

Small Teaching

By James M. Lang. (2016), 272 pages, ISBN: 978-1-118-94449-3. \$27.95

Subject: How to be a better teacher

Useful for: Useful for teachers looking to reinvigorate their course without completely overhauling it

Format: Chapters with index. Each chapter includes an overview of a learning theory, followed by supporting research, and examples of the theory in practice.

Reviewer's Comments:

In developing his ideas on small teaching, James Lang was inspired by the success of the Kansas City Royals' focus on small ball. In *Small Teaching*, Lang brings the small ball approach to the classroom. The goal of small teaching is to find ways to shake up a teaching practice without having to completely restructure a course. In contrast to a complete course re-design, small teaching practices can be incorporated class by class. Small teaching suggests micro modifications to existing course content, which can positively affect both classroom dynamic and student learning.

Small Teaching is broken up into 3 Parts: Knowledge, Understanding, and Inspiration. While these 3 Parts make a cohesive whole, each Part, or even each chapter, can be read and appreciated independently. In backing up his strategies, the author relies heavily on *Make it Stick: The Science of Successful Learning* (Brown, Roedger, and McDaniel, 2014), *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Bain, 2004), and *How Learning Works: 7 Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, and Norman, 2010). Each of these three books is a rich resources for instructors. Lang has taken the concepts covered in these leading titles, distilled them, and applied them to his small teaching approach.

Part I, Knowledge, begins by discussing an unfortunate reality of Blooms taxonomy – because knowledge is relegated to the bottom of the taxonomic pyramid, there is a tendency in higher education courses not to strive for the acquisition of knowledge. However, Lang notes, that the process of learning new facts is intertwined with the building up of mental structures. If learning taxonomies must be viewed as a pyramid, facts are not just the foundation of the pyramid, they are the bricks of which the pyramid is built. Therefore, the foundational first part of Small Teaching is devoted to 3 concepts which can be leveraged to promote mastery of knowledge: retrieval, predicting, and interleaving.

While Part I began with an in-depth justification for the need for acquiring knowledge, in Part II, Understanding, Lang assumes that the values of understanding and problem solving are already recognized in most classrooms. However, Lang cautions that 43% of instructors who use a flipped class room to foster problem-solving see no increase in learning from this approach. Lang then pitches the idea that his 3 small ball approaches to fostering understanding (connecting, practicing, and self-explanation) will improve student learning in any classroom setting.

Part III of the book focuses on inspiration. The 3 chapters of Part III (Motivating, Growing, and Expanding) discuss both ideas for inspiring students and ideas for inspiring instructors. It is in his discussion of inspiration that Lang finally address the idea of big teaching. Lang concedes that sometimes big changes to course content can be effective in motivating instructors and students. However, even here he tempers his big teaching talk with plenty of small teaching tips.

Small Teaching is a must read for anyone looking to make small changes in the classroom. Spending just 20 minutes with Lang and his small teaching ideas will provide strategies that will be immediately implementable and have the potential to reinvigorate a class.

Reviewed by: Stacia Stein, Yale Law School, in 2018.