

Centre for Teaching and Learning

Good Practice in Teaching and Learning

Small group (including tutorials) & large group teaching

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Introduction To Small And Large Group Teaching

Light and Cox (2001) describe that the lecture is almost synonymous with what higher education is all about, particularly for the undergraduates. It is popular as an efficient way to 'teach' large numbers of students, more recently though it has received bad press as to its position in relation to student learning.

To change away from a large lecture format often requires a complete curriculum review change, and many lecturers are not in a position to do this, they do not have choice in the class size that they teach. How then can a lecturer create the best learning environment in the class size that they teach?

Small group teaching has become more popular as a means of encouraging student learning, but the tutor needs a different set of skills for than that used in lecturing. Not all academic staff have had the opportunity to learn these new skills.

The lecture has often been criticised for lack of active learning and opportunity to interact with others. In addition the structure of the lecture, and its relationship with the rest of the course has a big impact on learning. These points were mentioned by Biggs (1989), as affecting deeper approaches to learning in students. He notes that in order to gain a deeper learning (Biggs, 1989), the following four components are important:

- **Motivational context:** intrinsic motivation, students need to see both learning goals and learning processes as relevant to them, to feel some ownership of course and subject.
- **Learner Activity:** students need to be active not passive, deep learning is associated with doing rather than passively receiving.
- **Interaction with others:** discussion with peers requires students to explain their thinking, this, in turn, can improve their thinking.
- **A well structured knowledge base:** the starting point for new learning should be existing knowledge and experience. Learning programmes should have a clearly displayed structure and should related to other knowledge and not presented in isolation.

The Large Group Teaching and The Small Group Teaching sections will also address these points and issues in these teaching contexts.

Large Group Teaching

Introduction to Large Group Teaching

There is a growing interest in the concepts of teacher-focused versus student-focused approach to teaching. The teacher-focused approach to teaching is concerned with the transmission of content to students and the teacher has the control and responsibility. The student-focused approach to teaching is more concerned with assisting student understanding and conceptual change. The focus is on what the students do and what are the learning outcomes follow from their activity (Cannon & Newble, p11, 2002) Teachers who describe their teaching as student-focused are less likely to encourage a surface approach to learning.

There is a move towards more student-focused approaches to teaching and, this should be borne in mind when lecturing to large groups. In particular, the lecture should be as active as possible for the student to encourage conceptual change.

Large group teaching, if carefully organized and implemented, can cause more active learning in students.

Structuring the lecture

It is very important from the beginning to have objectives/outcomes for not only the course, but for each lecture. Each lecture should be well organised and structured.

The lecture should have a

1. Beginning: Tell them what you are going to tell them (Introduction)
 2. Middle: Tell them it (Body)
 3. Endings: Remind them what you have told them. (Conclusion)
- (Race P., 2001)

The beginning and the end of the lecture are most likely to be remembered.

	Content	Some ideas/techniques for the lecturer
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State aims and objectives of lecture. • Outline key areas to be covered • How content links with previous lecture & course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be clear • Have an interesting opening: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Startling statement - Quote - Pose a question-video clip/photo • Use outlines of topics
Body	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation of key points (see sequencing of content in lectures below) • Summarise and link each key point 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key information simple • Avoid too much content • Have a student activity every 10-15 minutes (ideas for active learning in lectures) • Use examples / anecdotes / illustrations
Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarise the lecture • Link it back to the introduction (opening statement) • Conclude with where the topic / course is leading next. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finish on time • Consider how to evaluate what the students learned in the lecture: e.g. mini-test, collection of comments on three main points etc.

Sequencing of content in lecture

Cannon and Newble (2002, p 66) suggested that the content of lectures can be sequenced in many ways depended on the material, but they gave some different ideas for sequencing:

- Proceed from reality to abstract ideas, theories, principles. E.g. video clip first.
- Proceed from generalisations to particular examples and applications.
- Proceed from simple ideas to complex ones
- Proceed from what students can be expected to know to what students don't know
- Proceed from common misconceptions to clarifications and explanations
- Proceed from a whole view to a more detailed view.

Students' views of good lecturing

Students have varied views on what is good lecturing, but the main findings in this area have been that students value:

- Lecturer's Enthusiasm for the subject
- Clear structure
- Appropriate pace
- Providing good explanations
- Interaction/active lecturing
- Changes of tone
- Soliciting student questions

Communication issues in the lecture

The art of communicating the information to the students is not one that all lecturers find easy, some useful ideas to try are:

- Try to keep eye contact with as many of the group as possible.
- Make strategic use of silences.
- Vary your tone of voice
- Move away from the lectern at times, to move closer to class.
- Consider going up and down the aisles.
- Have some expression, enthusiasm in your tone,
- Avoid being cynical
- Make sure you are heard
- It is a good idea to have a colleague video you in the lecture and to observe your mannerisms, hear you voice.
- Use of humour - if you are comfortable with this.

Ideas for Active Learning in Large Groups

- Students attention levels drop dramatically after about 10 minutes and unless active they will stay low.
- It has also been shown that students very quickly forget material presented in lectures unless students have an opportunity to use it very quickly after its presentation.

With a large group setting, active learning can be encouraged in: a) Individual or pairs of students in a large lecture or b) Groups of students in a large group

a. Individual or pairs of students in a large lecture

- Silent reflection
- Write down answer to a question
- Swap answers with person beside
- Take a short test
- Write down a question
- Solve a problem

- Read some notes
- In pairs, discuss an issue
- Write a plan what you need to do
- Summarise the main points

(Gibbs, 1992)

b. Groups of students in a large group

- **Buzz groups (2/3):** very brief discussion generating ideas for follow-up
- **Pyramids*:** starting with two students discussing an idea, who join four, who then join into eight...
- **Fish-bowl*:** is a small circle of seated students who engage in a discussion, who are surrounded by a larger group who listen to it. The students on the outside can tap on the shoulder on someone on the inside group in order to swap places. Useful for classes of 30 or more.
- **Cross-overs*:** are a way of changing the memberships of groups of students in a large class. For example, students can be allocated a number and letter (A4) and they are first in their same number group (all 4's) and then in the group with the same letter (all A's). Groups equally can be creatively divided in groups such as 'those who are born in a certain month', 'by County', 'by musical taste', etc. This can be a good way to introduce students to each other and is a good ice-breaker. Cross-overs in a group of 50.
- **Poster tours*:** is where there is a task of having to produce a poster based on the discussion. Students can then tour around the displayed posters, asking questions of a group member.
- **Brainstorm*:** this is a technique used frequently in the work place, and is where students give out all ideas on an issue, without going into any depth or criticism on each concept / idea. Later the group can re-visit the ideas to see which are important

or need further discussion. All the ideas should be written down on a board/flip chart.

- **3-5 minutes each way:** this method is useful for quieter students. The students are divided in pairs and each person has 3-5 minutes uninterrupted time to talk on a subject, the other has to listen without interrupting.
- requires flat floor space

Small Group Teaching

Definition of small group teaching

The term 'small group teaching', or 'small group learning' as it is often termed, means different things to different people. Some are familiar with the tutorial as being their experience of small group teaching. The tutorial is usually linked with a series of lectures and its role is to complement the lecture. **Problem Based Learning Groups** have very specific procedures in how the information is discussed, i.e. Brain-storming and reporting back on information, often completed in a 7 step procedure. Discussion groups are not linked necessarily with a series of lectures and large groups can break into small discussion groups.

There is no magical number that defines a group as a Small Group. A lecturer used to taking 400 in a lecture would define 50 as a small group. As there can be sub-groups within groups, it is hard to define small group. In a discussion, where participation is assessed some students may not speak up in a group that begins to be get bigger than 10 participants and in addition tutors would find it hard to assess participation by individual students in groups with numbers greater than this.

Value of Small Groups

The lecture falls short when it comes to some of the generic and transferable skills required for employers, professional bodies, and in keeping with University strategic plans, e.g.

- Analytic skills, Communication Skills, presentation skills (Griffiths, Partington)
- 'competence in personal and interpersonal skills and being able to work with people is a key requisite to success in management' (Foreman & Johnson, (2001)
- Interpersonal, self-management, analytical (UCD Strategic Plan, Priority 3)

Ruddok (1978), Luker (1989), Griffiths, Houston & Lazenbatt (1996): researched that students enjoyed and benefited from small groups. The tutorial specifically has been noted for its value in

- Complementing knowledge in lectures.
- Expanding on the concepts considered in lectures.
- Encouraging student reflection
- Developing students' communication skills
- Encouraging active life-long learning

Starting tutorials / small group: Setting Ground rules

- Introduce group members to one another. (some ice-breakers are important)
- Discuss with students the ground rules, preferable involve them in setting them.
Ground rules might include:
 - Pre-reading will be completed by all and quick check on what was read at the beginning of the session
 - All in group must be punctual and must not leave early
 - Ass criticism should be constructive
 - Student seminar presentations must include overheads or hand-outs
- Explore the students' expectations of what their role and the tutors' role is in a group tutorial.
- Explore what topics they would like to discuss.

How to encourage student participation

- » Use questions more effectively: Using Blooms Taxonomy for eliciting higher level responses. Avoid closed questions which gain a yes / no response

- » Be aware of Learning styles of students

- » Learn how to develop good handling of quieter and dominant students

- » Try some ideas for active learning in small groups:
 - Use discussion groups (e.g. discuss a video)
 - Use task groups (e.g. get students to produce a poster presentation, solve a problem, design / edit a newsletter, prepare a debate)
 - Use open questions,
 - Use peer education groups
 - Use role play and simulation
 - Use problem based learning groups that give students specific roles such as chair or scribe
 - See also Ideas for Active Learning in Large Groups (above)

Skills / Knowledge / Attitudes required by the lecturer / tutor

There are different demands on the lecturer / tutor in deciding to move to more small group teaching. There are specific skills, knowledge and indeed attitudes that are required when it comes to small group teaching.

Specific skills:

- Listening, Responding
- Questioning: Open versus closed, Higher order questions (Blooms Taxonomy)

- Setting clear goals
- Handling quieter and dominant students

Knowledge on:

- Group Dynamics,
- Ground Rules,
- Phase of Group development,
- Different Group Methods,
- Learning styles

Attitudes:

- Move from teacher-centred to student-centred teaching.

Skills / Knowledge / Attitudes required by the student

The students also require some additional knowledge skills and attitudes when being introduced to the idea of being in small groups. Below are some of these requirements:

Skills:

Verbal, Communication,
Confidence/self esteem..

Knowledge on:

Group Dynamics,
Ground Rules, Phase of Group development...

Attitudes:

Acceptance of the approach: (Instead of the teacher is the expert!!!)

References for Small and Large Group Teaching

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