

Takeaways from Lang's *Small Teaching*

A small teaching approach to student learning may take one or more of these forms:

- ✚ **Brief (5-10 minute) classroom or online learning activities.**
- ✚ **One-time interventions in a course.**
- ✚ **Small modifications in course design or communication with your students** (pp. 7-8).

Part One: Knowledge

The first section of *Small Teaching* explores ways of helping students develop the ability to critically analyze information, as opposed to simply memorizing facts. Lang recommends three classroom practices to accomplish this goal:

Retrieving (Chapter 1)

- ✓ The first chapter provides activities that require students to practice effortful retrieval, drawing from their knowledge of a subject to answer questions in class. Lang points to various studies showing how students are better able to recall information that was part of a previous recall activity.
- ✓ “Put as simply as possible, the retrieval effect means that if you want to retrieve knowledge from your memory, you have to practice retrieving knowledge from your memory” (p. 20).

Predicting (Chapter 2)

- ✓ Lang cites research that demonstrates the effectiveness of predictive activities in helping students recall new information, connect learning to previous knowledge, and identify common misconceptions.
- ✓ “Making predictions about material that you wish to learn increases your ability to understand that material and retrieve it later” (p. 43).

Interleaving (Chapter 3)

- ✓ The third chapter provides models for interleaving instructional topics, or rather the “process of both spacing and mixing learning activities” (p. 68). By continually referring back to previous topics, students are able to better recall previous lessons while drawing connections between the various subjects.
- ✓ 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” (p. 65).

Part Two: Understanding

In this section, Lang offers three small teaching strategies supported by a body of research on human learning suggesting that students learn more effectively by “*doing* things in the classroom rather than merely sitting there passively” (p. 85). Such activities include:

Connecting (Chapter 4)

- ✓ Lang draws from *How Learning Works* to identify the differences between expert and novice understandings of subjects, particularly how novice students might “absorb the knowledge from each lecture in a course without connecting the information to other lectures or recognizing themes that cut across the course” (Ambrose, et al., 2010, p. 46).
- ✓ “For the connections to be meaningful and effective, the students have to form them. Your task is to create an environment that facilitates the formation of those connections rather than simply lecturing at them about connections” (Lang, 2016, p. 98).

Practicing (Chapter 5)

- ✓ Perhaps the most straightforward recommendation in the book, this chapter offers models for instructors to unpack their assessments in order to create *scaffolding* activities, which include opportunities for students to practice and receive feedback from the instructor.
- ✓ “Whatever cognitive skills you are seeking to instill in your students, and that you will be assessing for a grade, the students should have time to practice in class” (p. 117).

Self-Explaining (Chapter 6)

- ✓ This chapter focuses on the cognitive benefits to learners who are asked to explain the thought processes behind their learning activities or assessments. Self-explaining activities can come in the form of written reflection, verbal narration, or peer instruction.
- ✓ “Learners benefit from explaining out loud (to themselves or others) what they are doing during the completion of a learning task” (p. 138).

Part Three: Inspiration

In the final section, Lang focuses on the underlying role mindset and motivation play in student success, particularly the importance of viewing students as “fully realized human beings with emotions, attitudes, and other attributes that intersect with both teaching and learning” (p. 161).

Motivating (Chapter 7)

- ✓ Lang emphasizes the social and emotional factors that can tap into students’ intrinsic motivation to learn. This chapter includes an overview of studies on motivation, as well as specific recommendations on how instructors can create a positive and purposeful learning environment for students.
- ✓ “The best and deepest learning takes place when it is driven by intrinsic motivators—when, in other words (and put simply), the learner cares about the learning itself or the matter to be learned rather than about some reward she will receive at the end of the learning period” (p. 169).

Growing (Chapter 8)

- ✓ Drawing upon Dweck’s (2008) *Mindset*, Lang explains the demonstrated importance of maintaining a *growth* mindset, as opposed to a *fixed* mindset towards learning. This chapter offers models on how to reward growth, communicate for growth, and promote success strategies.
- ✓ “*The view you adapt for yourself* profoundly affects the way you lead your life. It can determine whether you become the person you want to be and whether you accomplish the things you value” (Dweck, 2008, p. 6).

Expanding (Chapter 9)

- ✓ Perhaps the most general chapter in the book, this final chapter explores ways of “expanding your own view of what student learning might look like in your classroom and how you might design and conduct your courses” (p. 223).
- ✓ Pedagogies related to Activity-Based Learning, Service Learning, and Games & Simulations are given brief descriptions. In addition, print and web resources for these pedagogical topics are listed.

Lang, J. (2016). *Small teaching*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.