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## FACULTY SEMINAR AND TEACHING FORUM

### Teaching On A Grand Scale Large Classes CAN Be Effective Learning Environments

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A perennial topic for discussion and concern among faculty is the subject of teaching a large class. How can one teach a large class well, without having it dominate the semester? Planning ahead for consistency communication and evaluation were the keys to teaching large classes drawn from the university-wide Teaching Forum on Oct. 20, co-sponsored by the Sheridan Center and the offices of the Deans of the Faculty and College, and at the Sheridan Center Faculty Seminars on Oct. 13 and 27. At the Teaching Forum, moderated by Dean of the Faculty Kathryn T. Spoehr, Professor Ken Miller (Bio-MCBB) provided introductory remarks and Professors Ross Cheit (Political Science), Dietrich Neumann (History of Art and Architecture) and Thomas Goodwillie (Mathematics) responded to Prof. Miller's short talk by sharing their experiences and ideas. The audience of largely faculty colleagues contributed to a substantive discussion of the issues raised. In addition, the Faculty Seminar sessions, which preceded and followed the Forum, provided an opportunity for exchange on a smaller scale as twelve faculty members discussed problems and solutions from their specific courses.

An examination of the distribution of class sizes at Brown shows that only 15% of the classes have thirty or more students, but this doesn't address the question of: "What is a large class?" from a teaching perspective. The number of students that defines a "large

class" varies by discipline because the appropriate definition must be functional. In a large class the teacher must change the method of teaching to accommodate the number of students, or the teacher feels isolated from the students in the room. Professor Miller articulated some of the challenges, including:

- maintaining student interest
- achieving academic goals
- monitoring student work
- soliciting student feedback
- making the best use of your own time

The invited presentations of the panelists and the contributions from the audience during the discussion time provided some answers to these questions, and included some strategies that can make a large class a positive experience for both teacher and student.

## **Plan Ahead**

Effort spent in planning before the semester begins is critical. This is the time to consider enrollment limits and the design of your syllabus. Take into account the setting for the class and determine if your room assignment offers some advantages or if it will impose any additional problems.

Presentation - Professor Cheit made the important point that just because you have a large class does not mean that you are restricted to a traditional lecture format. Even in large classes you can use the Socratic method, expect participation from your students, and assign cooperative projects. Professor Neumann has extensive experience teaching visual material, but his thoughts are valuable for all courses. Do find ways to incorporate visual material into your presentation. Vary the media that you use, and consider the attention span of your students when planning. You will keep your students more engaged with the material, and you are addressing students with various learning styles.

Training - When you will be using graduate student and undergraduate teaching assistants, advance planning should include training sessions for these colleagues. This initial training combined with weekly meetings throughout the semester will increase teamwork and will facilitate the coordination of expectations for assignments and grading. During the initial training, you can pair an inexperienced assistant with another who is experienced for

support during the semester. In addition, Professor Goodwillie noted that teaching people how to teach is a good way to improve your own teaching

## Application

Once the semester begins, the daily interaction with students and their work can become overwhelming. Keeping three themes in focus can contribute to a smoother semester.

**1. Consistency** - Be consistent about enforcing the rules and deadlines that you have detailed in your syllabus. This is particularly important with the management of written assignments. Have zero tolerance for late work. This will help both you and your teaching assistants.

**2. Communication** - The maintenance of open communication between you and your students can be particularly hard in a large classroom where students often enjoy the anonymity. The key point is to appear accessible. While Professor Miller used the term in the context of a course web page, the idea of creating a "town square" can be expanded. A suite of techniques can contribute to the creation of this vital center. Start with the simple and easy activities: foster eye contact with the students; stay after class for 10 minutes to talk. These daily actions can make it easier for your students to come to office hours. Regularly eat one meal per week at the Ratty and let students know that you welcome their company on an impromptu basis. Use e-mail or a class bulletin board on a web page to encourage frequent questions or comments. Hold open Question and Answer sessions to review for exams.

**3. Evaluation** - Regularly solicit evaluation from your students about their experiences in the class. This can take many forms. You may choose to have the students fill out index cards with feedback on that day's class, or you may choose to distribute a mid-semester evaluation form. Ask your teaching assistants for their thoughts on how the class is going. Finally, have some method of self-assessment. Try keeping a teaching journal that you write after each class. This can be very helpful in the planning of next year's class. Don't forget to have your teaching assistants evaluate their own performances. They can learn by following your example.

A problem inherent in all large classes is the diversity of student background and ability. This diversity can be reduced by encouraging the more able students to move into a higher level course. Alternately, a course which has section meetings can establish sections that

each have a different emphasis. We usually expect students to select a section based on the day and time that best fits their schedules. However, other possibilities could offer important benefits for the student. Sections could be designed for students with a range of background preparation, or sections can address the differing needs of students from different concentrations. Exams can be the greatest pitfall in classes with a large diversity in student background. As the teacher, you can address this issue in two ways. Plan your exams with a range of questions that starts with the basics and progresses to more complex factual and reasoning problems. Help the students prepare by offering review sessions that include problems similar to those the students will see on the exam.