Large classes heavy on content: A case from pharmacy -
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Faculty: Pharmacy
Subject: Physiology, B. Pharmacy
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No. of students: 200
Year: 2001

Overview

This course is designed to give future pharmacists the background in the workings of the human body which will allow them to understand how drugs work. Since this is a professional course, the conflict between content and understanding is a big issue. There is a strong professional imperative that the students understand a large range of issues/topics — we haven't achieved our objectives as teachers of pharmacists if we cut too much content and the objectives we cover don't match what they need to know as professionals. By the same token, if we cover everything too quickly, the students will have a poor understanding of a large range of topics.

The other major issue we have is that of a large class in first year, with all of the inherent problems in teaching and learning. The key in my mind to successful teaching of large groups is a diversity of teaching approaches, and extremely clear objectives matched well by the assessment tasks.

Focus issue

Getting lots of students (i.e. a large class) to engage with lots of content. Learning content versus understanding.

Strategies

Diverse approaches used - Student s won't engage with the topic unless they're interested, and they are unlikely to be interested in a monologue (in a monotone!). In this course, I use a combination of content delivery in a top own way, then get the students thinking about applications and examples, and then do small group discussion, with questions to hopefully tie it all together.

Content delivery — As mentioned above, we have to get the students to tackle a large amount of content. Previously, we would simply have lectures full of content with not much time for any discussion; not surprisingly the students simply treated the course as a rote learning exercise. We now quite frequently get the students to read well packaged content prior to lectures, which gives us the opportunity to examine the issues at a higher level than before.

Teaching and learning activities — I start with a top-down summary of the topic, to give a perspective view of the issues rather than build up from the nuts and bolts.
Then we consider the hard bits one by one, using an example with many facets. Finally, I ask some questions about the example and get them to discuss them in pairs, before a final summary. So with cardiovascular disease, I give them an overview based on what they should have read prior to the lecture. I talk for a while about a person with the lot — hypertension, angina, heart failure, arrhythmia. I then ask them to summarise the effects on various body organs of these diseases.

**Assessment** - We have an exam in the middle of first semester as part of our transition programme, worth 10% (basically a formative assessment). We then have pracs and assignments which are aligned with the teaching strategy used for a particular topic (worth 20% altogether) and then a final exam worth 70%

**Conclusion**

Doing the basics well (being enthusiastic, interactive, informed) is still the critical issue with any teaching and any class size. On top of that, we try a range of teaching and learning activities that are (mostly!) well aligned with the objectives and assessments. The methods can be chosen for their particular suitability to a topic or task.