

How to get students involved during class - even when it's a large lecture!

When giving a lecture, we might worry that we'll end up standing at the front of the room talking at students for 90 minutes straight in what becomes a blur. A way to keep students from losing focus is to involve students in active learning. But, in a class that's not a discussion section or small seminar, and where knowing all of the students' names might be nearly impossible, it might seem that opportunities for engagement and student participation are slim. So below I share some activities that I've seen work well in engaging students regardless of class size, and I'm hoping that you'll walk away from this article with a few tips you might use in your own teaching.

First tip: Get students to reflect on lecture material through writing exercises. For example, a professor I had for a human biology course had students bring either an entry or an exit ticket: index cards that you drop them off at the beginning or end of lecture. Entry tickets ask students to answer questions to focus attention on the day's topic or bring in relevant background knowledge – for instance: “What are the signs of an inflammatory response?” Exit tickets collect feedback at the end of a class; for instance, you might ask: “What questions do you still have about today's lecture topic?” Entry and exit tickets not only require participation from each student and can be a way to track attendance and help grade course participation, but also get students to focus on key concepts and ideas and give feedback to the instructor that can be useful in guiding teaching decisions such as course pacing, important clarifications, and identification of student interests. A similar idea you could use at any point during the lecture is a “Minute Paper” or “Question of the Day” Exercise. These activities prompt students to write a response to an open question for 1-2 minutes. These activities give students the opportunity to organize their own thoughts and can be used to develop critical thinking and writing skills.

Second tip: Get students to talk to each other. One activity I've seen used successfully in lots of different courses is a Think–Pair–Share. This activity first asks students to think about a question and jot down notes on their own for a minute or two, then asks students to turn to their neighbors and discuss the question in pairs, and finally brings the class back together to share thoughts and discuss the question as a whole group. Some advantages of this strategy are that it engages all of the students in the classroom and can give a voice to quieter students who might have difficulty or be nervous sharing in a larger

group. It can also make potential cold calling friendlier since students have had time to consider responses in advance.

Third tip: Use your students as participants. For instance, in psychology courses I've seen teachers give students a "participant's eye view" by recreating parts of studies in lecture. They might have students play economic games used in experiments in front of the class, or replicate a study by asking students to fill out surveys with experiments embedded in them and presenting the results. If you can't recreate a study in class but are discussing experiments, you can ask students to predict the results by polling the class in advance and sharing what the class predicted before unveiling the actual results. You can ask students open-ended questions like how they might change the study design or how to look at something else and present those responses. If you're not discussing experiments but discussing ideas, challenge students to play devil's advocate and to submit arguments against the conclusions. For example, if you're teaching literature, you might ask students how they would rewrite the ending to a story differently.

You can also use student survey input to reduce anonymity in large classes. Before the first lecture, you might have students fill out a short e-mail questionnaire about their background (what their major is, what countries and states are represented in your class, or what they think this course is about). You can make general comments about the responses to create connections with the class at the next lecture, and to let students know that you've taken the time to look through their responses and build rapport.

I hope these strategies can spark some ideas for you to use in your own lectures and good luck with your teaching!