ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF PROVIDING MEANINGFUL ASSESSMENT IN LARGE CLASSES: A COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY AT A RESEARCH-INTENSIVE UNIVERSITY
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Background: Why?

• Larger classes
• Students’ concerns
• Professors’ concerns
The AWG

Faculty, staff, students, librarians* met monthly for two years
*The Assessment Working Group included the following individuals:

Rhonda Amsel, Professor in Science
Elizabeth Elbourne, Professor in Arts
Kristen Emmett, Student in Information Studies
Lorie Kloda, PhD, McGill Libraries
Kenneth Ragan, Professor in Science
David Ragsdale, Professor in Medicine
Carolyn Samuel, Senior Lecturer at the McGill Writing Centre
Marcy Slapcoff, Educational Developer in Teaching and Learning Services
Daria Sleiman, Student in Arts
Mariela Tovar, PhD, Educational Developer in Teaching and Learning Services
Shauna Van Praagh, Professor in Law
Laura Winer, PhD, Director of Teaching & Learning Services
The Assessment Working Group

Examine current assessment and feedback practices in large classes at McGill with a view to making recommendations for improvement.
A collaborative inquiry approach: Questions we considered

- What are **recommended practices** for assessment and feedback in general? For large classes? At other institutions?

- What do we want to find out about assessment and feedback **practices in large classes at our university**? How will we go about getting this information?

- What constitutes a “**large class**”?

- What are optimal ways to share our findings in order to **engage the university community** in considering effective assessment and feedback strategies in large classes?
Recommended and existing practices

• What are recommended practices for assessment and feedback? In general? For large classes? At other institutions?

• Literature review
• Benchmarking
Assessment of large classes (EAB)

• How do they define “large class size”?  

• What assessments are used to evaluate students in large classes? What are the advantages or disadvantages of current methods?  

• What methods are used to provide feedback to students throughout the course?
In-house practices

What do we want to find out about assessment and feedback practices in large classes at our university? How do we go about it?

Goals:

• Document existing practices
• Identify good examples of assessment and feedback in large classes
• Document perceived challenges
AWG’s definition of a large class

What constitutes a large class (at McGill)?

a course that has more than 100 students enrolled
or
is one of the largest courses within the department or faculty
In-house practices: Survey and interviews

- **Online survey: Formal assessment and feedback methods**
  - ... worked well and why?
  - ... interested but not using? (barriers)
  - 430 surveys sent
  - 160 responses (38% response rate)

- **Follow-up interviews**
  - Selected by the AWG
Survey: Questions about formal methods

Evaluation of student learning: This refers to the formal methods resulting in a grade.

In the context of the course described above:

• What formal methods of evaluating student learning (e.g., exams, papers, projects) have worked well in this course, and why?

• Are there any formal methods of evaluating student learning that interest you that you did not use? If so, please describe them. What factors hinder you from using them?
Survey: Questions about feedback methods

Methods for giving students feedback: This includes formal or informal methods of communicating to students how they are doing during the course.

In the context of the course described above:

• What methods of giving students feedback (e.g., practice quizzes, clicker questions, feedback on draft assignments) have worked well, and why?

• Are there any methods of giving students feedback that interest you that you did not use? If so, please describe them. What factors hinder you from using them?
Results: Formal methods used successfully

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Instructor use</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>exams</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>most common means of formal evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>written assignments</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>most frequent in classes of 101-200 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quizzes</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>group assignments</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>online platform</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Formal methods: Interested in using

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Instructor responses</th>
<th>Representative comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>no interest in other methods</td>
<td>46</td>
<td><em>No. There are no formal methods of evaluating student learning that interest me that I did not use / None that would be workable for a course with 1,100 students.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>incorporate more writing into their course through assignments such as formal research papers, essays, book review, summaries of readings, etc.</td>
<td>41</td>
<td><em>A short term paper would be useful to evaluate students' ability to describe and discuss a biological phenomenon or process. Has not been used because it would require a huge human resource to read and evaluate such papers.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>change the format of the exams currently used or to use exams more frequently</td>
<td>34</td>
<td><em>I would do exams with only short answer questions. However, the correction time for this would be too long.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Feedback methods interested in using

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method Description</th>
<th>Feedback Count</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No other methods (either satisfied with methods used or restricted by class size).</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>No, there aren’t any methods I’m aware of which [I’m] interested in trying and have not. I’m always open to suggestions for alternative methods. No. For such a large class, I can’t think of any other practical and meaningful methods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Response Systems (Clickers)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Clickers sound fun but we have trouble imagining how to use them. Possibly incorporate Clickers for class quizzes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More individual feedback on completed assignments and exams.</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>It would be great to go through each student’s assignment code carefully and sit down with the student [to] discuss how it could be improved. I would’ve liked to be able to respond to individual students’ movie posts and conference assignment essays. Much of what students have to say are interesting.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Barriers: Formal and feedback methods

TA-Grader support

• *I would have liked:* Individual assignments. But it is not feasible given the large number of students and availability of just one hour of Grader per student per semester.

Class size

• The class is really too large to evaluate this large a number of students in a fair fashion.

Competing demands on instructor time

• *I have not fully explored methods of feedback in myCourses (audio feedback, comments on quizzes, etc.)* – largely because of time constraints.

Other barriers: Logistics (equipment, teaching space, technology), plagiarism, knowledge
### Cases selected for interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Assignment type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>70-75 upper year</td>
<td>group assignments, rubrics, peer feedback, undergrad student assistants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>short written assignments, rubrics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>online quizzes (JIT), discussion boards, clickers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>short written assignments, rubrics, student-produced MCQs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>poster session, group assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>peer evaluation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
University community engagement

What are optimal ways to share our findings to support the implementation of effective assessment and feedback strategies in large classes at McGill?

Brown-bag lunch/breakfast series
• short presentation
• Q & A

Companion blog
• Based on the interviews
• Specific assessment and feedback strategies
New! Brown bag lunch series: Evaluation and Feedback in Large Classes

First topic: Managing Writing Assignments in Large Classes

Second topic: A conference for undergrads: Assessing students in large classes using poster presentations

Third topic: Assessing Student Understanding Prior to Class
A CONFERENCE FOR UNDERGRADS: ASSESSING STUDENTS IN LARGE CLASSES USING POSTERS PRESENTATIONS

ONLINE TOOLS FOR ASSESSMENT AND ENGAGEMENT IN LARGE CLASSES

SHORT WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS FOR LARGE CLASSES

FACULTY TODAY
Fourth topic: Giving Efficient and Personalized Audio-recorded Feedback
19 Nov 2014 12:00 to 13:00
Would you like to reduce the time you spend writing comments on assignments while still offering meaningful feedback? Would you like to motivate your students to attend to your feedback? Professor Carolyn Samuel will demonstrate audio-recorded feedback, a time-efficient yet personalized means for providing comments on written and oral assignments.
Next steps

Advisory group
Upcoming topics drawn from interviews

- Peer and self-assessment
- Short written assignments
- Group assignments
- MCQs for higher-order learning
- Grading with teaching assistants
- Efficient grading
Questions?

Contact: mariela.tovar@mcgill.ca
Discussion

• How does your institution define large classes?

• How does your institution address assessment and feedback in large classes?

• What, if anything, do you think you could draw on from our presentation in order to engage your institution’s community in addressing the challenges of evaluation and feedback in large classes?