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REVIEW OF FLOWER DARBY AND JAMES M. LANG'S *SMALL TEACHING ONLINE:  
APPLYING LEARNING SCIENCE IN ONLINE CLASSES*

CHRISTIAN AGUIAR

ABSTRACT

In their 2019 book *Small Teaching Online*, Flower Darby and James M. Lang present a model for online instruction that uses what the authors call the “small teaching” approach, which posits that college faculty should look for small, high-impact changes they can make to their teaching practice in place of wholesale overhauls. The authors explore the unique challenges that online learners struggle with, from feeling disengaged to feeling overwhelmed by the demands of self-directed learning, then offer practical, sustainable solutions for each. Their text thus offers helpful teaching practices both for new online teachers and veterans.

Darby, F. & Lang, J.M. (2019). *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes*. Jossey-Bass.

REVIEW

This past spring, higher education faculty across the world made an abrupt transition from traditional in-person classes to remote teaching online. Moving forward, we cannot be certain how long higher education will remain primarily online, but it is a safe bet that higher education will make greater use of online teaching – whether fully-online, hybrid, or flexible remote – than it has ever been before. In this uncertain context, Flower Darby and James M. Lang’s (2019) book *Small*

*Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes* provides a helpful guide for all faculty in improving and sustaining effective online teaching practice.

The text is an adaptation of Lang’s 2016 book *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* and provides the same core insight as Lang’s original text: rather than make sweeping overhauls of one’s approach to teaching each time a new trend emerges, we would do better to heed Aristotle’s famous advice and inculcate our teaching practices, like our virtues, through small actions we take each day. The authors offer practical strategies for achieving this – several of which are presented below – supported by research into learning, cognition, and student success. Perhaps their most important insight for online teaching is viewing student engagement not as an additional element that supports learning, but rather as the primary consideration for effective online learning. This is in large part because online learning has much higher attrition rates than face-to-face courses – “at least 10-20 percent higher” – that we must actively work to counter (p. 134).

First, Darby and Lang tackle the challenges presented by online course design, exploring the importance of backward design, intentional learner engagement, and appropriate use of online tools. The most important principles here are the same as applied to face-to-face classes: design assignments with the final destination in mind, communicate clearly to students both the directions for an assignment and its role in their learning, scaffold learning so that students make steady progress, and provide frequent feedback. The authors emphasize that in online learning environments, it becomes particularly important for faculty to “provide a clear rationale for the work [that] students will do, as well as clear directions for how they can accomplish it successfully” (p. 15). They make the case that effective instructors tend to do this almost unconsciously when in the classroom, but must do so more consciously when teaching online.

They offer two strategies: first, instructors can present assignments using a simple what/why/how framework, which clearly states what students will learn by completing the activity, why that is important, and how they will do it; second, instructors can offer regular opportunities for students to reflect on what they've learned, perhaps through discussion board posts. The authors also suggest faculty help foster autonomy by creating assignments with multiple options for completion: perhaps discussion board assignments with several question options which can foster “multiple mini-conversations,” or perhaps the option for students to complete an assessment through either a paper or a video (p. 164).

Instructors would do well to remember that online learners use backward design too: students may look at final assessments and then complete only the work they deem necessary to do well on that coursework. Rather than penalize students for this kind of strategizing, we could help them do it better: the authors recommend using short videos – they suggest six minutes or so – paired with credit-bearing response questions is ideal. This gives students a clear purpose for watching the video while also building in another opportunity for assessment. The videos themselves, the authors suggest, do not need to be elaborate: indeed, low-tech videos recorded from a webcam have the benefit of increasing engagement by making “you and your video authentic,” an element often missing from polished online courses (p. 54). Online learners benefit from reminders that their professor is a human. Not only does this make the course more engaging, but it offers a subtle reminder that students can reach out for help.

Directly related to this, Darby and Lang suggest that instructors look at the online environment itself from a student perspective: without extra effort, course shells can become cold, clinical spaces. Transforming e-mail announcements into videos, scheduling or offering video conference appointments, or recording audio responses to discussion board posts can all help

students engage with faculty. Indeed, the authors emphasize that small, simple interventions like recorded audio comments, which are fully integrated into most LMSs (including Canvas) help increase student engagement.

These interventions are all what the authors title “small teaching,” but instructional faculty should also look for larger, systemic inequalities in their courses. Students take online courses for many reasons, including a variety of socioeconomic barriers that make on-campus courses untenable. Instructors can better support students by ensuring courses are designed to accommodate non-academic challenges and barriers to success. The authors suggest flexible grading systems, such as the “oops token,” which allows students an opportunity to submit one assignment late, revise an assignment with which they struggled, or otherwise make up for a mistake (p. 99). These systems build a certain humanity into the online course experience.

It is particularly important when adapting course shells designed by instructional designers to adjust content to be culturally competent. The authors push beyond this by making the case that online instructors must work particularly hard to be culturally competent in their practices due to the permanent, public nature of the platform. For example, a microaggression left unaddressed on a discussion board quickly becomes an “archive” for the duration of the course; instructors must be mindful that virtual spaces are inclusive and that doing so will require more than simple adherence to a blanket institutional policy statement: it will require modeling, moderation, and potentially individual interventions, all of which may take more effort in the online environment.

While Darby and Lang’s text provides dozens of individual strategies to address the various components of online learning, the most important strategy is, without a doubt, the emphasis on small interventions. Whether the reader is new to online teaching or more experienced, the greatest improvements will come not from massive pedagogical overhauls, but rather from implementing

one or two new, manageable innovations this fall and then perhaps one or two more in the spring. Just as we must treat our online students with compassion, so must we treat ourselves in learning, adapting, and growing our teaching practices.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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