

[Ellen Bremen](#) 9.6.2012 [Students, Before You Hide in Your Large Lecture Course, Read This](#)

Where will you sit? And be awake? And alert? And alive? And awesome???

Day #1 of my Intro to Comm class (Okay, and my Interpersonal Comm and my Public Speaking class): Pipe cleaner interviews.

(Thank you, Kim Nehls from UNLV... Yes, I still do this activity 14+ years later!)

Day #2, peanut butter and jelly activity to analyze linear versus transactional communication models.

Day #10, Post-it note activity on communication apprehension.

My student load is anywhere from 25 to 28 to 32 students.

Students typically *loooooove* my crazy reindeer games.

I have even done some of these activities in corporate training gigs. That's right, I've had people from some companies whose names you'd recognize bending pipe cleaners and making a hot PB&J mess... loving and learning from it!

Do I force my students, age 16 through 60 (or beyond), to be involved? Yes!

Are there times that a student or two finds that my teaching style is *not* for them? Yes!

Norman was one of those students. Norman liked *me*. In fact, we are still in touch to this day.

But Norman looked me square in the eye and said, "Ellen, I just want to be fed the information."

Really, a large lecture class would have been the perfect format for him.

So, I should not have been surprised when I saw this piece a while back entitled [Students Enjoy Large Lecture Hall Experience](#). Then I read some of the reasons *why* some of them like large lecture.

Sure... some students want to sleep. They don't want to engage. They don't want to get called on. They want to passively learn.

In other words, some students want to be fed... like Norman.

But let me ask you, Wonderful Student: Is this what you *really* want to do with your education?

Do you want to put in seat time for your classes? Do you want to be a bystander?

I'm asking a serious question and I hope you'll give this equally serious thought.

Fast forward just a little bit and think about your future work. I know every job I've held—even outside of academia—has required meetings I've had to sit through, many I've had to engage myself in, whether I liked it or not.

Being in your classes for the hour or so that you're there is excellent practice for that work you'll do someday. Can you possibly reframe your lecture class where the prof is droning on and on as great work experience for yourself?

So what's the communication lesson here?

This recent Huffington Post piece written by a student called "[A How-To Guide for College](#)" didn't use the word "professor" once, (which greatly concerned me), but had a line that I thought was excellent: Treat college like a 9-5 job.

Perfect.

This means that being in your lecture class is your *job* and you need to be awake, alert, and present for that job, don't you? Here are my recommendations, and many of them involve *nonverbal communication*:

-**Don't schlump** (not even slump, but schlump!) in your seat and stare at the wall or snooze.

Instead, take out your laptop if you are permitted to do that, and only if you're not going to be

distracted by Facebook (or distract others by Facebook—because you do have to consider those around you!). Sit tall and look ready to be attentive, regardless of your positioning in the room.

-Think about your professor's point of view. As a prof, looking out at a sea of zombie-ish, sleepy (possibly drooling), glowing-by-the-laptop-light faces is so incredibly motivating... It keeps your energy up. You want to continue right on with that lecture you spent hours preparing!

And I am so lying! Profs succumb to lack of audience engagement just like any other speaker. I'm not saying you should act involved in the class to make your prof happy, but believe me, if you are making eye contact (remember nonverbal communication and how much it matters? Like sometimes as much as 95% over verbal communication?), nodding your head, and actually responding to questions, your prof is going to appreciate that, and you will retain the material even more because you will be interacting with the information!

*Note—Important! I did *not* say that you will score points with your prof and possibly get a higher grade or be more memorable, like so many college success articles assert. Sure, if your prof scores your participation, then you'll likely get points for that, but I don't want to mislead you into thinking that every time you squeak out a word in class or act interested, that is automatically going to lead to a 4.0 without much else because we both know that is not the case.

-Don't be lulled into anonymity just because a class is large. Some large lecture classes still require lots of activity. Profs may move all over the place and they could still call on you. Some ask bunches of questions. Others may use classroom response systems, either with clickers or even with your phone. You may end up in small groups doing work (and, wow, try turning around in those swivel chairs that don't swivel), rather than in a corner with your head against a wall. You just never know.

-Be loud and proud from wherever you are in the room when you ask or answer questions. Speak from your diaphragm and project your voice. Make sure your professor and all of your colleagues can hear you. There is absolutely nothing wrong with letting your voice be heard. Do not be embarrassed if people start looking at each other like, "Who's *that* guy/girl?" Think to yourself, "*That's* the guy/girl who isn't wasting this opportunity! *That's* the person who wants to stand out and maybe get a mentor or letter of rec from this prof."

-Know that eyes can see what you don't expect. In #STNT, I talk about how profs wish we could un-see so much of what we do see. So, yes, we can still see you texting under the table in a large lecture class. Even if we can't see the phone, itself, we can see what the rest of your body/face is doing. So just don't.

I highly doubt that the model of large lecture is going away any time soon. So ask yourself: "How will I conduct myself should I end up in a big-ass class?"

Now I personally have a pretty rough attention span, so I'm not pulling any rank on you here. I'd have to make about 10 "Let's Make a Deal's" with myself if I ended up in large lecture right now. And you may have to do the same thing: "Here's what I get to do if I pay great attention for this next hour and a half."

And if you do have an off day, that's okay, too. You are allowed an off day in a small or large class.

Just remember all the other days that you're doing your job... and make those the "on" days. And don't forget to reward yourself for sitting tall, speaking out, and not schlumping!