

Book Review: Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning by James M. Lang (2016)

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For librarians, teaching is often not a big part of our formative, formal library science, education despite a prevalent belief that library students should be taught instruction skills as part of their reference training (Hall, 2013). For many of us, we learned to teach through trial & error in the classroom by observing senior librarians, and by asking for feedback from colleagues. Thus, there should be a ready-made audience for a book like *Small Teaching* by James Lang, as it is a practical guide for librarians with limited classroom training, delivering suggestions that are well-explained, and due to their structured and incremental nature, efficiently use valuable classroom time.

James Lang is an associate professor of English at Assumption College, and is also the Director of their Center for Teaching Excellence. He has published, prior to *Small Teaching*, two teaching-focused books: *Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty* in 2013 and *On Course: A Week-by-Week Guide to your First Semester of College Teaching* in 2008. The primary focus of Lang's work is providing practical teaching strategies in college level courses for both experienced and new professors.

Small Teaching is written for educators who are in the classroom with the same students throughout the semester or school year. For many librarians, however, interacting with students in a classroom setting is not guaranteed, as these librarians still often work within the confines of one-shot instruction, and do not see the same students for more than an hour or so of classroom time. With that in mind, several of Lang's small teaching modifications can work within the context of a one-shot instruction session.

The book is broken into three parts: Knowledge, Understanding, and Inspiration. Knowledge draws heavily from Bloom's Taxonomy, with a focus on memory and recall skills. Many of the recommendations in the three chapters within the Knowledge portion of the book focus on increasing students' ability to engage with and recall information. Part two in *Small Teaching* tackles the next level in Bloom's Taxonomy, Understanding. The three chapters of part two, Connecting, Practicing, and Self-Explaining, "are designed to help you foster active learning moments in your classroom" (p. 88). Part three is Inspiration, and chapters in this section discuss student motivation and growth outside of the classroom. Each chapter is broken into theories and research (typically from the cognitive psychology or neuroscience fields), practical models and examples of recommended teaching techniques.

Overview of Chapters

Retrieving is the first chapter in the "Knowledge" section. Lang states "one of our first and most important tasks as teachers is to help students develop a rich body of knowledge in our content areas—without doing so, we handicap considerably their ability to engage in cognitive activities like thinking and evaluating and creating" (p. 15). The studies featured in this chapter show that practicing recall deepens connections and makes later remembering easier. According to Lang, students can practice recall through frequent low-stakes quizzing, being sure to use a similar format to what students could expect in a formal evaluation. Librarians are often asked by professors to increase a student's ability to recall information—about the library, about how to use resources, and basic processes of research. For librarians in one shot instruction classes, Lang's strategy of asking closing questions on information that they just learned, or throughout the lesson as review of concepts, may be more realistic.

Predicting, the second chapter, may be a more useful tool to instruction librarians as it is the action of asking students to draw a conclusion before the lesson begins (or at least, during a lesson but before a correct answer is given/determined). Focusing on prediction studies, Lang says that, "when you are forced to make a prediction [...] you are compelled to search around for any possible information you might have that could relate to the subject matter" (p. 49). For students, questions create connections, and even wrong answers can highlight knowledge gaps. Practically, Lang recommends pretesting students or using clicker questions (I found out recently that clickers can be borrowed from our university's Technology Teaching & Learning Center, and I am working on incorporating them into my current library instruction classes. It never hurts to ask and see what your school or students already have on hand!). He also suggests using the prediction-exposure-feedback method: asking students to make and write down a prediction, providing them with the missing information, then asking them to re-evaluate their prediction and explain why they were or were not correct. Lang does emphasize the importance of providing feedback, so that inaccurate predictions can be addressed quickly. As instruction librarians, asking for students to make predictions takes very little additional time in the classroom, and—as shown in this chapter—can increase student's ability to connect ideas.

In section two, “Understanding”, Lang posits that students “lack comprehension [...] because they lack connections” (p. 93). Lang recommends asking students to write down what they know, and what they want to learn, akin to the KWL charts from Donna Ogle in 1986. Lang also advocates for structured notes, a partially completed handout of information that students fill in throughout the course, which “enables you to help them build accurate connections without simply handing them an already completed network and without leaving them to devise the organizational principles of the material on their own” (p. 103). I recently used this in a class discussing the scholarly publishing process. I took the text out of my flow chart, leaving blank lines that students could fill in as we talked about each step. This provided students the overall structure of the peer-review process, while allowing students to take the notes that would help them remember the process later.

The next chapter, titled Practicing, emphasizes the need for instructors to scaffold (without actually using the term) instruction materials in order for students build skills and knowledge over time. Lang discusses “unpacking” assignments to find the skills that students will need to practice in order to do more complicated work. In one example, Lang suggests that a literary analysis paper might have components of writing introductions, creating a thesis, incorporating quotations, using evidence, and crafting conclusions (p. 127). Lang recommends setting aside time in class to practice these skills. The final step in this process is to provide feedback to students on their practice material. Practicing skills is often integrated into library instruction. For example, when practicing searches, a librarian could “unpack” the process by using their sample research question to make keywords, talk through selecting an appropriate database, and stepping through a search while discussing the many filters available.

Self-explaining is the last chapter in the “Understanding” section. When describing self-explaining, Lang states, “the basic premise of [self-explaining] is that learners benefit from explaining out loud (to themselves or others) what they are doing during the completion of the learning task” (p. 138). One strategy Lang promotes to encourage students to self-explain is simply asking students, “Why are you doing that?” Another strategy for self-explaining is peer instruction where, after the instructor poses a question, students partner up and explain their answers to each other. This is followed with a class discussion of the correct answers.

The final three chapters of *Small Teaching*—Motivating, Growing, and Expanding—are in a section that focuses on “Inspiration”, and keeping students motivated in the classroom. Lang discusses infusing a sense of purpose

into the classroom, and helping students focus on how their continued learning will help them achieve their specific goals. Practically, Lang recommends getting to class early to set up activities that encourage students to begin thinking about subject matter (a picture, quote, or physical item that students can wonder about), to connect individually with students, and to show interest in them as a whole person. If an educator has multiple sessions with the same students, establishing this rapport is easier than in a one-shot scenario, where it is more difficult for librarians to form this motivating bond in such a short amount of time. However, it still can be done. I tried this with a composition and rhetoric class on National Puppy Day. I pulled up a series of puppy pictures on the classroom projector, and talked with the students about their pets before class. By the time class got started, everyone was in a better mood, and more comfortable talking to me.

The strategies discussed in the chapter titled Growing are readily implementable for librarians, particularly those who do not see the same students in the classroom on a regular basis. In this chapter, Lang discusses how the language of feedback can affect how students view themselves and their abilities. For example, Lang suggests that saying “you are a talented writer” can be harmful to students, because it equates their inherent abilities with their success. Rather, one might tell a student, “You have obviously worked very hard on your writing, and it shows in this essay” (p. 209). Thus, an instructor can change the student’s inner narrative from “I’m not good enough at this” to “I need to work harder at this”, and separates the person from their product. Librarians can do this, for example, by saying, “I can see you put a lot of working into formatting your citations,” instead of, “You’re really good at MLA,” librarians can praise the student’s diligence and hard work, instead of equating their abilities to an inherent quality. This way, students will continue to work hard, rather than rely on their intrinsic abilities to get their work done right.

Whether you are teaching credit-bearing courses, or one-shot sessions, *Small Teaching* is a book that instruction librarians can appreciate. The chapter layout, which details studies and research backing up the ideas, followed actionable suggestions gives intellectual weight to Lang’s ideas. While some of Lang’s book may not be entirely applicable to all library research and instruction departments, it is still valuable as easily-accessible guidebook for “small” practical tips that facilitate meaningful learning experiences.

References

- Hall, R. (2013). Beyond the job ad: Employers and library instruction. *College & Research Libraries*, 74(1), 24-38.
- Lang, J. (2016). *Small Teaching*. San Francisco : Jossey-Bass.