Fast forward to next semester, the first day of class: students file in, mostly alone and non-communicative. The teaching team—the faculty member, a teaching assistant, and 16 undergraduate peer facilitators—stands ready in various parts of the room, greeting students as they enter. The undergraduate peer facilitators, who are sometimes called near peers, took the course last semester, earned good grades, and are now getting internship credit for working as small-group leaders. As the class begins, the professor introduces the teaching team and explains that even though this is a large class, a portion of each class period will be devoted to working in small groups, where students can talk, practice, ask questions, and get feedback about the topics studied. By the end of the first class, students have heard about the course requirements, have seen a demonstration of a class concept, and have met the peer facilitator and the students who will be in their small group for the semester. Now, as they file out of class, the energy level is substantially higher, and quite a few students are talking with each other.

Is this fantasy? Most certainly not. But it did take plenty of time and work, and weeks of class still lie ahead. Many of the goals in this class are ones that commonly appear in the accumulating literature on undergraduate education (Smith & MacGregor, 2000), active construction of knowledge; learning by direct experience and inquiry; focused interaction with faculty; active, interactive, and cooperative involvement among students; development of teamwork skills and abilities to communicate with diverse people; and a sense of belonging and community.

With increasing realization that these are important goals, faculty who teach large classes not only welcome but depend on teaching assistants and undergraduate peer facilitators to provide attention to individual students and engage the students more directly with the course content. Although the instructor in the previous example will discover quickly that organizing the many facets of a teaching team for a large class is not easy, she will also recognize there are some helpful ways of approaching the task. Among the important guidelines she might consider are 1) to think broadly about the training of her teaching team, 2) to recognize different developmental stages among the teaching team, 3) to determine an organizational structure for the course, 4) to select and train the teaching team, 5) to communicate her expectations clearly, 6) to evaluate the team’s work, and 7) to model teamwork and professional behavior.
Strategies for Coordinating the Work of TAs and Undergraduate Peer Facilitators

Think Broadly about Preparing TAs and Undergraduate Peer Facilitators

A few years ago, a faculty coordinator for a large class could prepare TAs or undergraduate peer facilitators by focusing solely on the course tasks they were assigned. During the last decade, however, through a variety of programs related to preparing future faculty (Gaff, Pruitt-Logan, Weibl, & colleagues, 2000) or to involving undergraduates in student-assisted teaching (Miller, Groccia, & Miller, 2001), our understanding of the role of such experiences in preparing students for their professional lives has greatly expanded. As a result, and as the faculty member in the previous example demonstrates through her goals, it behooves course coordinators to think more broadly about how experiences in the large class might contribute to the preparation of the teaching team for future careers. Whether the careers are in academia or in some area of business or industry, many of the skills that graduate TAs and undergraduate facilitators garner as a result of their association with large classes can be considered preparation beyond their responsibilities in the large class. As Svinicki (1995) has suggested, particularly for TAs,

The skills which graduate students learn as teaching assistants or in an organized program on teaching will stand them in good stead regardless of their future careers... can even translate directly into the kind of training and development which is becoming such a large part of the present... All job candidates will have been trained in the discipline, so graduates will have to demonstrate additional skills to give them the edge over graduates from other comparable programs. Training and experience in teaching may be just the edge they need. (p. 6)

As a large-class coordinator, you can think more broadly about the preparation of TAs and peer facilitators if you do the following:

- Emphasize a broad definition of teaching as “any interactions with undergraduates about the content of the course” and move away from a definition of teaching as “standing up and lecturing”. Too often, TAs and peer facilitators working with small groups do not see themselves as teaching and therefore can easily denigrate the importance of their roles. An emphasis on the importance of all teaching roles not only reinforces the importance of these roles for achieving the large-class goals, but also helps TAs and near peers recognize that they are developing a variety of transferable skills.

- Identify some of the key instructional skills such as motivating people, organizing thoughts, synthesizing information, responding to questions, or managing and supervising others, that are transferable to any job setting.

- Recognize that all students, especially the graduate teaching assistants, may not want, or be able, to find careers in academia, especially in the kinds of institutions that offer PhD programs.

- Talk explicitly to students about how to discuss these skills during an employment interview.

Provide Experiences that Recognize Developmental Stages

One way to select and assign roles for teaching assistants or undergraduate peer facilitators is to think developmentally. Particularly for teaching assistants, Sprague and Nyquist (1989, 1991) and Nyquist and Sprague (1998) have studied how TAs develop and how assignments for TAs might address developmental needs. Although the idea of developmental stages is much more complex than originally thought, there are elements of the process which suggest that TAs and peer facilitators need, and should, be given increasing amounts of responsibility in a variety of situations during their training. Here are some ways of thinking developmentally about the preparation of TAs:

- Consider the stage of preparedness when making assignments. In the ideal situation, according to a developmental approach, TAs and undergraduate facilitators with the least experience will have less responsibility for the total range of instructional issues. For example, they may have responsibilities for answering questions when students meet in small groups, grading, tutoring, or meeting students during office hours. Some experienced large-course coordinators suggest that the novices do evaluation that is clear-cut, leaving little room for disagreement. In the middle range of expe-
rience, TAs and near peers who have mastered some of the basic skills of grading and one-to-one interaction might be assigned to facilitator roles in sections, studios, or laboratories associated with a large class. For experienced teaching assistants emerging as disciplinary scholars in their own right, there may be opportunities to present occasional lectures or units in the large class.

- Recognize that TAs and undergraduate peer facilitators need varying degrees of structure from you as the supervisor. Most of us would suggest that good supervisors find an appropriate balance of structure and autonomy to meet the level of experience and needs of the teaching team, particularly of the TAs (Meyers, 1995), and give novices increasingly more instructional responsibility and autonomy until they have experienced the range of issues involved in teaching and learning (Duba-Biedermann, 1994; Sprague and Nyquist, 1991). Adler (2000) has stressed the importance of providing close supervision of peer facilitators in the early stages of their work. Many TAs prefer an overall collegial style of supervision, in which course supervisors adopt a friendly, supportive, and flexible manner in dealing with them. However, the more novice TAs typically desire greater amounts of structure and direction from their supervisors (Prieto, 1999).

Decide an Organizational Model for the Course

There are many ways to organize a large class that uses TAs and/or undergraduate peer facilitators (Miller, Grocchia, & Miller, 2001). In some of the more common models, the TA performs the following functions:

- Shares lecture and class responsibilities with the faculty member
- Assists the faculty member with class organization, preparation of class materials and classroom setup, office visits, student email, grading and course records
- Organizes and coordinates a cohort of undergraduate peer facilitators during each large-class session
- Teaches discussion break-out sections of the large class that meet at times in addition to the weekly large-class lecture session(s)

- Meet with fixed small groups of students during the large class session to facilitate exercises, discussions, problem solving activities, or small group reports

Decisions about which structural model is most appropriate for a particular course are largely a function of the departmental resources, faculty teaching style preferences, goals for creating a particular classroom experience, and TA/peer facilitator availability. However, if the faculty member is interested in achieving some of the goals currently being espoused in the literature on undergraduate education, careful consideration of the roles of teaching assistants and undergraduate facilitators is a must. The degree to which goals can be achieved will depend on a structure that allows for maximum use of interaction among teaching assistants, near peers, and undergraduate students. The literature is very clear about the potential value of increased interaction with undergraduate students when there are more TAs and peer facilitators available to assist with the instruction (Adler, 2000; Marchetti, 2000).

Select and Train the Teaching Team

No matter which course model is chosen, the selection, training, and supervision of the teaching staff are critical to a positive learning and teaching experience. In an ideal world, the faculty member and possibly one or more TAs would participate in a national, regional, or campus conference/training program on large-class instruction. Additionally, it is helpful if you can do the following:

- Address important criteria when selecting a teaching staff for large-class instruction:

  1) Competency with the course content and direct experience with the course
  2) Ability to work with a multi-level system of instructors and peers
  3) Ability to communicate with a diversity of students in a professional yet welcoming manner
  4) Diversity of the staff (gender, ethnicity, age)
  5) Willingness to participate in training, weekly meetings, and performance feedback discussions
Organize pre-semester meetings and weekly meetings during the term. Topics for the pre-semester training might describe the course goals for teaching and learning, set expectations about the work of the teaching staff, and detail the specific activities for the first week. The weekly meetings might focus on the specifics of the course content, activities, staff questions, and student progress. The structure of a weekly meeting could include a review of the last week’s sessions (what went well, student feedback to the teaching staff, grading matters, questions on both content and process, suggestions), a preview of the upcoming week’s class sessions and activities, a practice run of the upcoming discussion topics or exercises, discussion of teaching staff challenges in working with students and class attendance/participation, and possibly individual time for the teaching staff to talk with the faculty member on concerns related to the course. Speaking from experience, we know that it is extremely helpful to have a pre-determined time established for the weekly meetings so that none of the teaching staff will face time conflicts. If deemed appropriate to departmental procedures, the provision of course credit for the weekly meetings can be attractive to the teaching staff and thereby serve as documentation of their leadership work in the course.

- Identify and train teaching staff for the skills they will need for their assigned roles. For example, detail the skills needed for working with groups and individual students, and target specific training to provide those skills.

- Teach the TAs and undergraduate peer facilitators how to evaluate student work. Clearly, it is best to have a grading plan in place prior to the start of the term, to detail that plan in the course syllabus, and to discuss the procedures not only with the teaching team, but also with the students at strategically appropriate times throughout the semester.

Too often, however, the evaluative component is not given sufficient attention when TAs and peer facilitators are involved. If those members will be responsible for any part of the evaluation of undergraduate students, it is important that they be carefully prepared and supervised in their efforts. As Lowman (1987) suggests, “The task of grading papers cannot simply be assigned to TAs and forgotten” (p. 78). Often the teaching staff appreciates sample templates of graded student work that help them formulate their own feedback. They also appreciate discussing ways to provide constructive feedback and seeing examples of exemplary student work which they can use as standards. While results from multiple choice tests do not pose many disagreements, the teaching staff’s comments on students’ essays or on homework problems might be challenged more often.

**Clearly Communicate Expectations for the TAs and Peer Facilitators**

The literature suggests repeatedly that in order to reduce potential confusion and conflict, it is important to define the TA-instructor relationship and for supervisors to articulate their expectations for the TAs (Meyers, 1995). Clarifying expectations not only helps to decrease the potential for conflicts among the teaching staff but also addresses the undergraduates’ need for consistency between what the professor teaches in the large class and what the teaching staff emphasizes in their interactions with students (Wulf, Nyquist, & Abbott, 1987). It helps if you, as the course supervisor, can communicate your expectations:

- Communicate high expectations for your teaching team. This sends the message that you are serious about the course and student learning. Involve the team in establishing the specific course goals and goals for the team’s work and interaction.

- Strive to relieve TA and peer facilitator concerns about full mastery of the course content. The course supervisor can assure the teaching team that they were chosen for their particular expertise and for the perspectives they bring in knowing what questions to ask and ways to think about the course. Assume them that these abilities are more important than complete mastery of the course content.

- Communicate expectations about relationships both between the TA and supervisor, and between the TAs and peer facilitators. Use of undergraduate facilitators requires some rethinking of the more traditional roles of TAs, particularly if the TAs need training skills to assist the peer facilitators in working with undergraduates (Miller, Groccia, & Miller, 2001). In most instances, it is beneficial to identify a clear structure for reporting and responding to diffi-
cult issues that sometimes arise. Adler (2000) found that she could resolve some of the teaching team coordination problems if she established "a clear stratification system that located the ATAs (peer facilitators) directly under the benevolent supervision of the TAs" (p. 213).

Evaluate the Ongoing Work of the Teaching Staff

An essential function of the large-course supervisor's role is to set standards and provide feedback about the teaching team's performance. Some excellent resources on the supervision of teaching assistants are available (Nyquist & Wulff, 1992; Civikly & Hidalgo, 1992), along with the literature on mentoring and coaching (Hargrove, 1995, 2000). Too often, feedback, which is so important to the development of the large-course experience, is the part of the training process that gets the short shrift. Researchers have reported that we are still not good at giving enough guidance and feedback to teaching assistants (Duba-Biedermann, 1994). Course supervisors can enhance their mentoring by establishing the expectation that feedback will be included as part of the team's work, and they might consider trying ways to use observation and feedback guidelines suggested by Fowler (1996). We also recommend the following principles to guide course supervisors in incorporating feedback in the training of TAs and peer facilitators:

- Recognize that the teaching staff usually responds better to feedback that emphasizes developing versus performing, and learning versus knowing (Hargrove, 2000).

- Provide feedback. Feedback should be an ongoing part of the discussions during the teaching team's meetings. The course supervisor's feedback is critical to keeping the teaching team apprised of how they are doing in reaching their goals.

- Feedback is a two-way process. At each team meeting, elicit feedback from the TAs and peer facilitators, and brainstorm ways to respond to that information.

- Ask the teaching staff to encourage feedback from the students. The feedback can be from individuals or might be structured weekly as feedback from a designated small group. Again, brainstorm ways for the team to respond to the feedback provided.

Another valuable learning component for the teaching staff is self-feedback that might take the form of periodic self-reflective essays on their development as teachers and facilitators. These essays may be presented as traditional strength and weakness self-assessments or as more innovative examinations of one's teaching passions and vulnerabilities (Palmer, 1998). An additional assignment would ask the teaching staff to identify one self-challenge they each make for the upcoming week or course unit. Other structural forms might include individual contracts on goals with progress reports during the semester; and structured discussions in pairs or small groups of the teaching staff cohort. Any of these processes can provide some of the badly needed time for reflection that scholars emphasize as part of the process of teacher development (Allen, 1991; Nyquist, et al., 1999).

Model Teamwork and Professionalism to the Students

"Instructors are salient role models for TAs and peer facilitators. The attitudes that instructors bring to their courses subtly shape TAs' perceptions of teaching and influence the quality of TA-student interactions" (Boher & Chevrier, 1991). Students watch the teaching staff do their work and interact with each other. They look to the staff for ways to work with their classmates. As such, it is important to model enthusiasm for teaching and concern for undergraduate students. It is especially important to present a united and authentic image of a teaching team. When it is clear to all instructors, facilitators, and students that the instructional group is working as a team, many of the problems commonly associated with large classes are lessened (Ore, 2000). Here are some ways to model teamwork and professionalism:

- Communicate teamwork to undergraduate students. Let students know on the first day of class that the teaching group functions as a team, including the behind-the-scenes meetings, and then be sure the assistants have the information they need to be consistent with that goal. Carbone (1998) suggests listing the names of each member of the teaching team on the syllabus and involving them directly in the first day's lecture and group activities.

- Provide ways for team cohesion. Most undergraduates are concerned about the coordination between what happens in the large and small groups. Students are adept at hearing one instructor's messages of disagreement with another's approach or response
and might use these differences to carve dissension in the large group. Most often such potential for discord can be deflected with the kind of team cohesion that comes from providing informal settings for interaction, such as team meetings. One such way to foster peer support is to provide group training (Nottarianni-Girard, 1999). The teaching staff also needs to commit to directly communicating with one another and to checking in with each other first when they have differences of opinion or hear student complaints. In turn, students need to recognize and should be prepared to expect some diversity of communication and teaching styles among the teaching staff.

Benefits to the Faculty Member

There is no question that teaching large classes and working with the teaching team is complex and time-consuming work. And it would be naive to think that the large-class instructor could occasionally employ a few of these strategies and expect to be a teaching success. The faculty member who begins to think about and address some of the challenges of teaching large classes greatly enhances his/her chances for success.

As the course supervisor, you will be rewarded for attempting to address some of these issues during the planning stages of large-class instruction, and there are a number of very tangible benefits to be gleaned from such foresight and planning. For one thing, as the example at the beginning of the chapter demonstrates, by using a well-organized team you can greatly enhance the amount of student interaction. By incorporating a greater number of specialists in the content, you can achieve some of the goals identified in the current literature in undergraduate education. In addition, a team working together stands a better chance of addressing the diversity of student needs and the many complicated details that arise in the day-to-day logistics of a large course. Similarly, the faculty member who takes time to clarify expectations and keep everyone on the same path at the beginning can decrease the likelihood of conflicts, misunderstandings, and failures down the road. Finally, the time spent in pre-class meetings and in preparation saves time during the actual teaching of the course. Working with a well-organized team, the faculty member can then use the time available to energize and maximize student learning.

References


Engaging Large Classes

Strategies and Techniques for College Faculty

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