

BOOK REVIEW

Darby, F., & Lang J. M. (2019). *Small teaching online: Applying learning science in online classes.*

Reviewed by **Edina Kovacs***

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Nowadays more and more universities and colleges offer online classes to their students. In the past few years nearly 6.3 million students have taken at least one online course in a semester (Seaman, Allen, & Seamen, 2018.). However, attending an online course is a big challenge for either the student, the designer of the course and the university. The small teaching approach could help all teachers to achieve success in designing an online course and students to participate successfully in the online space.

The authors of the book are Flower Darby and James M. Lang. Darby is an instructional designer with considerable experience in the field: she has taught English, Educational Technology and Instructional Design at Northern Arizona University for 22 years and has supported several institutes by creating both blended and online courses. James M. Lang is a Professor of English with wide experience in learning and education. He has published five books on this field and writes a monthly column on the topic in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Lang's earlier work, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* (Lang, 2016), was published in 2016 and has deservedly become famous for its methods in the field of effective learning and teaching, although it contains less information about the nature, support and opportunities of online environments. *Small Teaching Online* is based on this earlier work and provides a methodological guide about how to achieve great results with small changes in all areas of online education: for the experienced online instructional designer, the curriculum designer, or the beginner who has just fallen on online learning platforms. This book contains all the principles available in the previous book, however, the authors have developed new models and principles to guide the reader in the online learning environment effectively. Also, they have built the UDL (Universal Design for Learning) principles into the earlier ones, which are essential for creating an online curriculum.

The book is structured in three main parts: Part 1 Designing for Learning, Part 2 Teaching Humans and Part 3 Motivating Online Students. The introduction to the theoretical foundations, the overview of current research and the Introduction can be linked to the original author of *Small Teaching*. The adaptation of the small teaching methodology to an online environment

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can be attributed to the instructional designer Flower, who has extensive experience in designing and teaching MOOCs.

All three parts and all the chapters follow a regular structure: *Introduction, Theory, Models and Principles, Quick Tips* and *Conclusion*. In every chapter the authors outline four or five detailed models of how teachers could build the small teaching approach into their online courses and teaching practice. The principles part aim at covering all possible small teaching strategies related to the topic of the chapter. After each chapter we can find a *Quick Tips* section with small, easily adaptable ideas to support the implementation of this approach to everyday classes. The conclusion offers a final reflection on the main objectives and the theory of the chapter.

The Part 1 (Designing for Learning) includes three chapters which focus on the design and subject of online classes. The authors draw attention to the importance of the backward design method, i.e. the attitude that we need to know the goal (what we want to achieve and what we want to teach) of a particular course first. The term *ending understanding* is used for this attitude. Chapter 1 (Surfacing Backward Design) identifies three main questions for this: Where do we want to go? How will we know if we have arrived there? What will help us get there? Then, a number of practical tips help educators in both online and blended educational situations. For example, preparing for the final assessment in the first week, or even such small steps as explaining which subtasks are mandatory in a short video.

Chapter 2 introduces the importance of engagement in teaching. The authors emphasize the importance of experiencing small success in the learning process without which most students would not have sufficient motivation to invest energy in completing the course. This is especially relevant for MOOC courses where there are a lot of students and very little personal connection to encourage them. For such cases, small teaching approaches, such as breaking down complex tasks into small units, may increase motivation as well as eliminate early mistakes. With just a little change we can also make a huge difference in student performance and course satisfaction.

Another important element that the authors underline is dynamic content management and CR type release management: students should only encounter certain content elements once they have mastered the previous parts of the course. Modern learning management systems are maximally suitable for this approach. With its help learning paths can be adjusted to students' level of knowledge. The authors advise guiding online student learning by FAQ-type posts and answering the most frequently asked questions on the forums in video form.

Ending Part 1, Chapter 3 (Using Media and Technology Tools) summarizes all the principles to be considered when editing the curriculum in LMSs. It also draws attention to constructing a unity of multimedia and text, and the role of tests. Finding the right tool for a given task is another point the authors highlight. Although there are plenty of online programs and options, it is the teacher's task to find the one that best helps the acquisition of the curriculum, be it a test or an online collaboration tool. The authors also recall the goal-oriented curriculum editing discussed in the first chapter and summarize the main requirements of online curricula: curriculum shouldn't be text heavy, it should contain short formal and informal videos as well as further links to existing sources.

Part 2 (Teaching Humans) focuses not on the curriculum but the learner. The authors present techniques which can both motivate students and build communities. Chapter 4 describes theories and models for building communities in the online space. The online



introduction of the teachers is another important factor. It can help students feel the class-experience online. The chapter offers various advice on how to be present online effectively. In an online class, students need the teacher's attention as often as possible. There is no need to be available 24/7, however, the teacher needs to monitor the questions on the online forums and chat rooms frequently. To build an online community, teachers should develop students' cultural awareness, consider their cultural experiences and implement the principle of *social inclusion*.

Chapter 5 investigates the problem of the lack of feedback in online classes. The authors discuss the common problem of students receiving no targeted feedback about getting a certain amount of points for a task or a grade for a paper. Without such feedback students cannot improve their performance. Therefore, the authors offer some practical advice on feedback giving. For instance, the instructor may create real time tests, which evaluate students' answers automatically. Other types of assessment have two requirements: making sure students get feedback and they receive it in a friendly, timely way. Online media tools can create virtual office hours when teachers may provide feedback for students in a synchronous way.

In Chapter 6 we can find various models and principles that foster student persistence on online courses to avoid the usually high attrition rates. A flexible learning environment can be of an advantage, but in many cases it does not support attendance during the semester. However, with a little support we could encourage our students to participate in the course, e.g. by personalized emails at strategic points, using a commitment plan or gamification. Such small tasks may help students achieve success and develop confidence for more complex ones.

Finally, Part 3 contains theories and models for motivating online students. Chapter 7 presents those principles that support student autonomy online. We should let students be independent, which may help achieve the course goals, too. By offering the multiple topic selection option, or letting students annotate the curriculum we can improve their critical thinking and motivate them. Individual information can't help us solve a complex problem.

Then in Chapter 8 the authors describe models that make a connection between the online curriculum and students' prior knowledge in order to deepen knowledge about the subject. The chapter shows several online opportunities to support it, for example mind map tools, concept map tools, etc. In the last chapter the authors focus on the content creators, i.e. us. They summarize various tips for how we can become better online instructors, how we can improve the quality of our online courses. For example, it is essential to participate in an online course before we create one so that we could build our experience into the online curriculum. They also emphasize gradation: we shouldn't try all models and principles at once but try only one or two techniques. If they worked, we can go on to another one, thus eventually revolutionizing our previous teaching methodology.

In conclusion, this book is a welcome practical help for all the teachers around the world. I recommend it to any educator who is involved in creating online courses and teaching in an online environment, whether they are experienced or novice colleagues. Among the detailed and practical models, principles and tips, everyone will find information that they could use on their courses and improve the quality of the content and methodology of their online curriculum.



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