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Designing Curricula for Large Classes to Optimize Student Satisfaction

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While enrollment in institutions of higher education is declining, there continues to be an interest in effective methods for administering and teaching large classes. Several reasons account for this apparent contradiction: (a) Budgetary constraints require the employment of fewer instructors; therefore, smaller sections of courses are often combined into one or two large sections. (b) As tenure becomes increasingly difficult to obtain, evaluations of teaching effectiveness are being more closely scrutinized. Since students generally prefer small classes, many professors fear that poor student evaluations will negatively affect their careers. (c) Many college faculty members have difficulty in teaching and managing large classes. This is especially true since most large classes are introductory and/or elective courses where a lack of student motivation, experience, or commonality of backgrounds makes the task even more challenging. Moreover, it is generally the junior faculty member with less experience who is assigned to teach these large introductory courses. (d) As institutions and departments must compete for students, the reputation of course offerings becomes more crucial in attracting tuition dollars.

This paper describes several methods employed in the teaching of large sections of an introductory educational communications course at Ithaca College during 1979-80 and the results of a survey taken to measure student satisfaction with various components of the course. Although the results of this research tend to support most of the literature on large classes, several new techniques for the teaching and management of such a course were employed and proved successful.

Theories of Communications Media, an introductory course in the utilization and evaluation of educational and informational media, and a requirement for first semester educational communications majors and some pre-service education majors, is also a popular elective among juniors and seniors from all disciplines since it deals with media applications in teaching, corporate training, health care, physical education, and other careers. Two or three sections, each with approximately 80 students, are offered every semester.

In designing the curriculum for this course, several criteria which were believed to influence student satisfaction were established: (a) The content should be relevant to the student's academic and professional goals. (b) Information and requirements should be presented in a clear, unambiguous manner. (c) The class should provide for student participation and input. (d) The course should be flexible in format and technique allowing for individual needs and differences. These elements are similar to those postulated by Wick (1974) and Moore (1977) in their research on large classes.

In order to achieve these goals, several elements of the course were structured in a manner different from traditional lecture methods. The course utilizes three distinct modalities: one 75-minute large-group lecture per week, fifteen auto-tutorial slide/tape modules, and two small-group laboratory sessions per semester. Course content is primarily presented via the independent study modules; each program is made available in the college's instructional resources center throughout weekdays and evenings and during limited hours on weekends. The 15 modules are accompanied by specific behavioral objectives and are correlated to each week's lecture. During the lecture sessions, the basic information covered in the modules is reinforced by discussions, media, presentations, supplementary concepts and examples, and demonstrations. Special attention is paid to including material which relates theoretical principles to practical applications in on-the-job situations or to current events and trends. The two laboratory sessions

are offered at a variety of times on Fridays and are limited to eight students per session. Here, graduate teaching assistants demonstrate equipment operation and basic production techniques and give each student the opportunity for hands-on work with media hardware. This tri-modal approach of large-group, small-group, and individualized instruction is a paradigm recommended by many educational technologists and substantiated by research and practice (Trump, 1960). In addition to scheduled activities, undergraduate and graduate teaching assistants hold open consulting hours during which students receive individual assistance.

Assignments are also designed to incorporate the notions of individuality and student participation. Recognizing the fact that many students hold negative preconceptions about large classes (Moore, p. 20), the first assignment consists of writing a one-page paper suggesting ways in which students feel the course could most effectively be taught given the large class situation. Ideas such as the instructor's use of a microphone, attendance policies, moving students to the front of the lecture hall, extensive use of media, and breaking down into smaller discussion groups for topics of particular interest often have been incorporated into the structure. Through this paper, the student is not only made aware of the difficulties of teaching a large group, but is also given an opportunity to influence some of the approaches used during the semester. Other assignments require students to investigate the ways in which media and visual literacy influence their future professions and to abstract media articles found in their own professional journals. An extra credit assignment is available in which students in groups of two or three present to the class examples of instructional media applications in their field. Small discussion groups are also formed around special interest topics and are led by teaching assistants. Three quizzes are administered and scored by computer so that results are available to the students the next day.

Near the end of the Fall 1979 semester, a survey was administered which sought to measure student satisfaction with the course (Brust, Neeland, & Hessinger, 1979). Almost 70 percent of the students (N-192) reported that, in general, they preferred small classes with enrollments of 25 or less. However, many of the students rated this course as more effective than others they had taken (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
 PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS RATING THE COURSE AS
 "MORE EFFECTIVE" THAN OTHERS

Variable	Compared to Other Large Classes	Compared to All Other Classes
Ability to obtain and maintain interest	25	12
Clarity of information	41	33
Effective use of media	74	65
Opportunity for students to participate	10	7

Over 65 percent of the students felt that their ideas for a successful large lecture class were incorporated into the course. Over 91 percent rated the slide/tape modules as being effective in presenting course material, and over 57 percent thought that the modules were as effective as the traditional lecture

format. The effectiveness of these modules appears to have been attributable in part to the provision of behavioral objectives for each program since 82 percent of the students said that these objectives helped them focus on the main instructional points. Regarding the equipment labs, 83 percent found them useful in clarifying lecture material, and 93 percent felt that the eight person lab group size was "exactly right." Over 83 percent felt that the course was directly relevant to their career goals. Finally, over two-thirds of the students preferred the course format to other more traditional modalities (Table 2).

TABLE 2
CLASS FORMAT PREFERRED

Present format (lecture, independent study and labs)	70%
3 small classes per week	26%
3 large lectures per week	4%

The frequency distribution of almost 70 percent indicates that most students prefer a smaller class size. Therefore, it can be inferred that in order to enhance student satisfaction, students must perceive the group as a small, cohesive unit. Their strong preferences for the small lab sessions and for lecture techniques such as moving the class to the front of the lecture hall and inviting questions and discussions further confirm this hypothesis. Although this study deals with one particular course, these findings may be generalized to other subject matter and audiences. Most students in this survey (69 percent) indicated that they would take other courses with this format regardless of content. Also, this data is consistent with that obtained in a previous study assessing this

course during the Fall 1975 to Spring 1978 semesters when taught in a similar tri-modal format but by a different professor (Reich, 1979). Furthermore, through a cross-tabulation of responses, there was found to be no relationship between cumulative grade-point-average and student preferences or between students' academic majors and class format preferences. Therefore, the criteria of relevancy, clarity, participation, and flexibility in curricula can be posited as elements which contribute to a more personalized atmosphere which generally characterizes small classes and, therefore, to enhanced student satisfaction in large classes.

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