

What Ideas Worked for Me, What Didn't, and How to Make Them Work

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The State universities in California have undergone budget cuts in the last few years, which has resulted in changes to the class sizes of our introductory Statistics class sections.

In the past at Sonoma State University (SSU), each instructor was responsible for about 30-35 students, and undergraduate readers were available to grade homework problems or meet with students to answer their questions.

Recently, our classes have ranged in size from 125 students to about 55 students per section. Clearly, this has necessitated changes in the way we teach our courses. The most important change in Intro Stats is that weekly homework has become electronically graded instead of hand graded.

In order to make this possible, instructors have had to find a system capable of handling this task, as well as find appropriate problems to be graded, in addition to finding ways of grading more traditional homework problems in a way that most efficiently uses the instructor's time.

At SSU, we typically have taught about 300 Introductory Statistics students each semester, in about 10 sections, with each instructor receiving 4 units for the 4 hour per week class. Our most efficient (from a money point of view) change was to teach 2 sections of 125 students each, with each instructor receiving 6 units of credit. Because of the miserable pass rate in those classes, we have moved to a "compromise" situation.

Now, we teach about 6 sections of 50 students, with each instructor receiving 4 units of credit. The 6 instructors also have 4 TAs to assist in grading and they hold office hours as well.

The electronic system we found to best meet our needs was the MyMathLab tutorial series, which is tied to the textbook we use, namely De Veaux and Velleman's "Intro Stats".

There were many teething problems with the use of the system, which I will display and talk about in the session. These ranged from merely getting the instructors up to speed on the use of the system to problems with the software that needed to be addressed before we could use the system with confidence.

Surprisingly, the student audience for the program seemed to divide into two groups in terms of their computer proficiency – a group that was immediately able to use and benefit from the program, and a (smaller) group that was very computer resistant and that had great difficulty following even the simplest instructions.

We found the technical support for the program very helpful, so luckily we were able to change things, sometimes in mid-semester, to make things work. One of the notable features of using a program like MyMathLab is that students can no longer buy used books, without paying an additional fee to use the program. We found that this was not too much of a problem, as we were able to negotiate a reasonable package with the distributor of the program.

Now that the initial problems have been dealt with, to a large extent, we think that the sections are working well, and we are pleased with our ability to teach larger sections with what we hope is the same quality as what we did before.