

# Teaching Large Classes Well

[Tips from the Economics Department at BU]

**Maristella Botticini**

# How large is large?

- The **smallest** class I taught  
EC101    **166** students            in COM
- The **largest** class I taught  
EC101    **488** students            in Morse Auditorium
- Huge heterogeneity in students' background, preparation, skills, interests, and expectations...

# Caveat emptor...

- These are humble suggestions from a strictly personal point of view.
- They work very well for my courses but I have no claim of being an “ipse dixit.” I am here to learn from your experience as well...
- Some suggestions may work well when teaching economics, but not for other disciplines.

# Large classes versus small: are they really different?

Yes & No.

- **No**: there are some common features that make any class (large or small) either a successful or a disastrous one.
- **Yes**: it is true that large classes require some additional ingredients.

## To teach large classes well, one has to be a mix of:

- a scholar
- a teacher
- a CEO
- a “gladiator”

# The **scholar**'s perspective

- **Show your own enthusiasm for the subject!**
- If students see you love the material, they are more likely to develop an interest themselves.
- Share with the students the discussions and scholarly debates that make your field an exciting one.
- Being a serious scholar and being an exciting teacher should not be orthogonal features. One can be both.

# The **teacher**'s perspective, no. 1

- **Design your lecture around a problem-solving model.**
- Instead of seeing lectures as a way of transferring information, lead the class through the discovery process.
- Teach them how to arrive at conclusions themselves.
- For example, instead of giving a definition first, start with a simple example that you can work through together to arrive at the definition.

## The **teacher**'s perspective, no. 2

- **Write an outline at the beginning of each class.**
- Showing the lecture's structure and the main points to be covered helps students see how ideas fit together and allows them to concentrate on understanding the material.

# The **teacher**'s perspective, no. 3

- **Free yourself from your lecture notes.**
- You should not read a lecture!
- This allows you to be more aware of students' understanding, and to encourage student feedback.
- Your outline, overheads, and slides should guide your presentation and make your lecture organized and coherent.  
They should not contain every single word you are going to say...

# The **teacher**'s perspective, no. 4

**My own strong view: DO NOT post your lecture notes online!!!**

Posting the lecture notes online is the best way to:

1. Kill the students' attention during the lecture (would you watch a movie with the same excitement if you already knew the story?)
2. Make them think that attending the lectures is useless
3. Make them think that what's in your lecture notes is all they need to know to do well in the course

The **worst** possible lecture: give a Powerpoint presentation posted online, with the instructor standing all the time near the podium and pushing the 'page down" button

(this is the best guarantee to have zero audience, zero attention, and boredom all over Morse auditorium....)

# The **teacher**'s perspective, no. 5

## Promote **\*\*\*Active\*\*\* Learning**

- In a large class, it is easy for students to assume a passive role, merely writing the information on the slides.
- Students are more likely to understand when they are active participant in the learning process.

## Some helpful techniques

- **Learn students' names (how)**
- **Move a lot around the classroom!**
- **Plan participation**
  - Asking “is there any question?” at the end of the lecture is useless
  - Instead, pause every 5 minutes or so, and ask “did everybody understand?”
  - Ask a question to the entire class, and allow 20-30 seconds for students to think about the problem before you go on to explain
  - Ask simple questions by calling up 3 or 4 students (---something students hate at first, but....).
- **Have students contribute material for class**

Ask students to bring in relevant newspaper or magazine clippings, which you then use in lectures and exams

# The CEO's perspective

- To some extent, teaching a large class is similar to running a large firm.
- In order to make your customers (students) and stockholders (parents, your chairman, Dean, Provost, President) happy, you need
  - to have a vision and a strategic plan for the course
  - to coordinate and motivate workers (TFs)
  - to make investment decisions (how much time and effort to devote)
- When you teach a class of 488 students, if you are not well organized, it's over after the first week...
- Some helpful tips.

# The **CEO**'s perspective, no. 1

## **Spell out clearly the crucial information regarding the course**

- Prepare carefully your syllabus (exhaustive and concise)
- Never change rules during the semester!
- Spell out clearly your grading policy and explain that under no circumstances grades will be changed

# The **CEO**'s perspective, no. 2

## **Make sure the students do not get lost in the large class, part A**

- Keep a simple and informative course Web Page
- What to post on the web page? (de gustibus non est disputandum, but....)
- Post weekly announcements on the web page
- Also, send a weekly collective email so that each student knows what's going on in the course.
- Make “good” use of the email to complement the office hours.

## Make sure the students do not get lost in the large class, part B

- Assign weekly problem sets and return them graded promptly in the discussion sessions.
- Use companies that offer online interactive assignments (e.g., Aplia). They are a great tool to ensure the students do the problem sets in large classes when timely grading by the TFs becomes almost impossible.
- Have 3 or more midterms in addition to having the final exam. This continuous feedback makes the students aware of problems with their preparation well before the end of the semester.
- As soon as the grades are ready, contact personally the students who performed poorly and ask them to meet and discuss what they need to do (this has made a gigantic difference based on my experience).
- Tell continuously the students that you care about each of them doing well in the course (which I really mean, by the way)

# The **CEO**'s perspective, no. 3

## **Class Attendance**

- Compulsory? Yes.
- In the first lecture, I explain why class attendance is important as I want the students to understand this requirement.
- How to check attendance in an efficient way in a class of 488 students?  
In each class, I call up at random 5 or 6 students and ask them very simple questions related to the material I am explaining that day.

# The CEO's perspective, no. 4

## Elicit student feedback about the course

- One month from the beginning of the course, I distribute an anonymous questionnaire in which I ask students a lot of detailed questions about the course.
- I then read one by one their replies and use this feedback to improve the course (except fixing my “funny” accent, as the students define it in the teaching evaluations...)
- Doing this generates two good outcomes: (i) the students appreciate that their opinions count, and (ii) it enables me to teach a better course.

# The **gladiator**'s perspective

- When you first walk into Morse auditorium
- &
- you have 488 students and 6 TFs in front of you
- &
- you teach EC101 (Intro Microeconomics, which students assume it's boring by definition) from 3:30 to 5:00 p.m.
- &
- you know you have a “funny” accent

then you are tempted to run to the office of your associate chairman and start screaming “what were you thinking when you gave me this teaching assignment?”

Of course, you stoically resist this temptation and, in a matter of a few seconds, you think “how am I going to survive until the end of the semester?” The answer almost immediately pops up: I will be a gladiator (actually, a gladiatrix...).

# The **gladiator**'s perspective, no. 1

- The very **first lecture** (or couple of lectures) **sets up the tone** for the rest of the course.
- The students must perceive that you are in **full control** of every single feature of the course.
- Example: I tell the students that I prepare everything (lecture notes, problem sets, exams, and that I personally decide the grading curve for each midterm and the final exam).
- I tell them I am the “boss” and that if they have any problem about the way the course is organized, they should address it to me, not to the TFs.

# The **gladiator**'s perspective, no. 2

## **Be tough when it comes to discipline**

- Maintaining discipline when you teach a very large class is a real challenge and, in a sense, there is no perfect solution. Over the years, I learned that some things work and some almost never work. You may have other suggestions.

### **Don't**

- Threat leaving the classroom if some students are disruptive (not credible)
- Start lecturing with a louder voice

### **Do**

- I pause until silence is total, then I ask if there is any specific question or problem.
- I ask the TAs to stand in the classroom and to monitor the students.
- I walk toward the student who is disrupting, and when I am close, I smile and politely ask the student's name. This, by itself, usually makes the student silent. Then I ask him/her a very simple question related to the material I am explaining. The other students who see this, will think twice before talking...
- If a student keeps causing trouble, I finish the lecture as if nothing happened. Then at the end of the class, I approach the student, ask his/her name, and ask him/her to come and see me during the office hours. In my office I then explain the student why his/her behavior is very disruptive and, by pointing at the syllabus, I tell the student I am going to give him F in the course if he/she keeps disrupting the class.
- However, the chances of having the lectures disrupted decrease if you teach in an exciting and lively way.

# The **gladiator**'s perspective, no. 3

## **Coordinate and motivate your TFs**

- I found this task more challenging than teaching in front of 488 students...
- I do a lot of micro-management and delegate as little as possible. Those who are very good in delegating, may not want to follow my suggestions on this matter.
- I hold a weekly meeting with the TFs in which I explain how to organize the discussion sessions, what to explain, and how to interact with the students. I also ask them to report any specific problems they see the students are struggling with.
- The TFs check my exams and the solutions I give them. They grade the exams, but I decide the curve and letter grades for each midterm and final exam.

# Summary on Teaching Large Classes Well

- be **enthusiastic** (the scholar)
  - promote **active learning** (the teacher)
  - be **well organized** (the CEO)
  - be **tough** and in full control (the gladiator)
- 
- smile a lot & use good sense of humor