

Small Teaching, Big Impact

Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning
James M. Lang (Jossey-Bass 2016), 259 pages

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James M. Lang's thesis in *Small Teaching* is simple: There are small things that educators can do to improve learning outcomes in their classrooms. Lang asserts that these "small but powerful modifications to our course design and teaching practices"¹ are easy for teachers to incorporate and supported by research on learning. Lang is well steeped in pedagogical best practices—he is the former director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College in Worcester, MA, and he regularly writes for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.²

While Lang is a former English professor, the techniques he describes in *Small Teaching* can be adapted for any learning environment. The strategies that he offers are based both on the learning sciences and Lang's own observations—whether he himself productively used the techniques in his classroom or observed other educators employ them successfully.³ The suggested methods include short, five- to ten-minute learning activities, one-time interventions (activities that might span an entire class period during the semester), and adjustments to course design and student-teacher communication.⁴ *Small Teaching* offers a

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¹ JAMES M. LANG, *SMALL TEACHING* 5 (2016) (advocating for "small shifts in how we design our courses, conduct our classrooms, and communicate with our students"). Lang recently published a second edition of *Small Teaching* while I was in the process of writing this review. See JAMES M. LANG, *SMALL TEACHING* (2d ed. 2021). The new edition boasts "updated research, new examples and techniques, and brand-new resources." I look forward to reviewing these updates in a follow-up to this review.

² See, e.g., James M. Lang, *How to Improve Your Teaching—Fast*, *CHRON. HIGHER EDUC.* (Sept. 30, 2021); James M. Lang, *2 Ways to Fairly Grade Class Participation*, *CHRON. HIGHER EDUC.* (May 17, 2021), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/2-ways-to-fairly-grade-class-participation>; James M. Lang, *Distracted Minds: Why Your Students Can't Focus*, *CHRON. HIGHER EDUC.* (Sept. 14, 2020), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/distracted-minds-why-your-students-cant-focus>.

³ LANG, *supra* note 1, at 6–7.

⁴ *Id.* at 7–8.

variety of interventions, including how to effectively use opening and closing questions during class sessions to promote information retention, leveraging your syllabus as a tool in your teaching arsenal,⁵ and balancing the benefits of interleaving⁶ and massed versus spaced learning. Yes, some of the suggested techniques⁷ would not work for my law students, but I found that the vast majority of the methods presented would easily transfer to the legal research and writing classroom. Additionally, some of Lang's suggestions on motivation and growth also apply to the supervisor-supervisee relationship—particularly those related to providing feedback.

Small Teaching is organized in three main parts: *Knowledge*, *Understanding*, and *Inspiration*. The first part—*Knowledge*—covers small teaching activities to help students absorb the course material, laying the foundation for higher-order activities like comprehension, application, synthesis, and evaluation.⁸ Lang divides this section into three chapters, spanning techniques for introducing new material and reviewing old material with students: Retrieving, Predicting, and Interleaving. In the second part of the book—*Understanding*—Lang presents active learning techniques—helping students use the knowledge they are acquiring in the course to form deeper connections by “*doing* things in the classroom rather than merely sitting there passively.”⁹ Lang discusses ways to actively engage students in the section's three chapters: Connecting, Practicing, and Self-Explaining. In the final part of *Small Teaching*—*Inspiration*—Lang transitions to discussing how teachers can inspire students (and themselves), inviting educators to thoughtfully consider how they act and react in the classroom and how that affects the success of their courses.¹⁰ This part is separated into chapters on Motivating, Growing, and Expanding.

Each chapter includes the same, easy-to-navigate subsections. Sandwiched between the chapter's introduction and conclusion, the reader is met with a description of the learning *theory* that provides support for the suggested teaching *models* that follow, a list of *principles* upon which those classroom interventions are based—intended to help professors

⁵ See, e.g., *id.* at 36–37 (retrieval practice); *id.* at 184 (invoking self-transcendent purpose); *id.* at 210 (growth talk); *id.* at 214 (“Tips for Success in This Course”).

⁶ *Id.* at 65 (“Interleaving . . . involves two related activities that promote high levels of long-term retention: a) spacing out learning sessions over time; and b) mixing up your practice of skills you are seeking to develop.”).

⁷ For example, providing my students with an adlib-style set of lecture notes where they could fill in the blanks during class wouldn't fly in my very interactive, skills-based course—although I absolutely see how this is effective in other learning environments. See *id.* at 103.

⁸ *Id.* at 13 (discussing the Bloom taxonomy).

⁹ *Id.* at 85.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 161–62.

design their own models in the same vein, and a summary of *small teaching quick tips*. If you want the *TLDR*, you could simply read the *principles* and *small teaching quick tips* sections of each chapter and still glean a ton of useful, actionable information from this book. I plan on making myself a quick reference guide with my notes from those sections—something I can easily access as I think about updating my course for the next academic year. If you want a bit more depth on the proffered *quick tips*, then I suggest reviewing the *models*—which are detailed examples of the teaching, student communication, or course-design interventions.

I found myself least enamored with the *theory* sections of each chapter—they were too sparse for my liking. I wanted more information—more studies, and more details on the study designs so I could evaluate the experiments and their results. Even so, this limitation did not detract from the value of *Small Teaching*—after all, Lang’s project was not intended as a comprehensive exploration of the theory behind why different interventions work; these sections were intended as a baseline for further exploration, with suggested sources for additional reading. Also, many of these interventions feel familiar; as you read the suggested interventions, I suspect that they will intuitively seem like good teaching practices (either based on your experience as a student, or because you have successfully used some of these techniques in your classroom).

And, even though the recommendations felt familiar, *Small Teaching* inspired me—as I journeyed through the chapters, I kept reflecting on how I could improve my teaching. I really liked Lang’s suggestions on practicing¹¹ and self-explaining.¹² I would like to think I already deploy these strategies in my course but, as I read, I started seeing other ways to “amp up” my approach. For *practicing*, Lang encourages educators to think about the compendium of skills you expect your students to learn. Make a list. Then, think about how you can designate class time for students to practice each of these skills—for example, asking students to engage in an activity based on that day’s material during the last ten to fifteen minutes of class.¹³ I thought about my own legal writing course—while I give students time to practice rule synthesis during class (with instructor and peer feedback), for example, there are a host of skills that I introduce but do not ask them to try in class. Things that I could easily incorporate into my lesson plan—like giving them time to practice drafting a preliminary statement and complete analogies and distinctions. Why is creating time for practice in class important? *Because it promotes mindful learning.*

11 *Id.* at 113–36 (ch. 5: Practicing).

12 *Id.* at 137–59 (ch. 6: Self-Explaining).

13 *Id.* at 129.

Lang argues that if you are present when your students are practicing a new skill, you can intervene and help them think about what they are doing, provide feedback on the task in real time, and assist them if they get stuck.¹⁴ I also appreciate this tactic because it is another way to meaningfully incorporate skills-based, active learning in the classroom.

Small Teaching also inspired me to think about how I teach legal citation. One technique that I plan to try stems from the self-explaining chapter, which is premised on the notion that learning is improved when students explain what they are doing as they do it.¹⁵ Lang describes a “peer instruction” model¹⁶ where the instructor poses a question, students work on it individually, then pair up with classmates and take turns discussing their response, followed by a second chance to answer the question. Finally, the instructor solicits responses and provides the correct answer. I absolutely can see this activity helping my students become more comfortable navigating a citation guide to correctly format legal citations. Comparing their responses and self-explaining how they reached their answer will provide them with additional practice, as well as the opportunity to learn how their peers approach this process.

Finally, I want to highlight two pieces of advice that Lang offers in the final part of his book—*Inspiration*. While his target audience is educators, these pieces of advice apply broadly—to anyone in a mentorship or supervisor role who works with students.

First, Lang invites educators to “think carefully about how our teaching and feedback practices might help shape student attitudes toward learning and intelligence *in ways that will enhance their learning—or, at the very least, will not detract from it.*”¹⁷ This is something I often think about—both in how I approach students in my classroom and the tone of my written feedback on their memos and briefs. Educators can help students cultivate a growth mindset by reminding them that they can improve—that “intelligence is malleable” and “hard work and effort” play a pivotal role in their success.¹⁸ Lang wants educators to ask themselves—when you comment, “Are you telling students that they have fixed abilities? Or are you telling them that they can get better?”¹⁹ *Small Teaching* encourages educators to give “growth-language feedback”²⁰ and

14 *Id.* at 124–45.

15 *Id.* at 138.

16 *Id.* at 152–54.

17 *Id.* at 163 (emphasis added).

18 *Id.* at 199.

19 *Id.* at 201.

20 *Id.* at 208–09 (“Excellent work—you took the strategies we have been working on in class and deployed them beautifully in here,” or, “You have obviously worked very hard at your writing, and it shows in this essay.”).

use “growth talk”²¹ to inspire students, to remind them that effort matters and will help them improve. With a focus on growth, Lang also suggests including a “Tips for Success in This Course” section on the syllabus and sharing letters from top students with future students on how to do well in the course.²² All practical, easy-to-implement strategies with the power to inspire students: You can learn the material, hone the skills, and be successful in this field.

Second, and related to thinking carefully about our teaching and feedback practices and the power that we have vis-à-vis shaping student learning, Lang urges educators *to show compassion*.²³ Leading with compassion is just as important for motivating our students as is approaching our courses with enthusiasm for the subject²⁴ and invoking self-transcendent purpose.²⁵ Lang advises,

Whenever you are tempted to come down hard on a student for any reason whatsoever, take a couple of minutes to **speculate on the possibility that something in the background of that student’s life has triggered emotions that are interfering with their motivation or their learning**. Just a few moments of reflection on that possibility should be enough to moderate your tone and ensure that you are offering a response that will not send that student deeper into a spiral of negative or distracting emotions, thus potentially preventing future learning from happening in your course.²⁶

This advice reminded me of “Habit 3: Parallel Universe Thinking” from *Five Habits for Cross-Cultural Lawyering* by Sue Bryant and Jean Koh Peters.²⁷ This habit invites students and lawyers to brainstorm all the possible reasons a client is acting a certain way²⁸—to ask themselves, “I wonder if there is another piece of information that, if I had it, would help me interpret what’s going on?”²⁹ This *small teaching* adjustment, asking educators to approach their students with compassion, has an impact on

²¹ *Id.* at 209–11 (Asking teachers to assess whether their verbal and written communications “instill the conviction that students can succeed in [their] course through hard work, effort, and perseverance.”).

²² *Id.* at 216.

²³ *Id.* at 189.

²⁴ *Id.* at 187.

²⁵ See, e.g., *id.* at 186 (“On your syllabus . . . [highlight w]hat skills will students develop that will enable them to make a difference in the world. What purpose will the learning they have done serve in their lives, their futures, their careers?”).

²⁶ *Id.* at 189–90 (emphasis added).

²⁷ Sue Bryant & Jean Koh Peters, *Five Habits for Cross-Cultural Lawyering*, in *RACE, CULTURE, PSYCHOLOGY & LAW* (Kimberly Holt Barrett & William H. George eds. 2005).

²⁸ *Id.* at 56.

²⁹ *Id.* at 57.

student motivation, *but it also encourages educators to model a key characteristic of being a good attorney and a good supervisor*. It is, perhaps, one of the most powerful suggestions that Lang raises in this book. After all, how we treat our students (or supervisees) influences how they will treat their future clients and supervisees.

In *Small Teaching*, Lang's "ultimate aim" is "to convince you that you can create powerful learning for your students through the small, everyday decisions you make in designing your courses, engaging in classroom practice, communicating with your students, and addressing any challenges that arise."³⁰ He succeeds in this goal. Whether you are in the beginning of your teaching career, a seasoned educator who could use a little inspiration, or a practitioner who supervises law students, I highly recommend adding *Small Teaching* to your reading list.

³⁰ LANG, *supra* note 1, at 243.