to transcribe my notes onto acetates. In addition, it was clearly difficult to walk around the lecture theatre since I was essentially 'tied' to the overhead projector.

At the end of my first year lecturing this group of students, I decided that some improvements in my approach were needed. I decided to abandon the 'dynamic' lecturing style and prepare skeleton notes in advance. This approach proved much more successful for the reasons:

  (a)  My hand-writing was much more legible;
  (b)  I was no longer 'tied' to overhead projector;
  (c)  I could 'infill' notes, thereby giving added value to students;
  (d)  I could 'control' the classroom, thereby creating an atmosphere conducive to learning.

In my experience of lecturing large classes, the four most important issues are:

- Pitch;

- Pace;

- Clarity;

- Engagement.

By 'Pitch' I mean presenting material that is at an appropriate level (degree of difficulty) for the intended audience. It is important to be aware of the educational background of the students and whether the audience is a 'homogenous' student cohort (eg. all first engineering students) or a 'heterogenous' student cohort (e.g. a mix of students from many disciplines). It is also important that the material presented is sufficiently challenging for the students, but not too challenging (otherwise students will not be able to follow). More challenging material can be given later as homework assignments, for example.

By 'Clarity' I mean that all students (particularly at the back of the lecture theatre) should be able to see and hear clearly the material that is being presented. Simple things like using a microphone to ensure that the lecturer is audible is essential and assists the lecturer in maintaining discipline within a large class setting. Do not put too much material on visuals and ensure that the font is sufficiently large that students in the back row can easily read the material.

By 'Pace' I mean moving along with the lecture at a speed that is appropriate for students to comprehend the material and take notes. Moving too fast annoys students. Look around lecture theatre and observe students taking notes; when students have finished taking notes move to next slide (if using acetates or POWERPOINT).

By 'Engagement' I mean, in so far as is possible in a large lecture theatre, interact with the students to break up the monotony of constantly taking notes. For example, during the course of the lecture, walk around lecture theatre, make eye contact with different groups of students in the theatre (body language is important). Occasionally, for example, pose a thought-provoking question to the students to get their attention.