

Engaging the 'Mob' **- Keeping Attention in a Large Classroom**

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"I reject your reality and substitute my own." -Adam Savage,
Mythbusters

The regional campuses pride themselves in their small classroom size. Classes of 15-20 are the norm. However, not all classes are this small. I have a plant materials class which generally consists of 80-100 students, and most are first quarter freshmen. I recognize that 100 students is small to some, whose classes are 300 or more, but the techniques presented herein will work no matter the class size. Many are certainly easier with 20 students, but will work effectively for larger groups as well. In fact, the person who taught them to me regularly teaches classes of 300!

Often, the hardest part is simply getting the students to focus on what is going on in the classroom and NOT what is going on in the parking lot, with their girlfriend/boyfriend, family pet or other schoolwork. You want them paying attention in the classroom; and, you want them paying attention the moment they step into the room. One of the most effective tricks is to simply have a slide showing something completely off topic. Notice the quote above? That has nothing to do with the article; yet, upon reading it, your first thought might be, "now what does that have to do with managing the classroom?" If that comes close to your thought process, a silly picture, or funny quote will do the same thing for your students. They will start to talk amongst themselves about the picture, about the quote and all of a sudden their attention is in the classroom. I don't talk about the picture; I put it up when I get to the room. I leave it up as they are filing in and will only change it as I start the topic for the day. At some point during the class time, we will take a short break and someone will ask about the slide. I put the slide back up and we can then talk about it. I teach horticulture, so my pictures all relate to horticulture, but NOT to the topic of the day! But if you have something

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to look at as they enter the room, the end result is that after 10 seconds you have every head in that room looking at the front of the room and thinking about that picture; they are concentrating in YOUR room.

Of course, now that you have their attention, you have to keep it. We can moan and groan all we want about the attention span of students, but reality dictates that

humans are now on a 15 minute attention span, timed exactly with scheduled television commercials. Turn this disadvantage to an advantage by taking a short (1-2 minutes) break every 15-20 minutes. That does NOT mean let everyone get up and leave the room because 1-2 minutes quickly become 5, then 7 and before you know it, the entire class time is gone. Bring a crossword puzzle, word search or a few trivia questions about your topic. The questions could even be from a midterm or final. Hand out a copy of the crossword, or put a Power Point slide of it up, and tell the group, "The first one to answer 3 down gets a prize". All students are now furiously working on 3 down; they haven't left the room, but the mind gets that mental commercial break we are all geared to these days. What do I use for prizes? Mini candy bars, pens, OSU logo pencils and other small trinkets make great prizes. In horticulture, there are many landscape companies trying to recruit students. They are more than happy to donate pens with their logo to my cause. Once or twice a quarter, and without letting the students know, I will bring in something bigger: a \$5.00 gift certificate to the bookstore, or to a local fast food place. This is nothing more than refocusing attention; allowing the mind to wander, if you will, for 2 minutes. Then it's back to the class materials.

In a 2-hour class, I might take three or four breaks PLUS a 5-minute "get up and stretch" break. This keeps my students focused, allows them to concentrate hard for a short period of time, knowing the "commercial" will allow them to relax. The best part though, is they don't recognize the breaks as doing work related to the class until we hit about the 7th or 8th week of the quarter! I get to review a little bit, get them thinking "out of the box", and they are still thinking about plants!

My class in plant identification requires students to memorize many facts on approximately 150 different plant species, from scientific name to fall color to mature size. The amount of memorization becomes a challenge for many students, especially first quarter freshmen who simply were unprepared for this level of activity in college. Memorizing is not difficult, but it IS time consuming and many freshmen simply have not been required to memorize this volume of material in their previous academic careers and they simply don't know how. Here is another "game" to play during those breaks that helps students understand the need to read the material before coming to class. It requires a small amount of setup and a bit of research on your part, but the rewards are more than worth it.

Take five minutes and either do a Google search for popular TV shows or simply scan your cable/satellite listings for a few minutes. Go to the website of a show you've picked and "borrow" their background, or their title. Tweak the title to your class' needs. For example, I converted "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" to "Who Wants to Be a Hort-a-Holic" for my plant ID classes. "Desperate Housewives" became "Desperate Landscapers", "Pimp My Ride" became "Pimp My Landscape". This quarter I will try "PlantBusters" (instead of Myth Busters). You are limited only by your imagination. But you are now entering their turf, using language they are familiar with and they are more likely to join you on the journey if they are familiar with the ride; at least some of their comfort zone isn't entirely gone while they are sitting in class.

Then create a background in Power Point with the colors, background and/or music from that show. (MS Office '07 makes the process really simple.) Add whatever content you need to discuss to the slide. For me, I do basic plant questions, "What is the fall color of *Acer rubrum*?" for example with 4 answers. If the students don't know, they can "phone a friend", "ask the audience" or do "50-50". You don't need to even set your Power Point to change, simply get another student to help out! Call on individual students to give answers; put them in groups to come up with the answers or whatever works for your class! Have the student look up the answer in the textbook if they don't know them right away. As the quarter progresses, make the questions harder and harder, ones they have to KNOW the materials, or be able to analyze the information from class to be able to answer the questions. Some of my more challenging pictures/questions come from putting up a picture of a landscape and asking the students to not just identify the plants, but evaluate their health

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and make replacement suggestions. One or two pictures per session will suffice.

The end result of these few changes to my class of 100-plus students is, they pay attention more, read the materials more, miss fewer classes and as a result, pass the class in greater numbers than before. I know some people will be saying, "Why do I have to do all this?" You don't. But humans from Generation X and younger learn differently than previous generations. They are used to being entertained, used to instant gratification and satisfaction. They grew up in an educational system that "teaches to the test", so they only want to know if it's on the test. Right or wrong, that is how many of our students are. They are plugged in and turned on. If you don't want them tuning out, bringing a small amount of entertainment to the classroom can make a world of difference. If nothing else, you'll have the 'mob' on your side.