

**Inspiring Incremental Innovations:
A Review of *Small Teaching*
by James M. Lang**

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Abstract

A review of the second edition of *Small Teaching* by James M. Lang concludes that this title is highly recommended. The term *small teaching* refers to “an approach that seeks to spark positive change in higher education through small but powerful modifications to our course design and teaching practices” (Lang, 2021, p. 4). Educators of all types will find this book helpful and inspiring.

Keywords: small teaching, pedagogies, higher education

Inspiring Incremental Innovations: A Review of *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning, Second Edition* by James M. Lang

Do you want some simple, incremental strategies to make your class even better than it already is? Do you want to know how to use the first five minutes and the last ten minutes of class more effectively? Do you want to know what a *minute thesis* is and how to use it in class? Anyone who takes the time to read *Small Teaching* by James M. Lang will be a better teacher for having read it. Lang also makes his readers better learners. He does this using what he calls *small teaching*. What Lang (2021) means by *small teaching* is “an approach that seeks to spark positive change in higher education through small but powerful modifications to our course design and teaching practices” (p. 4). In other words, this book is not about large scale changes like completely rewriting the syllabus and overhauling your curriculum. Instead, Lang discusses strategies that are more like tweaks and

nudges over time. These small changes can make a huge difference for both professors and students. *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning, Second Edition* by James M. Lang is a goldmine of teaching strategies and tips that are updated from the first edition, based on scientific evidence, and widely applicable in a variety of contexts.

The second edition of *Small Teaching* has some important changes from the first edition. Lang has included material about teaching online and commentary about teaching and learning during the pandemic. He has some handy tips on how to use course management software for maximum impact. The first edition’s chapter titled *Self-Explaining* (the practice of learners talking to themselves about learning as it’s happening) has been expanded and generalized to *Explaining* in the newer edition. The biggest change in the new edition is that Lang has added some valuable insights on how a sense of belonging can impact student learning. The chapter titled *Growing* in the first edition has been replaced by the chapter titled *Belonging* in the second edition.

Here is the outline of the second edition:

Chapter 1: Predicting	Chapter 4: Connecting	Chapter 7: Belonging
Chapter 2: Retrieving	Chapter 5: Practicing	Chapter 8: Motivating
Chapter 3: Interleaving	Chapter 6: Explaining	Chapter 9: Learning

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Each chapter opens with an introduction and continues with a section called *In Theory*. Lang then discusses models, explores principles, and offers a collection of *Small Teaching Quick Tips* before a brief conclusion. The *Small Teaching Quick Tips* section of each chapter is especially worthy of attention and re-reading, because that section contains the suggestions for classroom activities.

James Lang inspires confidence that his ideas will work in real classrooms because he grounds all of his small teaching strategies in scientific evidence and in the principles of learning theory. Lang tested these principles in his own classes and thoroughly reviewed the literature on how people learn. *Interleaving* is an example of one of these evidence based strategies. *Interleaving* means “(a) spacing out learning sessions out over time; and (b) mixing up your practice of the skills that you want to develop” (Lang, 2021, p. 65). The strategy of interleaving indicates that cramming for a test is not the best way to promote long term learning and retention of material. Some of the science and data that demonstrate why interleaving is important comes from Benedict Carey’s book *How We Learn: The Surprising Truth about Where, When, and Why It Happens* (2014). Carey presents the studies proving the benefits of spreading out practice sessions over time. As he explains:

In one previous experiment, Bjork and T.K.

Landauer had students try to memorize a list of fifty words. Some of the names were presented for study, then tested several times in succession; other names were presented once and tested, but the test came *after* the study session had been interrupted (the students were given other items to study during the interruption). (Carey, 2014, p. 157)

The students who did the interrupted study sessions performed better, so Bjork and Landauer’s experiment demonstrated the benefits of interleaving. One of Lang’s (2021) tips for encouraging interleaving is to include questions on quizzes and exams that require students to draw on material previously covered and pull that older content from their memory banks. Not only are these ideas grounded in science, but they are also exceptionally practical and relevant in a variety of situations.

The ideas in this book are powerful because they are so easily applicable in a wide range of contexts. Teachers of all experience levels—from beginners to old pros—can implement Lang’s strategies. Although Lang writes primarily for an audience of col-

lege professors, many of these ideas could apply to high school teachers and some even to kindergarten teachers. These strategies do not require funding or waiting for the start of a new semester. Both in his book and in an essay he wrote for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Lang discusses how to use the first five minutes of class most effectively, which is one of his easily applicable strategies. Using the first five minutes for predicting is one of his suggestions. He also offers “4 quick ways to shift students’ attention from life’s distractions to your course content” (Lang, 2016, p. 1). Four things to do in the first few minutes of class are:

1. Open with a question or two.
2. Ask, “What did we learn last time?”
3. Reactivate what they learned in previous courses.
4. Write it down.

Furthermore, Mary Taylor Huber (2018) makes the case in her review of the first edition of *Small Teaching* that Lang’s ideas would be applicable to science teachers participating in the Science Education Initiative (SEI). Huber (2018) writes:

Small Teaching is distinctive in a number of ways. First, there’s the author’s voice: engaging and personal, telling tales from his own teaching life and recommending only activities that he has tried out or observed himself. Second is Lang’s deft handling of the research literature underlying these activities. Instead of simple generalizations, stories about important experiments introduce the theories that scholars have offered to explain the results, while exceptions and qualifications give readers a sense of the conversation among specialists in each domain. (p. 10)

In Huber’s review, she concludes that this is a great book for educators.

Small Teaching offers a lot to educators and is mostly engaging, but it is not the latest fiction thriller or beach read. That means that it does have a few places where it is a little dry and boring. The sections discussing learning theories and scientific studies provide the evidence to back up Lang’s practical suggestions, but some of those parts are dull and hard to follow. However, entertainment is not Lang’s objective. Helping teachers grow and improve is his objective, and he certainly meets that goal.

The second edition of *Small Teaching* is a treasure trove of tactics to raise teaching and learning to a higher level. This book is greatly recommended because it's improved from the first edition, evidence based, and easy to implement. Making college classes excellent does not have to be a massive, dramatic un-

dertaking involving hours upon hours of committee meetings. Instead, minor tweaks and nudges can radically improve outcomes for students and professors. Lang comes across in *Small Teaching* as a wise mentor, and all types of instructors can benefit from his mentorship and suggestions.

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Author's Note

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