

## **Interactive Strategies for Engaging Large and Small Classes Alike**

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As the associate director at Tulane's Center for Engaged Learning and Teaching (CELT), I work with faculty to help them transform their classrooms into more engaged spaces. One way to do that is by creating opportunities for interaction between the professor and the students and between the students themselves. I always start the conversation on this topic with three questions:

1. What is the purpose of making a class interactive?
2. What does an interactive class look like?
3. What gets in the way of you creating a more interactive space in your classroom?

Without exception, the question that generates the most discussion is the final one. The first is pretty straight forward—the students will learn more. The second can create differences depending upon the fields of study represented in the room. But identifying the barriers to a more interactive space—we all have a lot of opinions on this one.

So, what are the main reasons? Responses come in many forms but can largely be summed up in two words: Time and Fear. There isn't enough time outside the classroom to prepare activities, and there isn't enough time in the semester to cover the necessary content. Faculty fear that students won't participate, they will lose control of the classroom, they will get poor teaching evaluations, they aren't trained adequately in pedagogy, the physical characteristics of the classroom will make any activity impossible, there are too many students, there are too few students. I could go on and on.

I am very sympathetic to all of these concerns. In addition to my role at CELT, I am also a faculty member in the economics department where I teach large intro-level classes. I must impart vast amounts of information, mostly to first-year students, to ensure that they are well prepared for future classes in the department.

I understand the time crunch and the fear that can accompany it, but I have come to realize that every class, regardless of size, subject matter, or physical layout can be engaging. One does not need to flip their class or create complicated active learning activities or totally overhaul their entire pedagogy for learning outcomes to be achieved. There is still plenty of room for lectures in an interactive class.

One of the best ways to cultivate interaction is to literally go to where the students are. Get away from the front of the room and walk among the desks. I do this by wirelessly connecting my iPad to the classroom computer. I don't use PowerPoint, but you can use Doceri to advance your slides just as a regular clicker would do. You can also create a virtual film over the slide that allows you to draw on it, highlighting different parts and/or filling in outlines. You can pull up a website and then use the drawing tool to direct your students' focus to what is the most relevant. I use the white board feature. This is a virtual chalkboard that allows me to write and lecture just as if I were writing on the board. When I write, it is projected up on the screen increasing the visibility for all students and giving me a variety of drawing tools, shapes, and colors to create pictures and notes that are much easier to read.

Doing this one small thing, getting away from the front of the classroom, has transformed my classroom. I walk around to the back of the room, to the sides, around the front, to the other side, etc. During one 75-minute class, I beat a path around and around the room. No longer can the people at the back do their own thing because I am there with them. Being close to the students, being able to even sit down next to them and to talk to small sections of the room at a time, has dramatically increased the participation level and energy in the room.

While I'm moving around the classroom and connecting with individual students, the iPad allows a greater interaction between students. As I said, I teach economics—we draw a lot of graphs, so we frequently play "pass the iPad." I hand a student the iPad asking him or her to draw one small piece of the graph. Then I say, "Pass the iPad." To the next student, I say, "If you agree with what has been done, draw a smiley face. If you disagree, fix it." I do this regardless of whether what was previously done was right or wrong. This gets students involved, makes them think critically about an answer, helps them recognize the mistakes they were making and it's fun to see the picture emerge—both the graph and the elaborate smiley face.

Additionally, the only people who really know who has the iPad are those in the immediate area. This method gives students a degree of anonymity and makes them feel safer to participate. You can use this technique in any subject area. In a biology class, have the students identify parts of a cell; in an English class, have the students comment on parts of a paper; in a math class, the students can work collaboratively on problems. An added benefit of Doceri is that I can then upload these notes to our LMS.

As faculty, our goal is to create an environment in which students are engaged with the material, while at the same time ensuring that they are prepared to advance in their studies. There are many techniques and tricks and pedagogies we can use—some requiring a lot of work, some requiring less, but perhaps one of the simplest is to simply get closer to students, moving around the room, and offering easy opportunities for them to talk to each other.

*Toni Weiss is the Lawrence M.v.D. Schloss Senior Professor of Practice in the Department of Economics at Tulane University. She is also the associate director of The Center for Engaged Learning and Teaching.*