Planning and Assessing Assignments in Large Classes

When classes grow large or TA assistance is limited, some faculty may question whether they can continue to give students meaningful feedback on assignments. In this Bulletin, we describe approaches to maintaining effectiveness and efficiency when planning and assessing assignments in large classes. (For ideas specific to writing assignments, see CIDR Bulletin "Assigning and Assessing Writing in Large Classes").

PROVIDE CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Making expectations clear will help improve the quality of student work and reduce student queries and complaints:
- Provide and explain clear criteria orally and in writing. Rubrics are very helpful for this purpose.
- Use models and examples to illustrate criteria and expectations. For example, model for students on the board the way you would like them to present problems in their homework and/or put examples online.
- Clarify for students the benefits and rationale for each assignment and what type of feedback they can expect from you.

DEVELOP ASSIGNMENTS THAT ADDRESS A VARIETY OF LEARNING GOALS

Consider using different types of assignments that address a variety of learning goals. In some cases, assignments may help students practice material they are already familiar with. Other types of assignments may help you pinpoint strengths and weaknesses in student understanding. Ideas include:
- Varied assignment tasks that can help develop students' critical thinking. For example, ask students to:
  - identify relevant concepts and assumptions for a problem before deciding which equations or approach to use.
  - sketch out the steps in a few problems before they solve them.
  - estimate whether a solution seems reasonable.
  - draw and label a chart or map.
  - brainstorm reasons why a result is wrong.
  - identify the error in a solution and explain it in writing.
- Short "practice quizzes" online or in class. These help students learn the material and familiarize them with what you expect them to be learning but require little grading time on your part. Students can check results online or you can go over answers in class.
- Asking students to do homework in groups. This approach can maximize learning for them as they learn from each other. It also creates fewer papers for you to grade. Each student participating in a group assignment signs the final paper.

- Web-based homework.This can provide more routine kinds of practice and reduce the amount of paper you need to handle.
- Learning paragraphs: Periodically ask students to submit a paragraph that summarizes what they've learned and relates course content to their own previous experiences and learning. Students can submit their responses through WebQ, which makes skimming through assignments easy for the instructor.
- "Just-in-Time Teaching": Require students to respond to questions via WebQ before class. The instructor quickly skims responses to get a general idea of student perceptions and understandings and then addresses some of the key perceptions or misunderstandings in the day's lecture.

RESPOND TO ASSIGNMENTS EFFICIENTLY AND EFFECTIVELY

You can be strategic with regard to the amount of feedback you provide on assignments. Ideas for streamlining feedback include:
- Use a rubric or set of clearly defined criteria to help focus, clarify and limit your feedback. Attach the rubric to the back of the assignment and indicate on the rubric where students have done well and where they need to improve. If you number the criteria of the rubric, you can mark portions of the assignment with the number of the relevant criteria.
- Ask students to restate the problem and write out the logic for each step in the problem to facilitate your application of grading criteria or a grading rubric.
- Establish a format for homework, e.g. one problem per page, so that you can skim through work quickly.
- Select one or two problems to grade and give feedback on, and provide solutions online for the rest.
- Read through assignments quickly without writing on them to get a general idea of students' understanding of concepts across assignments. Prepare a handout reviewing areas of difficulty and/or talk through these in class using examples. Post homework solutions online.
- Simplify your marking for certain kinds of writing. Record work as "done" or "not done" without marking it or mark it using a "1", "2" or "3" or check/check plus system.
- For some kinds of assignments, such as Just-in-Time-Teaching, providing oral feedback and explanations to the whole class are sufficient.

MANAGING ASSIGNMENTS
- Use Catalyst Gradebook to regularly allow students to view their scores in order to reduce student queries about grades.
- When returning homework, sort into a series of alphabetized boxes and have students retrieve their papers from the appropriate box. Or position boxes around the room with one TA or undergraduate helper stationed at each "pick-up" site. Write grades on the back pages of assignments so that grades won't be visible when papers are picked up.
- When collecting homework, place a box next to the door of the classroom and ask students to drop their papers in the box as they come in.

For more information on large classes, visit CIDR's "Changing Times" website: http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/change/index.html

CIDR staff are available to consult with you as you plan and assess assignments in your course.   Call us at 206-543-6588 or send a message to cidr@u.washington.edu to arrange an appointment.

Center for Instructional Development and Research

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