Teaching in Large Blocks of Time

The following suggestions are ideas that might supplement, not replace lectures. However, we must also keep in mind that today's students are quite adept at finding information. Therefore many of them look to the faculty, not as a source of new information, but rather as guides to help them to sort through information, and to learn how to think well about the information they are finding. The goal of all education is for students to be able to make wise decisions. Regardless of the subject area in which we teach, ultimately the goal should be wisdom; making decisions that are guided by the content field in which we teach. Each of the following ideas should be adapted to fit your teaching style, personality, and subject area.

Teaching in large blocks affords opportunity to teach in different ways. Only a certain few are such gifted lecturers that they will be able to hold a class's attention for several hours at a time. However, with a bit of thought and creativity, we can use the large blocks to our advantage, enabling students to engage our subjects in deeper and more active ways.

Media
Especially in large lecture oriented classes, use of media is essential. Even a simple PowerPoint presentation to supplement your lecture will be greatly appreciated by students. With a little effort, pictures, charts and graphs, and videos can be added. At minimum, an outline of your lecture should be projected to help students maintain their focus. If you need help learning PowerPoint, your GA, provided through the dean's office can assist you.

Demonstrations of research tools and resources using programs such as *Gramcord* or other bible software, showing how these can enhance, but not replace, facility in languages, exegesis, and sermon preparation can be helpful and interesting.

Consider using clips from a DVD, videotape, or other resource to illustrate lectures and to provide visual engagement with the topic at hand. 35MM slides can be converted to digital format for easy use in class.

Use the Internet to show students examples of helpful web sites, and of ones to avoid. If they are in a classroom with wireless access, many will be looking at Internet sites as you lecture. It is helpful to introduce them to sites that will function as resources for your particular class material. This is the reason the dean's office has worked to ensure that you have a laptop resource for classroom use.

Remember that almost all of our students are media oriented, so they expect and appreciate media to be an aspect of their graduate education. Effective use of media can greatly enhance a long classroom experience.

Discussion
In that the goal of graduate education is that students may *think well* regarding issues they are studying, engaging them in periodic discussions is essential. The following may be helpful in developing discussion in class:

In a small class (less than twenty students) pose questions in the midst of your lecture to stimulate thinking. Of course, avoid questions that can be answered with one word, and probe the answers given, asking "Why did you answer that way?" or "Does anyone disagree with this answer?" The goal is to teach them to think as counselors, theologians, pastors, historians, missionaries, and educators. Rather than asking questions to which you already know the answer (these simply elicit information), ask questions to which you do not know the answer (i.e., Can you explain why you believe that? or Why do you think your colleague answered that way?). Questions such as these stimulate thinking and discussion.

In large classes, periodically break them into groups of five to discuss aspects of the readings or lectures. Have a sufficiently focused assignment that it can be accomplished in a set amount of time, but broad enough that it requires thinking and discussion to answer. Questions may be either theoretical or ministry oriented. After a set amount of time, debrief the groups, asking for their conclusion, and how the conclusion was reached. Ask groups that came to similar conclusions to add further support or nuance, and ask groups that came to different conclusions to present their thinking. The goal is to have every student engaged in the discussion.

Stimulate Inquiry
The process of learning something new is more effective if the learner is in an active, searching mode rather than a receptive one. One way to create this mode of active learning is to stimulate students to inquire into subject matter on their own, without prior explanation from the teacher.

1.   Distribute to students an instructional handout of your own choosing. (You may use a page in a textbook instead of a handout.) Key to your choice of material is the need to stimulate questions on the part of the reader. A handout that provides broad information but lacks details or explanatory backup is ideal. An interesting chart or diagram that illustrates some knowledge is a good example. A text that is open to interpretation is another good choice. The goal is to evoke curiosity.

2.   Ask students to study the handout with a partner. Request that each pair make as much sense of the handout as possible and identify what they do not understand by marking up the document with questions next to information they do not understand. Encourage students to insert as many question marks as they wish. If time permits, form pairs into quartets and allow time for each pair to help the other.

3.   Reconvene the class and field students' questions. You are teaching through your answers to student questions rather than through a preset lesson. Or, if you wish, listen to the questions all together and then teach a preset lesson, making special efforts to respond to the questions students posed.

Assigned Listening Teams
This activity is a way to help students stay focused and alert during a lecture-based lesson. Listening teams create small groups responsible for clarifying the class material. Prior to your lecture, divide the class into four teams, giving them the following assignments:

Questioners - following the lecture, ask several well-conceived questions regarding the material you have presented.

Affirmers - following the lecture, name several points or ideas they believe to be especially important, and why.

Arguers - following the lecture, identify what point(s) they found unhelpful, or disagreed with, and why.

Examples givers - following the lecture, either provide examples that illustrate the points, or discuss implications of the points for life and ministry.

Point - Counterpoint
Assign readings (books, papers, handouts, articles) that support contradictory positions. Students are assigned to teams that must present the perspective of one position. They are to present their position, and defend it against the opposing position(s). The goal is to strengthen student's ability to engage with and think about a variety of viewpoints, and to learn critical thinking skills.

Take a Stance
Present a provocative or controversial subject related to the topic at hand. Assign students to a small group (or pairs if it is a smaller class) and ask them to take a stance regarding this topic. Poll the class after they have had time to think about and discuss the issue, to determine who has taken what stance. Then require the students, either individually or as a group, to present and defend their conclusion. The goal is not to "get the right answer," but to learn how to think about difficult questions. As you debrief the exercise, probe the thinking that led them to their position, helping them to learn to think better.

Agree/Disagree
At the close of a segment of a lecture, present a succinct statement or summary of the idea, and have students write on their notes Agree or Disagree. Next, poll the class to see how each person voted. Ask individual students why they voted as they did, requiring them to support their decision. This procedure can be especially helpful for drawing out students who are normally quiet in a class, requiring them to demonstrate their thinking on a particular issue. A simple variation is to use the procedure prior to the lecture as a means of hearing how students are thinking before you present the material. You can then adapt the lecture to speak to student questions. This procedure requires students to pay attention because they know they will have to vote and support their decision.

Closing Comments
Virtually every idea listed above is being used effectively by colleagues on this faculty. Some have been adapted or modified, but all are being used in some form now. It is very helpful to talk with one another about what we are learning about how to teach well.

In the faculty lounge are a group of books that can be especially helpful for thinking about teaching at the graduate level. Of course there are issues unique to our disciplines that require adaptation or even exclusion of some of these approaches. But perhaps with some thought, some of these approaches can be adapted to enable our students to learn better our various disciplines. Our ultimate goal should be to establish a community of learning in each of our classes. As *community*, we should be seeking ways to learn together in cooperative ways for the common good. As *learners*, we should be growing in our capacity to *think well* about ministry, scripture, theology, and social and individual issues. Feel free to borrow these books for your own development as an educator. Just be sure to return them when you are finished so that others may use them too.

The new schedule provides opportunity to teach in different ways. We do not want to stop being who we are - a theological school known for superior academics; rather, we want to find ways to do our work as theological educators better. Perhaps being more intentional about *how* we teach in large blocks can help us to continue to live up to our reputation as a place that helps people learn to think well as Christians, all to the glory of God and the good of God's people.