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The Project
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101 Large Classes

by Hal Jacobs
illustration by Sandra Dionisi

When it comes to teaching large classes, history professor Patrick Allitt is unabashedly enthusiastic. “I like having a big class,” says Allitt, whose classes in American history range from sixty to seventy-five students. “There’s a feeling of a theatrical occasion about it. If you’re with just eight or ten students, there’s a domestic mood. But when there’s a lot, there’s a feeling of grandeur.”

A smile spreads slowly across his face as he lets this bit of iconoclastic wisdom sink in.

“As long as the teacher is willing to rise to the occasion—put on a show—it can work wonderfully.”

Make no mistake about it, small classes are desirable for many reasons. Research shows that students learn and retain more when they take an active role in class discussions, group activities or other interactive teaching approaches, says Joanne Brzinski, interim senior associate dean for undergraduate education. “Small classes also improve the likelihood that faculty will get to know their students as individuals and be prepared to write strong letters of reference.”

She notes that Emory College has worked to decrease the student-faculty ratio in order to boost the percentage of small courses. The current numbers attest to that: a 9.4:1 ratio in the College and 68 percent of classes with fewer than twenty students.

But the large introductory class is here to stay, and it has a few benefits of its own. These courses, ranging from 60 to 150 students, ensure that introductory courses are taught by great lecturers, while freeing up excellent small-scale teachers to lead seminar classes. In the process they give students a core set of skills that can be used later in those seminars and discussions.

The large size offers another benefit by guaranteeing a healthy diversity and range of opinion, says Alexander Escobar, a senior lecturer in biology. In fact, he uses his introductory biology class as an example of biodiversity. “I ask students to look around the room. Then I talk about how diverse populations are stronger, how they’re able to meet different challenges because of their diversity.”

Some students even prefer large classes, and not just because freshmen

and sophomores might want to feel anonymous and fly below the radar. Monique Osigbeme, a chemistry major, likes the freedom and independence of a large class. “You get to do what you want, when you want,” she says.

Nami Kim, an economics and art history major, points out another oft-heard benefit: “The lecturer is able to tell all he wants to tell,” she says. “Because some students tend to babble on in small discussion groups, a lot of time can be wasted.”

Yet another plus is that some Emory faculty put on, in the words of Ed Sullivan, a really great show. They have years of experience, an assortment of tricks up their sleeves, and some wonderful resources and technology to make their students feel more involved, engaged and sometimes—though it’s counterintuitive—more on edge.





L-R: Dorothy Fletcher, Matthew Weinschenk, Nancy Bliwise

I'M THE TEACHER, YOU'RE THE STUDENT

A few years ago, Allitt wrote a book called *I'm the Teacher, You're the Student: A Semester in the University Classroom*, in which he turned his dry British wit and twenty years experience of teaching history at Emory into a tour de force about the challenges instructors face in the lecture hall. Among the nuggets of wisdom and critical brickbats Allitt dispenses, he helpfully describes a few techniques that add oomph to his big classes.

First, he memorizes the names of all his students and calls on them directly (so much for anonymity). He's also known for putting students on the spot by asking them to step up to the whiteboard at the front of the class and draw something from memory, say, a bicycle or train or a simple sketch of the U.S. with the Great Lakes and major rivers. Not surprisingly, most students are terrible at it.

A few get indignant," he says. "But most laugh at themselves. It's a nice ice-breaking thing."

It also raises anxiety levels in the classroom, one of Allitt's goals. "Learning is difficult," he says. "If you're comfortable,

you're going to relax and your learning faculties aren't as sharp as they could be."

He realizes that this approach may not suit everyone. As director of Emory's Center for Teaching and Curriculum, he helps to coordinate regular lunchtime workshops and discussions in which instructors talk about styles and techniques that work for them.

The Department of Art History, for example, takes an ensemble approach to its large introductory classes. Dorothy Fletcher, senior lecturer and director of undergraduate studies, recruits faculty in a range of specialties—Greek, Roman, Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, African, African American, the Americas—to present several lectures each semester. It's a "Whitman's Sampler" of art history.

"This has incredible benefits," says Fletcher. "The students have the advantage of seeing professors who are compressing all their enthusiasm in an area to three or four lectures. And it showcases our faculty to students who might want to go into art history."

“EVERY COURSE, EVERY SEMESTER, IS A COMMUNITY.”

In addition, students meet once a week in smaller sections with graduate teaching assistants (TAs) to go over concepts and questions from the lecture class. Fletcher works closely with the TAs, who also receive extensive training through Emory's Teaching Assistant and Teaching Training Opportunity (TATTO) program.

SHRINKING THE CLASS WITH TECHNOLOGY

It's a good thing Matthew Weinschenk and Daphne Norton, lecturers in chemistry, say they feel called to teach large classes. Weinschenk teaches some of Emory's biggest: the introduction to organic chemistry can top out at around 150 students in each of two sections. This fall Norton is overseeing 18 sections of introductory lab classes, each headed by a graduate and undergraduate TA, who meet weekly with her to review lab work and lectures.

Technology allows both instructors to connect with their students, although Weinschenk also takes a page from Allitt's playbook by memorizing each of his students' names within the first couple weeks of classes. ("It's a bit of a skill," he says.)



Norton stays connected with students on LearnLink, the Emory-only online network (*Quadrangle* Spring 2008), and by overseeing Blackboard sites, which allow instructors to build course materials online.

Weinschenk uses a variety of media to reach his students. He records lectures and posts them online so that students can listen again (and again). He posts videos of himself building

molecular models or working through lessons at the whiteboard or on his computer, so that students can follow along.

One of his favorite in-class gadgets is the clicker, or personal response system, now *de rigueur* for students in several science classes. The clickers resemble TV remote controls, but instead of switching channels, students use them to respond to questions posed by the instructor. Their answers are instantly compiled for the class and projected on the screen at the front of class.

"It keeps them engaged," says Weinschenk. "They're fascinated by seeing their responses right away. And they'll laugh if there's a multiple choice question and their answers are spread out by 25 percent. When nobody knows the answer, that's a good teaching moment."

"Every student I've talked to likes the clickers," says Kevin O'Halloran, an undergraduate TA who helps out in Norton's lab. "They force you to learn the material right then and give you insight into the types of questions your teacher might ask on the

exam. The only negative thing I've heard from students is if the professor uses them for participation points and the student forgets his clicker or the batteries go dead."

"I love the clickers," says Nancy Bliwise, a senior lecturer in psychology. She teaches two large psychology classes, applied statistics and research methods ("I think it's safe to say they are not students' favorite classes"), which range from 75 to 115 students.

But she didn't start using the clickers regularly until she calculated that with the two classes and daily class exercises, tests and papers, she was grading by hand more than 7,000 assignments a semester. "After I knew that number, I couldn't do it any more. That's when I learned about the clicker technology and started using it."

With the clickers, everyone responds and makes a contribution to class. Instructors are able to keep track of group and individual scores. Bliwise says she can quickly identify students who may be struggling with certain concepts.

"I love that part of it," she says. "If I have a student who's regularly having a problem, I'll send an email and say come in and see me."

THE CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

Whatever the class size, Matthew Bernstein, chair of the Department of Film Studies, reminds his students at the beginning of each semester that it all comes down to the choices they make.

"Every course, every semester, is a community that is artificially created and somewhat arbitrary, but it is a community, large or small," he tells them. "You are not window shopping. You are not sitting down to watch the parade. You will get more out of it if you are participating in some way."

For their part, Emory faculty are finding new ways to bring active learning strategies to the large class, structuring opportunities for students to engage with the teacher and each other, and using technology to promote more personal interaction.

"Emory is great," says Bliwise. "I've never worked anywhere else that had so many resources to support our teaching." In addition to the TATTO program for graduate students, she cites the availability of undergraduate TAs, supplemental instruction weekly review sessions, and individual tutors through the Office for Undergraduate Education.

The chemistry department is taking active learning to heart in the design of its new classrooms. Instead of a large lecture hall, its planned new building will have rooms optimized for group interaction. Students will sit at tables and work through assignments while the instructor, rather than stand behind a lectern, circulates through the room.

Whether the instructor chooses to raise anxiety levels while she does so is, of course, entirely up to her. ∞