

Teaching Philosophy – G. Dirk Mateer

When everything goes right, the classroom is a magical place where 300+ people come to share a common understanding of the way things work. Teaching large classes (and being in a large class) can be thrilling. Large classes are a lot like sporting events and concerts. If you've felt the roar of 100,000 fans at Beaver Stadium you understand the connection.

I believe that bigger can be better!

How does anyone arrive at that conclusion? My first appointment after earning my Ph.D. was at Goucher College in Maryland. I taught classes of 15 students. Goucher is a great small college but I wanted to live in a smaller town. For the next eight years, I taught at Grove City College in Western Pennsylvania, where my classes were typically 50-60 students. What I discovered along the way was that when something worked really well that a critical mass could be achieved where everyone became engaged.

So when the opportunity to join the faculty in the Department of Economics at Penn State presented itself I grabbed it. Initially my colleagues had reservations about whether what had worked in relatively small classes could be transferred to large lectures. What I do is to take the best part of small classes: the interaction, discussion, and one-on-one contact with students and try to retain these components in large lectures. I encourage student interaction through directed discussion, demonstrations, participation in experiments, short collaborative exercises, watching movie clips and listening to music. The goal is to create an active learning environment where the students do more than take in a lecture, they participate meaningfully in class.

This brings me to a key point, classrooms work best then you think about how to manage the course like a small class instructor.

In addition to thinking small, I also remember what it is like to be a student. I lay out a series of expectations in the syllabus for my courses that are student-centered. The expectations include my policy on attendance, homework, answering questions, how to reach me, the posting of exam scores, and student conduct. It is important that students understand that you are their advocate, and that you've been where they are, and that you are there to help them to learn the material.

Set high expectations and students will meet the challenge

Once you get everyone involved in the course you need to capitalize on the opportunity by challenging students. I assign written homework in my large classes and students can augment their participation score by completing a group project that relates economics to real life dilemmas. On exams, I use short answer questions to augment the multiple choice questions so that students have to think about a process that will lead to the solution. In short, I want students to be able to deploy the tools we have learned in class in as many ways as possible.