

## Center for Instructional Development and Research

100 Gerberding Hall  
Box 351265  
University of Washington  
Seattle, WA 98195-1265  
Phone: 206.543.6588  
Fax: 206.685.1213  
Email: cidr@u.washington.edu

<http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb>

Information for People who Teach  
at the University of Washington



## Actively Engaging Students in Large Classes

Research tells us most students learn best when they actively engage with class material. While active engagement can be more of a challenge in large classes, many UW instructors have successfully designed large classes to include significant student interaction. Some strategies include:

### DEVELOPING RAPPORT

- *Reduce anonymity.* Making a connection with the instructor or fellow students will help students be more willing to participate in a large class.
  - Give students information about yourself and your interests.
  - Arrive a few minutes early and stay a few minutes after class to chat with students or answer questions.
  - Have a “suggestion” box in the back of the classroom for student questions or comments.
  - Early in the quarter, give students brief time in groups to meet one another.
  - Learn a sampling of student names and use them when calling on students. Some faculty ask all students to create and bring name cards with them and place them on their desks.
- *Reduce the distance between instructor and student.* Move around the room while teaching. Consider asking students to leave every third row empty so you can walk up and down to interact during group work.
- *Communicate with student representatives.* Recruit a group of volunteers to meet periodically and give you feedback. Post their names and email addresses so other students know how to contact them with concerns.

### CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

- *Whole class activities:* In a large class, students are typically not as likely to initiate participation. You can invite student involvement by deliberately structuring opportunities into your class. For example:
  - *Interactive lecturing:* As you lecture, ask questions and make time for students to ask questions.
  - *Brainstorming:* Ask the class to brainstorm answers to a problem or question. The goal is to stimulate thinking and draw connections, not necessarily identify specific answers.
  - *Class response to questions:* Ask a question, provide alternative answers, and ask for a show of hands as to which answer students think is correct. Some faculty like to use clickers (individual remote controls that allow students to respond individually and anonymously to questions in class). The answers are automatically aggregated and displayed on the instructor’s computer. For more information on ideas for using clickers, see the CIDR Bulletin, “Using Clickers to Promote Student Learning.”

Continued on back >>



## Center for Instructional Development and Research

CIDR promotes excellence in teaching and learning at the University of Washington through its work with individual faculty and TAs, departments, campus-wide initiatives, and University leaders. CIDR staff are available year-round to collaborate on the design, implementation, and assessment of ways to advance teaching and learning for all students in the diverse UW community. Consultations are confidential and offered at no charge to UW faculty, TAs, and departments.

If you have questions about teaching and learning, or you would like to find out more about working with CIDR, you can call us at 543-6588, send a message to [cidr@u.washington.edu](mailto:cidr@u.washington.edu), or visit our web site:

<http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/>

- *Individual or small group activities using prompts:* Give students something to respond to – a quote, an image, a film clip, an anecdote, sample data – and ask them to write individually or discuss in groups. Afterwards ask for volunteers or call on groups or individuals to hear their responses. Tasks could include:
  - solve a problem
  - describe response to a prompt
  - analyze/ conclude from data
  - brainstorm why a result is wrong
  - relate to personal experience
  - compare/contrast
  - analyze in terms of theory
  - estimate implications or significance
  - locate weakness in argument
  - list pros and cons
  - evaluate in terms of criteria
  - reorder in an appropriate sequence
- *Activities reviewing course content*
  - Have students spend the first part of class discussing and writing answers to questions on key class concepts.
  - Stop lecture midway and have groups of students compare notes. What did they find most important in the first half of the lecture, most striking, most confusing? What questions do they still have as a group?
  - Ask students to discuss how class material has affected their thinking or beliefs.
  - Ask students to take a minute at the end of class to write the answer to a question like “Summarize the key ideas of the lecture today” or “What questions do you still have about the content we have covered this week?”
- *Activities that help prepare for lecture*
  - Ask students to submit questions electronically that they would like you to address in class.
  - Give a quick pre-lecture “quiz” to assess student knowledge in an area or uncover common assumptions that the subsequent lecture will challenge.
  - “Just-in-Time Teaching”: Require students to respond to questions via WebQ before class. The instructor then adapts the lecture in light of student responses.

## MANAGING IN-CLASS INTERACTIONS

- *Set clear expectations.* Students often come into a large lecture expecting to listen passively. Therefore it is important to emphasize from the first day that class will be active and that you expect students to participate.
  - When you ask students to engage in activities, make sure the task and your purposes for it are clear. Let students know how long to spend on it and what you will expect them to do after the activity is finished (Share what they discussed? Turn something in?)
  - Give clear ground rules about how you expect students to interact and work.
- *Show confidence* that students can answer your questions or work in groups. If students don't actively participate at first, don't give up too quickly. It can help to visit groups while they work and help them get started, ask questions, provide quick coaching or feedback, and encourage them to talk.
- *Develop signals* for starting and stopping activities such as ringing a bell or turning lights on and off.
- *Avoid letting individual students dominate.* As with a smaller class, if one or two students tend to dominate, you can interrupt, respond quickly and positively, and then turn your attention to other students. You can also call on quieter groups of students or ask for “other voices.” Or, after class, you can thank a student for her contributions and then ask her to hold back and give other students opportunities to talk.
- *Accountability.* Let students know that some of them will be called on to respond after an activity is finished. You can also give participation points for written group work that students turn in after class. One instructor hands out tickets in class to students who participate effectively. Students sign their names on the tickets and turn them in after class for participation points. Clickers can also help track participation.



UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL