2004-2005 Final Report of the LAS Teaching Circle on Writing in Large Classes

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This teaching circle addressed a long-term question, how writing can be effectively and reasonably used in large classes with relatively high student-teacher ratios. This question has become more pressing as state support for higher education has declined, leading to more large classes with limited teaching resources. Gail Hawisher (Director, Center for Writing Studies) and Paul Prior (Associate Director, Center for Writing Studies) facilitated this teaching circle, bringing together a number of faculty members who have used writing in large classes, many of whom were also long-time and exemplary participants in the Center’s Writing Across the Curriculum program. The teaching circle focused especially on the following issues.

What are large classes and how are they staffed?

From our first meeting, we talked about our experiences with large classes. Should large be defined by the number of students, the ratio of students to instructors, or even the amount of writing relative to that ratio? Among this group, answers to this question were diverse. Several courses were in the range of 90-130 students, with 2 or 3 graduate teaching assistants involved teaching discussion sections of 20-25 students each. Another course had 75 students and three graduate teaching assistants not offering individual discussion sections; however, that course was also writing intensive, satisfying Advanced Composition requirements. On the high end, one participant was teaching a course that was pushing toward 500-600 students and, for budgetary reasons, had lost discussion sections. The revised course was to have approximately one teaching assistant (at a 50% appointment) for each 150 students. What emerged from this discussion was a sense of how different these varied contexts were, how special issues are associated with each context, and how different kinds of writing suggestions apply to each.

What kinds of writing work effectively in large classes?

The short answer is that the kind of writing that works effectively in large classes is the kind of writing that works well in any class: writing that

- is integrated well with the course design,
- is sensitive to students’ understanding of what is valuable, and
- matches the resources students and instructors have available to devote to the task.
In a large class with high student-teacher ratios that last factor, resources, will tend to mean that the amount of writing that can be responded to and graded will be correspondingly small. See The Mathematics of Response. In such contexts, we would suggest short writing assignments and varied uses of informal writing to learn and writing to share (in-class quickwrites with subsequent discussion or pair-share formats, micro themes, short papers for instructor response, etc.). Many times short informal writing does not require instructors’ written comments or grades; instead, the writing can be integrated into, or equivalent to, class discussion.

**Tensions and challenges**

*Management.* Everyone teaching large classes noted how much time it took to do otherwise routine tasks (passing out and picking up papers, responding to student email, sorting papers for different instructors’ responses or grading, keeping track of student work and grades, coordinating the staff involved in the course). Changes in class size, in staffing, or in configuration (the addition or dropping of discussion sections) can lead to rippling effects on the choice of readings, activities, tests, and so; thus, change in large classes imposes a significant redesign of the course. Managing the collaborative activity of multiple faculty and teaching assistants is also time consuming.

*Steep learning curves.* Learning what works in large classes is a challenge and the learning curves can be steep (or expensive). Assigning a large paper with the promise of prompt and engaged response, for example, could lead to significant tensions. One participant recalled learning that his in-class writing assignments, which were handed out at the beginning of class (to avoid spending class time passing them out), were being picked up by some students, taken into the hallway, filled out, and turned in immediately, after which the students left. The instructor responded by making sure that the handouts did not contain all the information needed for the task, with key information only made available at the point on overheads when the writing was being done in the class.

*Value and Sustainability.* Faculty teaching large classes noted that although they were confident that they could offer a valuable large class, making it a site of active learning and engagement, they were not confident that they could sustain the effort it took over time without seriously diminishing their work in other areas, especially scholarship. Everyone also agreed that close sustained attention to student writing in large classes was difficult (in the smaller courses with TA discussion sections) to impossible (in the largest courses without TA discussion sections) and that offering opportunities for such sustained attention remains critical for undergraduates’ development as writers.