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Small Changes for a Big Impact: A Review of Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classrooms by Flower Darby

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Abstract

Book review of Darby, F. (2019). *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classrooms*. Jossey-Bass.

This article provides a narrative review of Darby's work and the "small teaching approach," focusing on the practical skills that Darby provides for the online classroom. Comments are gleaned from the author and two learning circles (one sponsored by USU and another independent) on the book.

Keywords: Review, small teaching, pedagogy

As soon as it was confirmed that I would teach HIST 1110: Modern Western Civilization, a 110-person, survey-level course of European history from 1500 to the present, in an online, asynchronous capacity, panic started to set in. Having never taught or even taken an online class, I had little idea of what to do. So, I embarked on a summer crash course in online pedagogy. First on my reading list was Flower Darby's *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes* (2019). I read this book in two "learning circles" with educators across North America, one sponsored by Utah State University's Empowering Teaching Excellence program and the other organized independently through Twitter. In both groups, we largely agreed that *Small Teaching Online* offers practical, applicable advice that works well for online classes.

This short, 253-page book has been my intrepid field guide to online learning over the past year. Having previously read and applied techniques from James M. Lang's (2016) *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*, I was already familiar with the "small

teaching approach,” which provides “faculty small, actionable modifications that they can make without having to overhaul their teaching from the ground up” (Darby, 2019, p. xxii). Although Darby suggests that readers first peruse Lang’s *Small Teaching* and come back to *Small Teaching Online* second, most of the educators I read Darby’s book with only engaged with her text and found it easy to understand, impactful, and transformative.

Though instructors could read *Small Teaching Online* at any point in the semester, it will most benefit those in the planning stages of a course. The book’s three parts, “Designing for Learning,” “Teaching Humans,” and “Motivating Online Students (and Instructors)” move progressively through the challenges that instructors face over the course of a semester. Each of the three parts contains concise thematic chapters on various learning phenomena like “Giving Feedback” or “Creating Autonomy.” Darby models the teaching practices she preaches—that of consistency and clarity—in the organization of her chapters, with each chapter including the same subsections: Introduction, In Theory, Models, Principles, Small Teaching Online Quick Tips, and Conclusion. By having the same organization in each chapter, readers know what to anticipate and can move through the book according to their interests. For instance, not all instructors want to explore the “In Theory” sections that provide the pedagogical theory behind the practices and will, instead, want to move onto the Models and Quick Tips sections that are more action-oriented and practical.

The small teaching approach that Darby employs is successful because it does not overwhelm instructors. Nor does it demand that they completely redesign their course. Instead, what Darby suggests are small-scale revisions that can be easily integrated into existing structures. Darby argues, for example, that because asynchronous classes lack the spontaneous in-class touchpoints that may provide additional, off-the-cuff instructions to students on assignments, we need to be even more transparent and intentional in our directions. Following a simple template, instructions should clearly define (using headings) the “what, why, and how” of each assessment in as few words as possible. By making this small change to instructions, it will result in “fewer student questions” as well as “better-quality work” on the assignment (Darby, 2019, p. 17).

I decided to take Darby’s suggestions for HIST 1110. On each assignment, I included the following section headers: What is the goal of this assignment? What will I learn doing this assignment? How do I complete this assignment? When is it due? I noticed I received far fewer questions than in previous semesters about how to complete the assignment and when it was due. Most importantly, though, students explained on end-of-semester evaluations that they appreciated the consistency and clarity the instructions provided. By cutting down on and better organizing the instructions, I got to the heart of the assignment and so did the students.

This adjustment requires minimal revision on the instructor's part with maximum payoff for instructors and students alike.

In addition to providing how-to guides on assignment and course design, Darby also provides practical small teaching suggestions for online learning. In chapter 3, for instance, Darby focuses on how to make short "content videos." Drawing upon pedagogical research and fitting with her small teaching approach, Darby insists that "the key word here is short" (2019, p. 52). In fact, she suggests that "online class videos should be no longer than six minutes." Darby continues this section by explaining how to pare down longer lectures, whether to record yourself or to do a voice-over, and what tools to use. Although for some disciplines, a six-minute lecture video seems far too short to cover your content, Chapter 3 makes the convincing argument that shorter and more focused videos are more effective. For instructors who are fretting about how to record a lecture, Chapter 3 also breaks down the process into an approachable format. Again, in giving these instructions, Darby takes her own advice, writing the instructions in a similar template she encourages instructors to use, explaining the what, the how, and the why of her small teaching suggestion.

I decided to give her content videos suggestion a try. I took my traditional 45-to-50-minute lectures and distilled them down into short "mini-lectures" on various topics. For each day where I would normally have had one large lecture, I now had two or three shorter mini-lectures. Although I was never able to get the lectures down to six-minutes, I was able to keep them around the 10-to-12-minute mark. Students commented on end-of-semester evaluations that these videos were sufficient for providing explanation without becoming boring. This length allowed me to explain the topic in-depth, provide some examples, and coach students on primary source analysis.

While the student evaluations were helpful to knowing that these videos served their purpose, the video analytics also demonstrated that students engaged with these mini-lectures. Using Canvas analytics tools, I compared attendance data from previous in-person semesters with mini-lecture video views to see if there was a correlation. To my surprise, roughly the same percentage of students who had attended a particular day were watching all of the mini-lectures on that topic. For instance, the first day of the French Revolution in HIST 1110 (usually the Tuesday of Week 3), I had 78% student attendance in the fall of 2019. This corresponded to 77% of asynchronous online students watching all three mini-lectures of the French Revolution in fall 2020. This was not only a confidence boost that kept me motivated to create good videos; it was also helpful to see that roughly the same percentage of online students were engaged despite being outside of the traditional classroom.

Darby's *Small Teaching Online* also suggests small but impactful ways to humanize the classroom. In particular, in Part II: Teaching Humans, Darby explores how to build instructor-

student relationships without a physical classroom setting. Especially relevant for teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, this section reminds instructors of how to be compassionate yet establish boundaries. Building upon the work of Kevin Gannon (2018), Darby suggests that it is vital, essential even, for instructors to let our students know that “they are not just names on a screen,” but “living, breathing people” (2019, p. 96). In order to better humanize the classroom and create a community, we need to understand that our students, like us, have “real pressures” in their lives that may have kept them from completing an assignment. To address this, Darby suggests employing the “Oops Token” in online classes that “allows students some wiggle room on class assignments” (2019, p. 98). Linda Nilson (2015) described a similar practice in *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time*. In order to help “students learn to take responsibility for their own learning,” the Oops Token allows students to “make up for an unexpected challenge or honest mistake” through an extended deadline, dropping a grade, or anything else the instructor deems appropriate. Darby explains that the Oops Token helps students recognize that she cares about them but also that there “are consequences for not doing their work up to a standard” (2019, p. 99). The Oops Token is one way to humanize the classroom while also setting standards, maintaining rigor, and establishing boundaries.

Part III, “Motivating Online Students (and Instructors),” was particularly helpful for a first-time online educator. These chapters offer practical advice on how to encourage your students through small “nudges” or reminders; personalized feedback to students on their progress; and through goals contracts. This last idea of creating a goals contract further puts the role of students into view. Many of the suggestions that Darby provides are things that the instructor largely has control over—due dates, policies, and learning tools. But, in this section, Darby gently reminds her readers that “students will not succeed in an online class if they do not take responsibility for their own learning” (2019, p. 158). This is an incredibly important reminder for instructors. Though instructors can encourage their students and provide them with many opportunities to succeed, students have to take the responsibility to engage in learning. Reminders like this are what make *Small Teaching Online* such an impactful book for online educators.

In both of my “learning circles” last summer and fall, we discussed how easy it was to incorporate these suggestions into our courses. For those of us who had already experimented with certain practices like specifications grading, *Small Teaching Online* provided the confidence that our methods were “best” practices. Most importantly, though, many of us reflected that by engaging with the small teaching practices, we became much more intentional instructors. We were able to revise our classes slowly but effectively, implementing small teaching techniques into our course design, assignments, and lectures.

Some instructors, especially those who are education researchers themselves or deeply steeped in educational theory, may find *Small Teaching Online* too simplistic. A few of the teaching practices Darby describes have been around for over a decade. The way she packages these practices, however, providing multiple models of their application, can benefit even seasoned educators. As you embark on your first, second, or twentieth semester of online teaching, I would consider reading *Small Teaching Online* to see how you can make small changes for a big impact.

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