

The article below looks at four effective strategies in teaching large, often one night per week, evening courses. It is by Oscar Wambuguh, assistant professor of environmental health in the Department of Nursing and Health Sciences at California State University, East Bay. His e-mail address is [oscar.wambuguh@csueastbay.edu](mailto:oscar.wambuguh@csueastbay.edu). The article is from the January-February, 2008, Volume 94, Number 1 issue of *Academe Online* [<http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/academe/>] the bulletin of the American Association of University Professors. 1012 Fourteenth Street, NW, Suite #500; Washington, DC 20005. Copyright ©2008 American Association of University Professors. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

## **Teaching Large Evening Classes**

They've been working all day, they're tired, and there are scores of them—how do you reach them all?

By Oscar Wambuguh

High enrollments, conflicting student work schedules, and the sheer convenience of once-a-week classes are pushing many colleges to schedule evening courses. Held from 6 to 9 pm or 7 to 10 pm, these classes at my institution are typically packed, sometimes with more than 150 students in a large lecture theater. How can faculty effectively teach, control, or even simply keep awake the students in such classes, many of whom start their days very early in the morning with family responsibilities?

Evening classes bring special teaching challenges. Evening students tend to interact socially more than day students, necessitating frequent instructor interventions to maintain calm and order, and many come to class overwhelmed, hungry, and tired. In addition, there are the usual challenges: poor lighting conditions in many large lecture theaters; lack of, or poor-quality, audiovisual equipment; and distractions caused by student electronic devices such as cell phones, iPods, or laptops. Under such conditions, even the most ardent instructor can become frustrated.

In my large evening classes, I always have a mix of students, ranging from the highly motivated to the couldn't-care-less types. I teach environmental health classes focusing on attention-catching topics such as global warming and climate change; air pollution; epidemiological issues like SARS and Asian bird flu; toxicology, especially of heavy metals in our water and food; biodiversity loss; and food concerns. Over the years, to enhance student engagement and maintain interest, I have incorporated strategies such as combining audiovisuals (PowerPoint presentations, short video clips, and transparencies) and class discussions and activities. Doing so is challenging in large classes set in "lecture-only" theaters. However, I have found four strategies that maintain student engagement and interest throughout what might otherwise be a long evening.

## PowerPoint Presentations

I start my lectures with a two- to three-minute video clip about current course-related issues. Then I lecture using PowerPoint slides for about an hour and a quarter. Although PowerPoint isn't exactly a brand-new technology, it works well for my classes. Many students are relatively fresh at the beginning of class and likely to remain attentive through the whole lecture. I use illustrations and pictures interspersed with text slides as much as possible. I time myself carefully and always stop after seventy-five minutes, after which students take a ten-minute break to recharge for the next session.

## Intergroup Questions

Before the first class meeting of a semester, I organize students in groups of eight to ten and post group numbers and the names of group members on a Blackboard site, where students can access them. I end up with fifteen to sixteen groups for a class of 150 students. During the first meeting, as I call students' names, I ask them to move into their groups for a "get-to-know each- other" session and information exchange. To maintain regularity, I ask group members to stay with their groups at the same location in the lecture theater in future meeting sessions. The groups are responsible for generating five short-answer questions (typed, with answers) for each class meeting. Within their groups, students take turns developing questions each week and circulating them among other group members for feedback through Blackboard before class. Once we begin intergroup question time, two groups are chosen to answer two questions asked by each of the other groups.

Here's how it works. When the first session begins, groups 1 and 2 are ready to begin answering questions. The first question comes from group 3, which asks group 1 one of its five short-answer questions. Members take turns each week reading the questions aloud as everyone in the class listens. One member from group 1 (members take turns) responds briefly (taking no more than two minutes total) to the question asked. If I judge that a concept is not clear, I add to the answer given. Then group 3 asks group 2 its next question, after which group 4 asks groups 1 and 2 questions. The process continues for between forty five and sixty minutes until all groups have been reached. Satisfactory answers are given two points each, recorded next to the question asked. Throughout, I maintain order and monitor timing. At the end, I collect all the groups' short-answer questions for grading and record the points earned by the two chosen groups. At the next meeting session, groups 3 and 4 will be the chosen groups, and so on until the last group is reached.

This system works well in a number of ways. It encourages students to read course material ahead of time; helps the instructor cover course content and explain concepts and material that are not clear during the question-and answer session; keeps students motivated and energized by requiring individual responsibility, attention, and group commitment (no one wants to

be blamed for letting the group down); encourages active participation among students, allowing them to develop and polish their oral communication skills; gives students a sense of owning the questions and the learning; and creates excitement and a sense of achievement, especially if group members answer their questions correctly.

### Article Time

Another part of our evening class deals with current articles in the field. Each group will have had a week to choose and summarize an article from the media (newspapers, newsmagazines, science magazines, journals, or the Internet) dealing with a topic covered by the course. Summaries, which are usually about half-a-page long, must be typed and must include the names of all the students in the group. Group members take turns choosing and summarizing the weekly article on behalf of their group.

During article time, the member of each group who chose and summarized the article stands up and tells the class the title of the article and the reasons why he or she chose it and then reads aloud the typed summary. The groups report in order of their group number, taking about two to three minutes each for a total of forty-five to sixty minutes. Everyone, including the instructor, listens, and the class is free to comment briefly after each article has been read. At the end of the session, the instructor collects the fifteen summaries for grading. This happens each week. Reviewing each article and its summary is quick, taking an average of about ten minutes (a total of just two-and a- half hours a week for the ten instruction weeks of the quarter).

I have found this process beneficial in many ways. It encourages literacy about current events in the field among everyone present, including the instructor; improves student reading and analytical and comprehension skills by requiring students to summarize two-to-three page articles in about half a page; improves students' confidence in their oral and written communication skills while also enhancing those skills; helps keep students engaged and motivated at a late hour of the evening as topics spin from one area to the next; and allows students to appreciate the practicality, complexity, and interdisciplinarity of some of the material covered by the course.

### Short Quiz

While it is debatable whether college-level students should be required to physically attend every meeting session, I have made it hard for students to miss class unless something unavoidable happens (like an illness, a baby sitter not showing up, a transportation problem, or a family emergency). In such cases, students must call my voice mail or send me an e-mail and present a note at the next class meeting explaining the reasons for their absence.

What motivates students to be sure to come to my class? During the last ten

to fifteen minutes of each evening session, we have an optional extra-credit quiz worth ten to fifteen points. If a student misses class but leaves me a voice or e-mail message and gives me a written note, I prorate his or her points based on a simple ratio of the total points earned for all prior quizzes divided by the total expected, multiplied by the total points for the quiz missed. The quiz, which is multiple choice, is given on a projection screen (eliminating unnecessary copying). Students complete it silently on fifteen-question Scantron forms- machine-readable forms designed for multiple-choice tests-without using class notes or text. I advance the questions on the projection screen as students answer them. I use a \$20 sensor that works with PowerPoint and Word, which allows me to advance the questions remotely from anywhere in the room.

All the points students accumulate over the weeks are put into a "point savings account" that students can see on Blackboard. The "fatter" the account gets, the more motivated students become to keep it high. The account can swell to an average of about eighty-five points for most students. But they understand that no matter how many points they "save," their total is prorated so that it does not offset more than 10 percent of the overall course points, usually eight hundred. For example, if a student has accumulated twenty five points before the first midterm, he or she can miss up to twenty-five questions on the exam, which usually has a total of a hundred questions. If by the second midterm, the student has a total point savings of fifty-five, those points can offset the total points missed on the two midterms. Similarly, if by the final, the student has accumulated an overall total savings of eighty-five points, he or she can offset the total points missed on all three exams (subject to the 10 percent cutoff).

The quiz is very popular and has obvious benefits. It allows students to monitor their understanding of the lecture session's material right away; it gives the instructor feedback about the quality of instruction and student understanding; it motivates (or forces) students to stay for the entire class, as the quiz is administered at the very end; it encourages students to pay attention to the material presented (because of the pressure of immediate assessment); it allows the instructor to monitor daily attendance; and it saves the instructor's time, because some of the quiz questions can be rephrased and used on midterms and the final.

In addition, the quizzes encourage students to stay on top of the course material, because they have to review an evening's material ahead of time so that they can fill the "holes" as we discuss the same material in class. This, many students believe, provides an extra edge as they are not encountering this material for the first time before the quiz. Perhaps most important, the points students earn on quizzes give them a sense of hope that they can miss some questions on the midterms or final without penalty. The quizzes also allow them to remain optimistic about the course even after a devastating performance on the first midterm exam. Students quickly forget the optional nature of the quizzes and soon start taking them as a matter of

priority and survival (some students who have missed an entire session have shown up the last fifteen minutes of class so as not to miss this quiz!).

During quizzes, the instructor has to remain vigilant, moving around the room to discourage students who whisper to each other, exchange Scantron forms, or check their notes. The instructor must also be sure to collect and secure all Scantron forms before taking time to chat with students after class.

Over the years, I have had positive evaluations about the quizzes. Many students are pleased that they get immediate feedback about their comprehension of course material, allowing them to take advantage of the period in which they can drop the course without penalty. Do the quizzes contribute to grade inflation? Hardly, given the 10 percent cutoff for the number of quiz points counted toward the final course grade and the fact that the questions are not "giveaways"; they are real exam questions, requiring advance preparation, sustained attention, and understanding.

The quizzes do not help all students. I find that some routinely miss class despite the cost to their grades, while some perform consistently on the quizzes. Most students actually look forward to taking the quizzes. On the rare occasions that my schedule doesn't allow me to prepare a quiz by the end of a class meeting, I can see disappointment on most students' faces. They consider they have been "robbed" of the opportunity to accumulate point savings and improve their grades.

Today, with an increasing number of nontraditional students returning to school, we are challenged to develop creative and innovative ways to make our classes work for them and to make our course material relevant to their daily lives. Evening classes, which afford these students flexibility and convenience, are one way to meet their needs, and I hope my experience with evening classes will help others find ways to make them work for this diverse and dedicated group of students.