

FLOWER DARBY
with JAMES M. LANG

small
**TEACHING
ONLINE**

Applying Learning Science
in Online Classes

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“For anyone teaching online—novice or seasoned—*Small Teaching Online* is a must-read! Darby expertly combines educational research and her expertise as an instructional designer to suggest practical solutions to challenges faced in the online environment in bite-sized chunks that don’t overwhelm.”

—Mel Young, Teaching and Learning Innovation Hub,
Cambrian College, Blogger, disruptivepedagogy.ca

“Darby and Lang extend the powerful *Small Teaching* paradigm successfully to the online teaching and learning environment. Faculty who are new to online teaching are especially well-served with this superb introduction to research-based incremental strategies.”

—Victoria Mondelli, Founding Director, Teaching for Learning
Center, University of Missouri

An unexpected delight! Flower brightens the literature she cites with her experiences and experiments in her own online classes—what she tried, what worked well and what didn’t, and how she improved on less-than-perfect results. You feel like you’re getting to know her and finding a new friend and mentor.

—Linda B. Nilson, Director Emeritus, Office of Teaching
Effectiveness and Innovation, Clemson University

Any professor would find this book useful, whether you teach entirely online, in a flipped classroom, or just want your course website to be more than a folder of readings. Flower Darby mixes her rich experience as a teacher and learner with a careful review of the most current literature to bring us a work that’s deep with context and immediately applicable.

—Joseph M. Murphy, Director of the Center for Innovative
Pedagogy, Kenyon College.

In his book *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*, Jim Lang provided instructors with practical, simple, and easy strategies for maximizing student learning and success. Flower Darby and Lang now offer *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes*, an equally important book for those who strive to create engaged learning experiences for students in an online environment. This will be really helpful to many instructors, whether teaching online or face-to-face or in a hybrid format. Indeed, anyone who cares about student learning and student success in the 21st century would benefit from implementing the lessons presented in this book.

—Dr. Jerry Daday, Executive Associate Dean, Institute for Engaged Learning, Professor of Sociology, IUPUI

The work of teaching is hard. Coupled with the often-uncharted paths involved in teaching online, it can feel downright discouraging. Enter *Small Teaching Online*. It is a practical guide to help us design our online classes to support learning, be more experimental in our pedagogy, give effective feedback, help students persist, and create more authentic connections. This book helps us see how we can continue to iterate one small step at a time toward excellence in online teaching.

—Bonni Stachowiak, director, Institute for Faculty Development, Vanguard University; host, Teaching in Higher Ed podcast

“What faculty members teaching online need most of all are research-based, but very practical, strategies they can use in their online learning environments tomorrow. Darby and Lang’s book, chocked full of great ideas that faculty can use right away, is just the resource we have all been looking for.”

—Larry Gallagher, former Director of Faculty Professional Development at Northern Arizona University

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Flower Darby
James M. Lang

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*For Emerald, Piccadilly, and Britannia, for whom I learned to
teach online so I could be home when they were small.*

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About the Authors

Flower Darby is a senior instructional designer and adjunct faculty member at Northern Arizona University, where she has taught for over 22 years. She is also adjunct online faculty for Estrella Mountain Community College. She's taught over 75 online classes to more than 2,000 online students. Darby also teaches in-person and blended courses in a range of subjects: English literature, composition, technology, education, dance, and fitness. She regularly writes and presents nationally and internationally on excellence in teaching and learning design. She is zealous in her promotion of student success through effective classroom practice, whether the classroom is physical or online. Her bachelor's and master's degrees are from Northern Arizona University in English literature.

James M. Lang is a professor of English and the director of the D'Amour Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts. He is the author of five books, the most recent of which are *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* (Jossey-Bass, 2016), *Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty* (Harvard University Press, 2013), and *On Course: A Week-by-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching* (Harvard UP, 2008). Lang writes a monthly column on teaching and learning for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*; his work has been appearing in the *Chronicle* since 1999. His book reviews and public scholarship on higher education have appeared in a wide variety of newspapers and magazines, including the *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Time*.

Lang edits a new series of books on teaching and learning in higher education for West Virginia University Press; he co-edited the second book in the series, *Teaching the Literature Survey Course: New Strategies for College Faculty* (2018). He has conducted workshops on teaching for faculty at more than a hundred colleges or universities in the United States and abroad, and consulted for the United Nations on the development of teaching materials in ethics and integrity for college faculty. In September 2016 he received a Fulbright Specialist grant to work with three universities in Colombia on the creation of a MOOC (massive open online course) on teaching and learning in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) education. He has a BA in English and Philosophy from the University of Notre Dame, an MA in English from St. Louis University, and a PhD in English from Northwestern University.

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And of course, finally, Tim, my husband, to whom you will see multiple references in this book because of how involved he has been in the process. Tim, who tirelessly engaged in hours and hours of discussion of the concepts in this book, who helped to generate the most insightful ideas you will find here, who is the best instructional designer I know, who's the wisest and most patient faculty support professional, and who's an ideal case study of what today's online students are experiencing since he himself is halfway through an online graduate program. Not to mention Tim's incredible support at home, taking on the vast majority of parenting and domestic duties while I wrote, never complaining, just quietly serving the needs of the family and home, freeing me up to do this work. Though it's a cliché, it rings true: Words can't express my gratitude. So I'll conclude with a simple, yet inadequate, thank you. For everything.

Flower Darby
Flagstaff, AZ

Introduction: 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 are 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 are 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 are still going the right way. You consider asking someone for directions, but everyone around you seems sure of themselves and of where they are 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 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? In 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 you're 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's 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 anticlimactic. It's defeating. Demotivating. Downright obstructive.

You muster up a renewed sense of determination, flip 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?

THE CHALLENGE OF ONLINE COURSES

The scene we've painted here seems so unlikely that it might be difficult to imagine it actually happening in the real world. We all know from experience that the first day of a college semester buzzes with excitement, energy, and nervous tension. Instructors and students gather in classrooms to conduct a ritualized first-day dance of putting faces to names, reviewing the syllabus and class expectations, forming impressions of each other, and making initial connections.

But the bleak scenario we've presented here represents an all-too-common version of what our online students experience. If anything, students in online classes can be even more keyed up than they are in our onsite classes, especially since so many of them are returning to school after an absence. And that's not the only cause of anxiety: Today's students face additional challenges

based solely on their circumstances. What we've typically thought of as being a 'non-traditional' student is quickly becoming the new normal, according to Alexandria Walton Radford, head of RTI International, a think tank in North Carolina. In a September 2018 interview with Elissa Nadworny of National Public Radio, Radford stated that almost three-quarters of today's college students have one of the following characteristics: they've delayed enrollment in higher education, they have a child or other dependent, they're enrolled in school part-time, they work full-time, or they are a single caregiver. About a third of today's students have two or three of these challenging circumstances to manage (Nadworny and Deppenbrock, 2018).

These factors are the very reason many of our online students choose to take college classes online. They need a flexible option that accommodates their work and family obligations. But juggling so many concerns adds to the uncertainty of taking an online class. It's easy to become overwhelmed.

For example, many new online students struggle even to find the log-in page for the Learning Management System (LMS). If they find the site, they might not know their user ID and password. If they find and call the help desk number, they may be greeted by an overworked, stressed-out employee who might not provide patient and friendly support. All of this effort is required just to get in the door of an online program. Even after they successfully log in to the LMS, newer students may not know how to get into the virtual classroom. It is not necessarily self-evident that students should click the link or the tile with the often-abbreviated class name and confusing session code.

Once online students finally get into their class, it is frequently unclear what they should do first. When college students walk into a physical classroom, they know the norms and routines. Sociologist Jay Howard, the author of *Discussion in the College Classroom*, points out that students in physical classrooms follow basic behavioral norms that they have internalized from many years of

classroom education. They sit in a student desk, face front, and wait for the instructor to come in and begin the class session. “On the first day of class,” he writes, “have you ever arrived in your assigned room to find a student seated at the professor’s desk or standing behind the podium ready to lead the class session?” (Howard, 2015, p. 9). If you haven’t, it’s because your students are well familiarized to the norms of classroom education. They govern where students sit, how they interact with you and one another, and many other aspects of the learning experience.

Many of these familiar educational norms do not operate in an online class. Instructors and other students are not physically present to help guide or shape an online student’s behavior. They’re being guided by words on a screen instead of by the fully embodied humans they’re used to seeing in their courses. They might not be aware of how to start engaging with the course content. If they’re new to taking online classes, they might stumble over seemingly simple tasks like posting to a discussion board or taking an online quiz or checking their status in the gradebook – and there’s no one there in real-time to ask for help.

Because online courses do not provide these kinds of basic social supports, we can hardly blame our online students for what might look to us like poor, disengaged performance. We do little to set them up for success even from the very first point of access. Just as in our imaginary first-day scenario, the system barriers and the lack of social support frustrates, demotivates, and discourages our online learners. Many students are tempted to give up altogether.

And, quite frankly, so are many faculty.

THE GROWTH OF ONLINE LEARNING

Online courses are not going away. *Grade Increase: Tracking Distance Education in the United States* reported that distance enrollments

increased for the fourteenth year in a row, with 6.3 million students taking at least one online course, at a rate higher than enrollments have grown for the past several years (Seaman, Allen, and Seaman, 2018). The authors further indicate that “there are now fewer students studying on campus than at any point since 2012” (p. 26). Our students are moving away from traditional on-campus classes and moving toward online classes.

This growth of online courses poses a new challenge for higher education: preparing faculty to teach effectively in this format. A quick Google search on this topic reveals a wealth of resources to help faculty learn to teach online. This highlights the *newness* of online teaching. Many online instructors have not taken many online classes as students. This is certain to change over time. But at this point, most faculty teaching online have not experienced “the apprenticeship of observation,” a phrase first coined in 1975 by Dan Lortie. The 2002 second edition of his book *Schoolteacher* describes the unique experience found in the teaching profession (Lortie, 2002, p. 61). Lortie argues that new teachers entering physical classrooms have had decades of experience observing professionals on the job. These observations typically form the basis of our approach to teaching, especially considering the dearth of faculty preparation programs for teaching in general.

But most of us don’t bring any prior experience with online classes. We can’t fall back on the apprenticeship of observation. “Distance educators lack a model or benchmark for online teaching because many of them have not taken online courses as students,” note a team of researchers in a recent article on how faculty learn to teach online (Schmidt, Tschida, and Hodge, 2016). If faculty have had experience as online students, it’s limited, not like the years of experience they’ve typically had as students in a physical classroom. This is one reason why we urgently need programs to prepare faculty to be successful in their online teaching.

An October 2018 report from Hanover Research, *Best Practices in Online Faculty Development*, states that institutions should have a focused approach for professional development for online faculty. Just such a concentrated effort is underway at Northern Arizona University (NAU). Over the past several months we have engaged in an extensive review of institutional expectations of online faculty and corresponding support models as we seek to equip our faculty to teach online. Our leadership recognizes that providing this additional support would help many faculty to be more successful in online classes – but online faculty at other institutions might not find themselves in such a supportive environment, and might feel unprepared for their work as online teachers.

One way to address this lack of preparation is to think critically about how we define effective teaching and what makes a good class. In her 2019 book *Thrive Online: A New Approach for College Educators*, Shannon Riggs observes that the format in which a class takes place does not, by default, determine its quality:

[G]ood teaching does not spring naturally from a particular modality. A good course on campus is not good because of the location or traditional brick-and-mortar ambiance. Likewise, a weak online course is not weak because it is delivered via the internet. Good teaching in any learning environment requires careful attention to course design and facilitation. (Riggs, 2019, p. 4)

Helping faculty prepare to design and teach effective – no, excellent – online courses can and should be a primary goal of educational developers and institutional leadership. If we want to successfully grow our online programs, and many colleges and universities do, to meet the growing demand for rigorous and engaging online education, we must attend to the all-important foundational step of developing our faculty and helping them thrive in this relatively new learning environment.

at NAU, and approached him immediately afterward with a proposal: “I want to work with you to write a version of this book for online faculty.” Jim immediately agreed, because at the conclusion of almost every lecture or workshop he gave, someone always asked: “How can I apply small teaching techniques in my online courses?”

The first and primary premise of *Small Teaching* is an extraordinarily simple one: Paying attention to the small, everyday decisions we make in teaching represents our best route to successful learning for our students, in almost any learning environment we can imagine. Jim developed this theory as a result of observing his children play sports, and noticing that, when small bodies were not really capable of extraordinary feats of physical prowess on the field, successful coaches worked with them on small, fundamental skills that had powerful effects.

This argument has resonated with many faculty, who have reported to Jim in workshops that they have been overwhelmed by pressure from their administration to revamp their teaching and their courses according to whatever the latest new educational fad might be. Making these kinds of significant, wholesale changes to your teaching is a time-consuming and intimidating process and can lead to two unhappy outcomes. First, faculty often find that their first effort to make large changes to their teaching does not go well. This might cause them to retreat immediately to their previous habits and stifle the possibility of future innovation. Second, the prospect of making large changes can seem so intimidating that faculty never bother to start, and instead just continue to default to their current practice. The small teaching approach seeks to effect change by giving faculty small, actionable modifications that they can make without having to overhaul their teaching from the ground up.

Many faculty around the world have seen the wisdom of this approach, but the premise is hardly a new one. To the contrary, you

Motivation and *mindset* were the keys to inspiring students, and were covered in the third section of the book, which finished (as this book does) with a chapter aimed at faculty, designed to help them *expand* their pedagogical knowledge and skill base.

APPLYING SMALL TEACHING ONLINE IN MULTIPLE CONTEXTS

Readers will gain the most from their encounter with the small teaching philosophy if they read the original *Small Teaching* and acquaint themselves with these core learning principles, which can help support effective learning in any kind of environment, face-to-face or online. But if you have already read *Small Teaching* (or if you pause here and go read it now), you'll notice a major difference between that book and this one. The chapter topics here do not align precisely with those in the original. You will find all the same learning science principles interwoven throughout this work, but because online teaching has its own special opportunities and challenges, we developed a separate set of principles to guide effective change in online teaching and learning.

Another difference between this book and the original is our reference throughout this text to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles. Although many higher education professionals associate UDL with accessibility for students who have documented disabilities, this is a too-limiting view of the reach of this framework, according to Thomas Tobin and Kirsten Behling, authors of *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education* (2018). Still, many people think about making online content accessible more often than they think about alternative formats and experiences when teaching in person, so we would be remiss if we neglected this important topic.

As we examine small teaching strategies in multiple areas of online classes, we'll seek to expand our understanding of how UDL principles can benefit a diverse student population. "In addition to respecting the ethnic, gender, socioeconomic, and ability-based diversity on our campuses, we can design courses ... that expand the reach and efficacy of higher education" (Tobin and Behling, 2018, p. 1).

And there are many good reasons for doing so, notably that UDL increases all of our learners' ability to engage with our content and demonstrate their knowledge in ways that they might prefer:

UDL is a way of thinking about creating the interactions we have with our learners so that they do not have to ask for special treatment, regardless of the types of barriers they may face – time, connectivity, or disability. (Tobin and Behling, 2018, p. 130)

When we reframe our thinking about how UDL can help all our learners engage and succeed, we see the value of the approach in every course design decision we make, whether teaching online or in person. Thankfully, the Plus-One design model presented by these authors aligns perfectly with the *Small Teaching* approach of making small changes in order to enhance student learning and engagement.

With UDL principles undergirding all of our small teaching suggestions, we divided the learning science principles in this book into three sections, just as you will find in the original *Small Teaching*. Part I of the book focuses on designing online courses. Chapter 1, on backward design, presents an approach to course development that applies in both traditional and online courses. But we still encounter new and experienced faculty who

have not come across this idea, so we wanted to begin the book with a thorough grounding in a fundamentally sound approach to course design. Even if you are an experienced instructor, we hope that you will find it helpful to walk your way through the course design process in this comprehensive way, using small teaching principles to guide you through what can seem like a very intimidating task. From there, Chapters 2 and 3 move into two core challenges that every online instructor will face, both in the design process and throughout the semester: How will I invite my students into the course and get them engaged so they are ready to learn, and what materials and tools will I provide to help my students learn? For both of these challenges, we've provided research and techniques to help you and your students succeed.

In Part II, we consider the human element in online courses. In recent years, an increasing amount of attention has been paid to this aspect of online education; however, it is still the case that many online learning environments could benefit from more effort to welcome and support the people who are in them—including us. A primary strategy to address this concern is to make a deliberate, research-based effort to create a sense of community in our online classes, the topic of Chapter 4. Chapter 5 looks at ways of providing effective feedback, a necessary ingredient for people to learn and grow. In Chapter 6, we acknowledge that a significant concern in online classes is the attrition rate, and we give you theory and strategies to help your students stay present and engaged so they may successfully complete your class. Each of these chapters helps us to nurture and support our students such that they want to be in class and they want to learn.

Part III of the book tackles the complex matter of motivation. Creating and maintaining motivation can be a constant challenge for online faculty. Not only do many students struggle to inspire themselves to work consistently on their online courses, many faculty might face a similar struggle. Lots of people prefer to

teach and learn in person, but for various reasons, they're engaged in online education. Some of the simple supports that naturally occur in onsite classes don't exist in asynchronous online classes. For example, online courses lack a predictable class meeting schedule and the built-in accountability that such a schedule provides. As such, Chapters 7 and 8 focus on helping students sustain their own motivation by developing learner autonomy and by making connections with the material and discovering how course content relates to their future academic and career goals. Both of these approaches have been shown to increase learner motivation; we'll share research and small changes you can make to address this concern. Finally, in Chapter 9 we turn our attention to finding ways of motivating ourselves to continue learning and improving as online faculty.

As you might imagine, we deliberately selected and organized chapter topics with a view to addressing some of the unique challenges presented by online education. No one single book can cover all of the issues and opportunities we face in our online teaching, at least not in any depth. What follows reflects our considered judgment on the topics and strategies that are most likely to have an outsized impact on online student engagement and learning.

Our primary audience for this book is one that grows larger with each passing year: instructors who have experience with face-to-face teaching and are now being asked to develop the knowledge and skills they need to teach online. In other words, we presume some basic familiarity here with teaching at the college level; what we hope to offer in the pages that follow are knowledge and skills that will enable an experienced teacher – even if that experience consists of a few courses taught as a graduate student – to teach their first online courses successfully.

While we have written this book with a special eye toward instructors who are new to online teaching, we hope and expect