



SIES School of Learning and Leadership Development (SISSLDD)

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on

Managing Large Classes: Challenge for Teachers

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Backdrop:

One of the biggest challenges teachers, particularly new entrants, face is managing large classes in terms of the number of students taught at a time. While theoretically the teacher-student ratio may be 20:1 or 25:1, many classes, especially at the undergraduate level, may comprise students from 60 to 100 or even more. For many teachers, the experience of keeping the students engaged for a period of 1 hour or more becomes a taxing one. And it is not one class alone a day; a teacher may have to engage such large classes a greater number of times a day depending on his / her grade. Even for the teacher himself/herself, the experience may be a tough and stress-generating one.

Types of Challenges:

In a situation of large-size class, the challenges faced by a student are manifold. Some of these are:

Infrastructural issues: The class may not have proper acoustics and a sound system. Many classrooms are not equipped with air conditioning facilities and therefore, the learning ambience may not be ideally suitable both for the teacher and learners. Seating in such a climate for an hour or so may be taxing.

Heterogeneity of the Class: Students in a class often come from diverse backgrounds and with different styles & levels of learning. The distribution becomes more obvious as the size of the class increases. With acute heterogeneity, the teacher finds it increasingly difficult to manage the rhythm of the class and keep it universally engaging.

Management of the Proceedings: As the size of the class increases, so does the difficulty level of managing the proceedings of the teaching-learning process at a smooth pace. How to identify the students who are not active during an activity also becomes an issue; so does even the projection facility, as it may not be clearly visible or audible to the students on the last benches. Many activities need smaller class sizes, and it is practically impossible to undertake them if there are 100 students. And finally, special attention that needs to be given to the lowest performers of the “bell curve” is not practically possible in a large class set-up.

What Could be the Coping Strategies:

Many of these constraints are beyond the control of both the students and teachers and therefore, need to be taken as they are or efforts/steps are to be taken by the management at the unit level. Some of the coping strategies that are practical and can be adopted are:

Role of Local Management: To the extent possible, the classes meant for large classes should be made “learning friendly” in terms of seating, acoustics, sound system, lighting, and air-conditioning, wherever possible. There are practical constraints and all the teachers as a part of the system should adapt to the local teaching climate as fast as possible.

Adequate Mental Preparation: This is particularly crucial for new entrants to the teaching profession: how to face a young generation audience of 100 or more with varied and diverse backgrounds and aspirations. Half the battle depends on mental readiness; therefore, new teachers should be prepared to face uncomfortable situations, at least for the first few sessions, which will be crucial.

Understanding the Class: Understanding the composition of the “class universe,” including students' backgrounds and diversity, is very important before starting the class. This will help the teacher to enable them to device the teaching-learning strategies including the activities to be undertaken to achieve the learning outcomes. This is important because in a large class, students will often have diverging aspirations because of their unique background.

Knowing the Students: This is another crucial step. The teacher must, during the first few sessions, take care of the pulse of the class in terms of:

- a. Knowing names of class representatives
- b. Remembering names of a few distinctive students
- c. Knowing details of the students who might need bridge courses (for bringing them at par with others)
- d. Getting an idea of the most dominant “learning style” of the majority of students

The idea is not only to know students but also to develop a social and emotional bond with the students so that he/she can become more acceptable to them.

Controlling the Audience: One of the crucial roles of the teacher in a class is that he/she controls the class proceedings; he/she may be the facilitator but still the commander of the ship and therefore, responsible for what happens in the class towards achievement of outcomes by offering the “expanded opportunities” to the learners. Therefore, the teacher should ensure that during the class proceedings, he/she has the proper:

- a. Communication with a large number of students by moving across the class.
- b. Confidence in answering the questions asked by the audience.
- c. Teaching style that can never be aggressive but persuasive and asserting if the need be
- d. Attitude to deal with the problem makers in the class with objectivity and fairness.

These traits are extremely important for managing a large class. With experience and conscious practice, a teacher can develop all the traits necessary to oversee a large class.

Choosing and Delivering the Activities: Lecture and pure traditional blackboard methods may not be suited for the new generation learners and that too in such large numbers. The activities have, therefore, to be chosen carefully. Not only that, even the delivery system needs to undergo a change; many activities like, say, a “brainstorming” exercise cannot be done with all students of a 100-member class. One improvised way could be to run the brainstorming with a select group of, say, 20 to 25 students, with other students acting as “observers” and “moderators”. “Group presentations” by different groups on varied topics, with moderation by the teacher and questions by other students, could be another methodology. “Peer learning” is another methodology that can be tried. “Outdoor experiential learning” methodology is often considered a preferred teaching pedagogy for a large group. The overall objective is to choose a mix-and-match of learning pedagogies that take care of the learning style of most students while keeping them engaged. Technology could be a good support.

Moving Ahead:

Taking a large class is a reality in India and many teachers are accustomed to managing such classes. However, for effective management of such classes, the teachers need a different mindset, attitude, preparation, and delivery techniques. It is high time that this issue be looked upon seriously.
