

# *Small Teaching: A Review*

Lang, J. (2021). *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*. Wiley.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the second edition of his book, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*, James Lang (2021) provides the reader with theory, models, and practical tips for instructors in the higher education classroom. The essence of small teaching practices is to implement small, incremental changes to improve teaching effectiveness that can lead to improved student performance for both classroom and online instruction. Lang presents his insights in three sections: 1) knowledge, 2) understanding, and 3) inspiration, where he explores the theory, models, and principles to deliver small teaching in the classroom.

James Lang is a seasoned faculty member and professor of English at Assumption University, a frequent contributor to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and the author of six books focused on improving instruction at the college level. *Small Teaching* is written with a focus on undergraduate courses, but his insights can be applied to graduate courses as well. While it was not written as a handbook specifically for Christian higher educators, Christ followers who seek to demonstrate a love for their students (Mark 12:30-31) can align many of Lang's recommendations with faith integration within the classroom. The pedagogical techniques found in *Small Teaching* offer actionable insights to foster student success which allows both students and faculty to honor God (1 Peter 4:10) with their talents.

## KNOWLEDGE

The first of three sections of this book is devoted to knowledge acquisition covering predicting, retrieving, and interleaving, which are examined below. This section is packed with pedagogical recommendations that can be applied in both classroom and online instructional settings. According to Lang “We should not assume that students

are either willing or capable of mastering such foundational knowledge on their own, in their study and learning outside of the classroom” (p. 16). As I read *Small Teaching*, I was reminded that a teacher must be both a steward of their knowledge (1 Corinthians 4:2) and an educator who continually evaluates their instructional techniques to fully meet the needs of students.

Lang recommends using prediction techniques that devote a small amount of instructional time for students to make predictions on what they know, even if they are incorrect. One method is asking students to complete a pre-quiz before the introduction of new course material. Lang encourages the use of immediate feedback to stimulate reflection by the student. While predicting has a natural place at the start of a unit of instruction, breaking up a course lecture with techniques like brainstorming, polling, and predicting outcomes are recommended.

Retrieving information is crucial for student success. Lang cites extensive research that shows that learners are not limited by an issue of capacity but retrieval. Lang states, “[T]he challenge for students, or for any of us, is not jamming facts and information down into our long-term memories but instead drawing those facts and information out when we need them or when they will help us in some way” (p. 49). Teachers should seek to incorporate retrieval in small doses within their classes, which can be achieved with opening and closing questions such as a written response to what is unclear from today's lesson or identify one thing learned in the session. Frequency is essential for effective retrieval techniques and a consistent, low-stakes quizzing strategy is one approach that can be added to most courses with minimal effort. These techniques contribute to student success by providing methods for students to identify gaps in their knowledge before taking a high-stakes midterm or final.

Lang completes this section with a review of interleaving, which is a process to improve long-term retention. According to Lang, it includes spacing out learning over

time and mixing up practice of skills that are being developed. When students utilize spaced learning, it allows “some time for the forgetting of learned material to set in” (p. 67). This approach provides a student multiple attempts to retrieve information from their long-term memory through which they improve the retrieval of information. This technique provides an opportunity to relearn material and engage in memory retrieval. It requires a bit more effort for the instructor to build a recursive process into the instructional plan, but the benefits to the student are worth the effort. When this technique is implemented, it allows students to identify information they have confidently learned and what needs more practice. Lang does emphasize that the use of a blocked study format, studying a topic completely before moving to the next topic, is often necessary in some instructional settings.

### UNDERSTANDING

Lang’s second section focuses on understanding, the process of integrating comprehension within our instruction. The initial topic in this section is connecting where the instructional goal allows students to take previously learned content and apply it to a new setting. Connecting is tightly linked with comprehension, and Lang emphasizes that effective teachers create an environment that enables these connections. Lang provides a useful review of neurological research and offers instructional techniques that are adaptable to a variety of subject areas to foster stronger connections. These techniques include connection notebooks, frameworks, concept maps, and a minute thesis. I found the use of connection notebooks, a journaling technique, can offer business instructors a method to facilitate the linkage of business concepts with the Christian faith. I use a version of this approach with a personal finance course so students can establish the connections of biblical stewardship and finances. It can facilitate a semester-long process of weaving faith and business principles while supporting self-reflection.

Practicing is seen by Lang to be at the heart of small teaching principles. When educators provide effective practice opportunities for their students in their class, it allows their students to become proficient in an academic skill that is to be assessed. Lang acknowledges it can be challenging to ensure students practice well and quite a burden without meaningful guidance. Students can benefit from gentle nudges on how best to practice the skills taught in the classroom. I was reminded of the comments of Quentin Schultze in *Servant Teaching* (2022). He “personally want[s]

to inspire and motivate learners to determine what works best for them” (p. 99). It can take some effort to identify the appropriate practicing techniques and where to focus for our students, but with a servant mindset, teachers can continually provide ideal opportunities for students to grow.

Lang concludes his focus on understanding with an analysis of explaining. The student behavior we are looking for is self-explaining. The use of explaining can assist students to improve their learning, but some students cannot achieve this on their own. They need a prompt from their teacher. Lang suggests engaging students in practice activities with a relevant nudge, “Why are you doing that?” to remind students what key concepts are being applied in an exercise (p. 145). I found the suggestion of allowing students to contribute to the instruction by requiring them to create instructional materials—a recommendation that can work well in both in-person and asynchronous settings. Providing opportunities to take a more active role in their learning and assisting their peers can improve learning and deepen student engagement.

### INSPIRATION

*Small Teaching* concludes with a section titled inspiration, where we see our students as more than “collections of neural networks, or receptacles of information” (p. 159). Lang encourages instructors to be proactive in engaging students to foster a sense of belonging. I was reminded of Carolyn Call’s promotion of the practice of hospitality and viewing students as guests in *Teaching and Christian Practices* (2011). Belonging and community are attributes found in Christian higher education that compliment Lang’s recommendations. One such recommendation is to identify a student’s good work both verbally and in written form. Acknowledging a student’s efforts, especially those who may find college very foreign, provides opportunities for these students to increase their sense of belonging. Additionally, instructors need to ensure assignments are clear and have adequate structure to support all students. Taking the time to provide more structure to assignments and assessments benefits all students and, for some, it can be deeply impactful.

Lang’s review of motivation in the classroom is categorized into two categories: extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Fostering a sense of purpose is necessary for many students to contribute towards their success. Lang recommends introducing a bit of theater as you commence a class to create a sense of wonder or stories that make meaningful connections to the course material. These meaningful

connections for the Christian professor are opportunities to integrate the truth of scripture into the course content. I applied this approach with a lesson on interest rates and a subsequent discussion on a Christian response to payday lending where interest rates can exceed 300% APR. Lang encourages professors to be cognizant of the emotions in the room. Are the students capturing any of your enthusiasm? Possibly some students have external issues that make learning challenging. Christian higher education should excel at providing meaning and value to classroom instruction. Given that our faith views all students as created in the image of God, instructors at Christian colleges should teach in a way that reminds students that their unique talents bring honor to God.

I recommend this book to instructors who desire to make incremental changes to their teaching and have a desire to improve student academic success. Instructors can read individual chapters of *Small Teaching* and still benefit. Lang's writings are a launch pad to explore many pedagogical techniques. Extensive references allow the reader to explore techniques beyond the book and further improve their instruction. Instructors who embrace small teaching techniques are adopting a continuous improvement posture to deliver positive outcomes for students. The students in today's classrooms are always changing, and *Small Teaching* provides research-based techniques to adapt to various learners and support them on their educational journey.

## REFERENCES

- Lang, J. M. (2021). *Small teaching: Everyday lessons from the science of learning*. John Wiley & Sons.
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