# Large class teaching: encouraging student participation

Teaching which puts students in charge of their own learning through participation in activities is referred to as ‘active learning’. Research shows that active learning benefits all students but can offer disproportionate benefits for individuals from underrepresented groups. Evidence also indicates that encouraging students to work with their peers increases their participation and this is beneficial for groups where there is a diversity, for example, in terms of prior knowledge.

This resource provides ideas to encourage active learning for those involved in teaching large classes.

**Provide a brief overview of your expectations.** Students’ experiences of large class teaching are often associated with passive learning. Let students know that they will be expected to actively participate in activities during your class and say why you are doing this to support their learning.

**Provide clear instructions for activities.** For activities that require students to produce specific outputs, it is good practice to provide written instructions (eg on a handout or on a slide) in addition to verbal instructions to ensure all students are clear on the task requirements.

**Divide your class into sections (‘chunks’).** Consider what students are doing in each of these periods; it’s hard to concentrate for any length of time if you’re being talked at and perhaps overwhelmed with content.

**Use mini-activities to keep students engaged**. Brief activities can include things like a show of hands in response to a question, or ‘take a 2-minute break to consolidate your notes and write down any questions you may have’.

**Invite anonymous responses.** Allowing students to contribute responses anonymously is important to enable all students to participate in an activity. This means interesting contributions that might not otherwise be shared are captured, for example, from students who might be less confident in contributing to in-class discussions. There are many ways this can be achieved, including the use of ‘post-it’ notes (see below) or by using an [online polling system](https://ctl.ox.ac.uk/vevox), such as Vevox.

**To build student confidence in answering questions in front of a large class** you could ask students to write their response on a small piece of paper/post-it note and then swap it with someone in the room; after a couple of minutes call on students at random to read the text on the piece of paper they’ve been given by one of their peers. The advantage of this approach is that it’s anonymous – the author of the text is unknown and the person reading the entry isn’t reading aloud their own response, so they don’t have the fear of saying an incorrect answer in front of the whole class.

**Use think-pair-share.** Rather than an instruction of ‘talk among yourselves’, ask students to work in pairs and give them a specific question to address. You might want to use the think-pair-share approach in which students are given time to think or write down ideas in response to a question, then they talk in pairs, comparing their ideas before sharing their ideas with the group.

**Encourage ‘buzz groups’.** Choose questions that are going to engage students in discussion rather than those that may be too general and/or elicit a correct/incorrect answer. These so-called ‘buzz groups’ can be effective in restoring and maintaining student attention in a large class. Be clear how much time students have for discussion. You may want to call on pairs to feedback to the whole class. Try to mix up buzz-group activities, for example, ‘take a minute to summarise the main points from the class so far, then share your thoughts with the person next to you/seated behind you’; ‘I’m going to put you in groups to generate a question for the tutor based on the class so far’ etc.

**Divide the class into small groups to work on a task together for a specified period of time**; groups could be asked to feedback simultaneously to the whole class, for example, through a show of hands or by giving a quick 2-minute summary of their group’s findings. Students may feel less anxious about sharing their group’s collective response in front of a large class than their own individual thoughts. For groups where there is a diversity of prior knowledge and/or perspectives, these small group activities provide valuable opportunities for peer learning.

**Mix it up.** If using small group activities within your class, select groups at random to feedback to the rest of the class. Asking each group to feedback can be tedious for others and time-consuming if you have a limited time to cover content – sharing one example from your group’s discussion can be used as an alternative.

**Provide thinking time within the class.** Many different factors will influence whether a student volunteers an answer to a question posed by a tutor. However, setting aside a few minutes of thinking time for all students after asking a question gives time for students to formulate an answer and decide whether to contribute, and so can lead to an increase in students volunteering answers. Evidence indicates that it also results in student responses that are more thoughtful. Thinking time is also a valuable exercise to enable students to consolidate their learning in the class to date – it allows students to catch up on their notes and/or formulate questions to follow up later.

**If you’re teaching in a tiered lecture theatre**, encourage students to work with those in the row in-front/behind, as well as students seated next to them.

**Invite students to anonymously feedback on points of confusion or areas they’re less confident about.** Make use of ‘sticky post-it notes’ or small pieces of paper for students to anonymously write down one aspect of the class they’re finding difficult or are less confident about; you can ask students to place these notes at the end of their row for you to collect. Depending on the time you have available, you could read through these and address main themes during the remainder of the class, or you could provide feedback to students on Canvas at some point after the session. This approach is also a useful way for you to evaluate whether students have grasped the main area(s) covered in your class.

**Be realistic in the number and type of activities you embed in your class** – things can sometimes take longer to work in practice and it’s better to use one or two activities to begin with to build students’ confidence.

**Seek students' feedback on your teaching**: This will help you to evaluate their experience and perhaps implement improvements next time.

**You might find these other Oxford Teaching Ideas useful:**

* [An introduction to evaluating your teaching](https://ctl.ox.ac.uk/evaluating-teaching)
* [Designing evaluation questions](https://ctl.ox.ac.uk/designing-evaluation-questions)
* [Methods to evaluate your teaching](https://ctl.ox.ac.uk/methods-evaluate-teaching)