



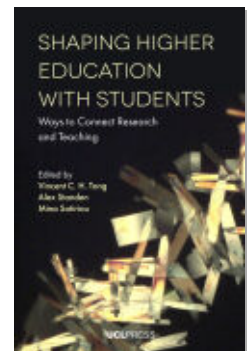
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## 1.8. Involving tutors, demonstrators and teaching assistants more actively in large-group teaching

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## 1.8

# Involving tutors, demonstrators and teaching assistants more actively in large-group teaching

Mariya Badeva

*The UCL Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment*

## 1. What are the general challenges?

One key challenge that arose in my focus group about large-group teaching was how to eliminate the passiveness of students in this context. It was acknowledged that many students do not feel comfortable or lack the opportunity to share their thoughts in front of a large group. Many of the issues identified during the focus group were found to be dependent on the professors, teaching assistants and demonstrators who lead large-group sessions. These leaders are perceived as an important factor to integrating and involving students in large groups, dictated mainly by the strategies they use and how well prepared they are for a particular class. Inevitably, different teaching contexts require different approaches. By attempting to tackle the various challenges, we can achieve a much better involvement of both tutors and students in the context of large-group teaching.

## 2. Recommendations

One way to improve large-group teaching might be to accept and perceive it as a system. Knowledge can be seen as information that flows through this system. Ostensibly, professors and students might sometimes have largely differing views and perceptions about the system, and therefore it

is important that teachers and teaching assistants are aware of students' perceptions and vice versa. This will increase the understanding of both sides and improve communication between the two groups. It is critical that teaching assistants and tutors can situate themselves on the other side of the system. In this way, they will know how students feel and thus make improvements in certain areas to increase students' involvement in large groups.

Another suggestion is to offer additional tutorials, especially for first-year students, to ensure they are well prepared and have a good understanding of the material delivered in class. This will facilitate greater interaction and involvement of teaching assistants in large-group teaching.

A further recommendation would be to provide adequate means for redesigning courses to help students think and be engaged in large-group contexts. The *sustainment of curiosity* was identified as a crucial aspect of student engagement in large groups. It is suggested that through more practical exercises and/or experiments there would be much better involvement of both tutors and students in large groups. This is especially valid within disciplines such as Biomedical Studies, Physics, Chemistry and Computer Science. The involvement of PhD students in courses that they have previously undertaken – sharing their experience by being integrated in the main lectures – could also positively contribute to the learning process.

Lecture theatres play a significant role in how teachers and teaching assistants interact with students. The space can be perceived as an important stage where the roles of actors (tutors) and spectators (students) constantly interchange within an arena of mutual involvement and conversation. It is suggested that by going around the lecture theatre and asking questions at various points within the space, might dramatically improve the interaction between participants, helping students in all parts of the room to feel more engaged.

It is also recommended that tutors should look on each new group of students not as a single group but as individuals, and take the time to provide more individual feedback. Some tutors tend to give very general feedback that is applicable for 75 per cent of a group, but this is seen as a negative practice. Instead, teachers and/or teaching assistants should provide specific feedback, as each student is unique and makes individual mistakes. Focused, specifically prepared feedback will inevitably have a better effect on students' performance as compared with general feedback that focuses on the result rather than on the learning process and what aspects of it can be improved in the future.

Last but not least, writing is seen as one of the most crucial skills in life, one that needs to be acknowledged by students. Writing means the ability to communicate, and therefore students must learn how to do this properly. It is suggested that assessment through writing might turn into a positive practice, as writing is one of the most valuable skills learnt in university. Therefore, tutors and teaching assistants should facilitate moments of writing during large-group classes. This will aid the mental engagement of both teachers and students in the large-group setting and, if practised regularly, might lead to many positive results both inside and outside the university.

### **3. Concluding remarks**

Tutors, demonstrators and teaching assistants face a number of challenges when approaching large-group teaching. The focus group I conducted identified areas that could be improved, including assessment and feedback, the integration and delivery of tutorials as well as teachers' preparation for large-group sessions. It is recommended that if tutors and teaching assistants have a more personal approach towards the delivery of their lessons, it will have a positive effect on their involvement within the specific large group or class. In addition, employing simple tasks and actions such as innovative writing or questioning techniques will increase both tutors' and students' engagement. All in all, it is felt that the student–staff partnership in research-based education is of key importance for the successful implementation of large-group teaching and learning.