

HOW I TEACH 1200 STUDENTS OUT OF A 150 SEAT CLASSROOM: PRO'S AND CON'S

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ABSTRACT

Ten years ago we developed a hybrid online/traditional introductory Marketing course to replace the 'mega' section formerly taught in a local movie theater. Using an approach we now call "student-managed learning," there are several complementary ways for students to master the content. Each student chooses the mix of options that best meets his/her personal goals. Students can choose from a variety of in-person and online options including live-lectures at a scheduled time, online lecture archives available 24/7, podcasts, study guides, a traditional textbook, and online quizzes as ways to access the material. No single channel covers all of the content in the class encouraging students to take a multi-modal approach. While the vast majority of students choose the online options, there is enough interest in the live sessions to allow for a healthy give and take.

Consistent with the large-section class it replaced, the hybrid course uses multiple choice tests to evaluate student learning. In order to minimize cheating, we use a two-phase approach to testing, each phase worth 50% of the student's grade. The first phase is a series of low-stakes weekly mini tests offered over the course of the semester. We develop a pool of about 100 questions related to each week's content and each mini test is an online quiz using 10 questions randomly drawn from the week's question pool. Students are allowed unlimited attempts at each test over a two-week period. Because each test is only about 4% of the total grade, and because students can re-take the tests as many times as they choose (seeing a fresh set of questions with every attempt), there is little incentive to cheat. As a control for cheating, the second phase of the testing program is a comprehensive proctored final exam offered in an on-campus computer lab over several days. If a student hadn't been personally involved with the mini tests, the chance of answering 50 questions randomly drawn from a pool of over 1000 is not good and it is unlikely the student will pass the class. Because all testing is online, and because there is no time when all students have to be in the same place at the same time, there is no physical limit on the size of the class.

While this is not an optimal approach to teaching marketing principles, it is a very efficient way to introduce students to the language and theory of Marketing as the foundation of a program of learning. This efficiency allows us to offer smaller classes so instructors of follow-on classes can take a more experiential approach when building on this foundation. With this caveat in mind, there are several advantages and disadvantages to this approach. On the plus side, students love the class. Enrollment has more than tripled since the class was offered and we were able to eliminate all of the other live sections of introductory Marketing as students dropped them in favor of the online option. In addition, the class has increased the visibility of Marketing on campus. Of the 1,200+ students currently enrolled in the class, more than 300 come from programs outside of the college of business. Hundreds of non-business majors have found a place for principles of Marketing in their program. Because all testing is done online, students attribute their performance to the computer rather than to the professor which puts the instructor in the role of coach and mentor rather than in the role of judge and executioner. The multiple content delivery options are consistent with universal design for learning and the online testing component allows frequent attempts at each test with immediate feedback to the student. The two-phase testing program can be used as an assessment tool with the mini test scores representing mastery of the material at the time it is presented and the cumulative final a measure of overall retention. Because the tests are tied to modular question pools, variations in performance can be used to diagnose and address learning issues at a topic level.

On the downside, this class is not a fun way to teach. The instructor has personal contact with a very small number of students and most of these contacts are about administrative issues or problems with the technology. Because this is an internet-mediated class, the instructor is of necessity required to develop working knowledge of the various technologies supporting the class and acts as a single point of contact for students with technology-related issues. The class structure requires collaboration between multiple campus units (i.e., instructional faculty, administration, and technology units) so interdepartmental cooperation is essential. Because costs and benefits are not distributed equally among the various campus units, conflict is a concern. For example, while the Marketing department reaps the benefit of increased visibility on campus, the technology unit bears the cost of supporting this increased visibility and the administration focuses on the cost savings associated with the structure.