

In the Classroom 28
Reviewing the New Book:
Small Teaching Online

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thank you ever so much for joining me on this podcast. I recognize the fact that you could be listening to other podcasts and doing other things, but you are hanging out with me. Today, I think I have a really good show lined up for you. We are going to explore this new book that just came out in June called *Small Teaching Online*. Now, I have to be honest, I haven't read *Small Teaching* yet but it's on my list to read but I was really interested in *Online*. The reason that I'm interested in this, is I've been listening to podcast talk about this new book over the past month.

I wanted to get it in my hands and read it to see what I can learn. Now, what I have figured out is this is the book that honestly I would have written on online instruction if I had a chance because it's almost all of it is information and advice that I have given to faculty at one time or another. The actual name of the book is *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes*. It's written by Flower Darby and James Lang. Now, James Lang, he was the one who wrote *Small Teaching*, which I have heard nothing but good remarks about that book for a long time, and as I noted, I need to pick it up and actually read it myself.

How this thing came to be written is, Flower Darby approached James Lang because she was excited about the whole small teaching idea and asked that if they could write a book together. Now, James Lang, he is familiar with the small teaching concepts, but he's not that experienced in online learning. Where Flower Darby has spent a lot of time in the online classrooms, bringing that experience to the book. A lot of the examples that you see in the book have come from Flower Darby.

What I think about the book, I think this book if online faculty would read this book, it would elevate online courses from what are typically correspondence courses to those with substantive human interaction. This book is a very quick easy read. It's 252 pages, it spans nine chapters and it's arranged in three parts. Designing for learning, teaching humans and motivating online students and instructors, so those are the three parts. In the book, Flower Darby includes lots and lots of excellent examples of how you can apply these small teaching principles in an online environment.

These are certainly ideas that any online instructor can put into practice and make their class better almost immediately. When you read this book and they mentioned right up front that they're influenced a lot by Universal Design for Learning or UDL and also active learning, and they tried to apply those principles throughout the different sections of the book but also throughout their classes. In my show notes, I have included links to previous episodes where I talk about Universal Design for Learning and those are episodes 8, 9 and 10.

If you get a chance to go check those out, please do so. What can you expect in each chapter? Each chapter is modeled the same way that when you get in there you have this consistency that you will appreciate because each chapter has an introduction where they introduce the topic. They go into the theories, so the science behind what they're talking about and kind of explain that. They also present models that you can examine and principles that you can consider while you are building your courses. Towards the end of the chapter, you have *Small Teaching Online* quick tips and finally a conclusion.

Now, when they wrote the chapters, there's a lot of redundancy that as you're reading the chapter they bring up the topics, they expound on the topics, then they reiterate to topics and summarize the topic. You see this throughout the book. Personally, I thought this kind of lengthened the book a little bit, but I think also the summary points are pretty nice. Let's get into the book itself and the first thing that I want to do is, actually, I want to read a series of paragraphs. The first two pages on the introduction of the book and because I thought it was a really nice introduction and it talks about this idea of being in the online classroom and why we need to get this right.

Let's get into this so this is from the introduction of *Small Teaching Online*. Think back to when you were a brand new college student. Imagine it's the first day of the fall term, you're excited, nervous, maybe even a bit overwhelmed at the thought of your class schedule. You're not sure what to expect or whether you have what it takes to succeed. Your printed schedule lists the building number but since you're new to this college you don't know which buildings are where. You consult your creased campus map, looking for landmarks, building names, anything to help you determine whether you're still going the right way.

You consider asking somebody for direction, but everyone around you seems sure of themselves of where they're going. Clearly, you're the only person on this campus who doesn't know how to get to class. Suddenly, your building appears as you round the next corner. Relieved, with a little time to spare, you stride up to the door and give it a good strong pull. The door doesn't budge. Now you're frustrated as well as stressed. Is this college preventing students from getting to class. As a last-ditch effort, you walk around the perimeter of the building, looking for other ways to enter.

Almost predictably, the last door you try, opens. At last, your inside. You find the classroom listed on the schedule but what you see inside only adds to your mounting despair. Almost predictably, the lights are out and no one is in the room. The desks are tumbled crazily on top of each other with no rhyme or reason. It is not clear where you're supposed to sit or what you're supposed to do. Now you're getting annoyed, having been so keyed up about the first day of class, this is more than anti-climatic.

It's defeating, demotivating, downright obstructive. You muster up a renewed sense of determination, flip up the light switch and spot a pile of papers on a table in one corner of the room. Thinking maybe there are instructions or some notice of a room change, you walk over and take a small packet. It's the class syllabus, just left there for students to find and read on their own. Skimming through the pages, you glimpse information about the textbook, assignments and testing dates but not much else. You'd like to get

a better sense of what this class will be like, what your instructor will be like, but there's not much to go on.

Disheartened, you trudge out the door. Is this class even happening? If so, how are you supposed to learn anything when so many barriers have been raised, when there is so little support from anyone? Then they start talking about online courses and this is typically what students feel like in online courses that are not well designed. Let's dive into the rest of the book. The first major section talks about designing for learning. What the authors point out is that most online instructors have never taken an online course. They have never received instruction on how to teach an online course.

They're expected to build an online course and teach it, but they really don't know the best principles on how to do this. That's why I think this book would be wonderful in online instructor's hands. As we've figured out over time, that there are learning strategies that are certainly better than others, that are more effective, that use the science of the brain and how we learn, and if we apply those principles, students learn better. This book features those type of strategies.

In this first section, there's three chapters and these three chapters talk about really designing the course. The first chapter talks about backward design principles and basically this is starting with the objectives. When you start designing with the objectives, you start getting rid of a lot of the fluff. This is really the basics of instructional design, that you're learning. You want to answer three questions, where do we want to go? How will we know if we have arrived, and what will we need to get there? I've taken instruction in instructional systems design and this really comes out to be, first, where do we want to go?

That is your objective and it's important to have clear objectives when you're building out a course. Next, how will we know if we have arrived? This is talking about assessment and then finally, what will we need to get there? This is about the content or the vehicle to get there. I've seen a lot of instruction that is actually built backwards, that they're building the content, but they don't know what they're going to measure at the end of the day.

This idea of instructional design is, really, you build your assessments before you provide your content, and those assessments measure the objective. Your content should help them meet those assessments. Are you teaching to the test? Absolutely, you're not teaching the test, you're teaching to the test. When you create good objectives and assessments to measure it, this will help students get there. One of the things they stress throughout the book was keeping this idea of the end in mind, that when most often students have no idea, they see the objectives in the syllabus but that's the last time that they're mentioned.

By keeping the objectives up front and in their face and constantly discussing them and referring to them, it helps to give the course meaning. Other things that they're talking about designing the course is managing the cognitive load, that you should chunk information, you should scaffold the information and do incremental release of the information, so that you do not overwhelm students. That new information builds on previous information.

One of the things that they talk about is this idea of mastery of information, that before students get new information that they have demonstrated mastery of previous information. These things all definitely come into play using technology as a way to do this. Now, naturally for an online course, you're using a lot of technology, but any new technology that you're introducing should serve the purpose of the objective, not just for the sake of using technology. That's a basic for instructional designer, instructional technology is, what's the objective and does this piece of technology help or hinder in getting to that objective? Also in this section, they talk a lot about how to use video, and video is a great way of humanizing the course. I've also talked about this in previous podcast episodes, and I'll put that into the show notes.

The next section that they have in the book is called teaching humans, that this is not about building a correspondence course. That an online course should be as much of a community as a face-to-face course. In this, they talk about the community of inquiry, where you are focusing on three different elements, the cognitive presence, the social presence, and the teaching presence. The social presence is the ability of participants to project their individual personalities in order to identify and communicate with the community and develop interpersonal relationships. This is coming from Garrison.

The cognitive presence is the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse. Then finally teaching presence is the design, facilitation and direction of the social and cognitive processes for the purpose of realizing the relevant learning outcomes. Each of these has a play that is important and for all this to work, it requires dialogue, that students must be able to have conversation with the content, with their fellow students and with the instructor. Part of the book that they emphasize over and over is this idea of reflection, that students should reflect on the objectives, they should reflect on how the content is related to the objective and reflecting on how the activity or the assessment also ties back to the objective.

In order for this all to be successful, instructors need to be present in the course. I cannot tell you how many online courses I have had where instructors basically disappeared and would show up every couple of weeks. That is not a good online course. It's a correspondence course. I've done correspondence courses also. Did an English class all by correspondence, that was fascinating, but that instructor was actually present, she gave feedback quite well. Instructors as part of their teaching presence, it's important that they go in and provide timely and meaningful feedback, one of the quotes that I pulled from the book was, "Would you rather attend a professional conference or complete a self-paced online professional development module?"

Most of us would like to go to a professional conference because of that human interaction. Darby and Lang, they provide a lot of different ideas that you could use to help increase this idea of humanism into your class to make it that there's real people involved in the class and make it alive. Video happens to be a very powerful tool for doing this, and so they provide ideas for increased persistence and success in the online course, strategies that you should put into play to keep students definitely involved.

These are certainly things that I'm going to be looking at, I have two online courses I'm teaching this fall, and so I'm going to go back to this book and pull out ideas, things that I'm going to want to try for my courses. The last section talks about motivating online students, that the reality is, an online course is probably not as exciting as a face-to-face course. As an instructor, a lot of instructors don't feel the same energy, students don't feel this energy, but I'm going to let you know that I've had some pretty exciting online courses that I've been part of, either as an instructor or as a student.

It really comes down to how you design your course. A lot of the strategies are tied back to this UDL, Universal Design for Learning. A couple of concepts that they talked about that I thought were interesting, one was on specification grades and spec grading is basically all or nothing grading. I compare it to competency-based instruction, where the student either is successful in the task or is not, and if they're not, you provide feedback, you kick it back, you have them redo it until they are successful. That they can do it without supervision and I'm a fan of that type of grading.

One of the other things that's talked about consistently through the book is this idea of "why?" That they want students to reflect why they're doing what they're doing, how does it help them meet that objective, and they also want them to turn into a lifelong learners by creating their own personal learning network, where they can add meaning to the class by pulling in resources external to the class and building their own network. That they're really aiming for lifelong learning.

A lot of great ideas in this book, it's well researched, there's a lot of good notes throughout the book, a lot of references that they tied back to either articles, journal articles or books, where they are pulling information from. It certainly has fattened up my must-read list and there is countless examples of how to implement each of these different elements into your class. Once again, I plan to go back to this book to mine it for ideas that I'm going to use in my upcoming classes. I think this is a book that if you're an online instructor, you definitely need to get it into your hands and read it. I am confident that it will improve your online instruction. With that, I really appreciate you hanging out with me and before I let you go, I'm going to make a plug for my own book.