

Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning

Reviewed by Wendy TU

DLIFLC-UCR

Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning James M. Lang

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The book *Small Teaching* stemmed from a conviction found in how scoring works in baseball. Hitting grand slams is one way to score. The teams can also score by hitting small balls and advancing from one base to the next, eventually to home plate. The book argues that teaching works similarly. It advocates for little everyday acts that result in fundamental differences in the classroom. Many of us teach a pre-existing curriculum, whether it is commercial textbooks or texts produced by curriculum developers at our institutions. Some of us also team-teach a class of learners according to a predetermined team-teaching schedule. This review mainly focuses on simple 5-10 minute interventions faculty members can make within a

sphere of pedagogy, preset materials, and periods of 50 minutes. The smallest possible increments can start changing teaching and learning positively without an extensive overhaul of course design or curriculum.

The book was written for classroom instructors across disciplines. Here are some highlights for world language instructors.

Part I

Knowledge is about helping learners build a solid knowledge base through adequate first exposure and then retrieving the course content repetitively through mixing and spacing practice to create robust wiring.

1. Prediction-Exposure-Reflection

It might seem out of sequence when we ask learners to use their existing knowledge and skills, prior experiences, and contextual cues to struggle with the new material before we teach it. Yet, corrective re-modeling, i.e., “generating a prediction, detecting one’s error, and correcting oneself, is the very foundation of effective learning.” (Dehaene 2020, p.209)

2. Retrieving

Retrieving specific information from memory in real-time is required of second-language learners. It involves linguistic and cultural competence and referencing a vast amount of background knowledge. Storing massive amounts of information in the brain is a means to an end. Practicing effortful retrieval is a powerful way to strengthen neural pathways in our brains. How do we foster retrieval practice in class? For example,

- In the first minutes of a class session: use the teaching schedule to draw out previous course content.

- In the final minutes of a class session: ask learners to write down one thing they learned from this class session. Draw the information from memory, not from their textbooks or class notes.

3. Blocked Practice versus Spacing and Mixing Practice

Knowledge gained from blocked practice (also known as cramming) lasts a few days.

Blocked practice is an effective way to get things started. However, Spacing and Mixing (learning different components in mixed order, such as integrating language skills) are essential to strengthen memory. Spaced-out retrieval practice needs to be scheduled after a bit of forgetting, over and over again, beyond the original context throughout the course. Keep it small but frequent.

Part II

Understanding is about helping learners connect dots from textbook knowledge to forge new synapses in unfamiliar contexts, expand those neurological connections into neuronal networks and develop a deeper understanding of the real world.

4. Connecting

Making new connections is more complex than retrieving pieces of remembered knowledge, as explained in Part I. For the connections to be long-lasting, learners must devise them in their brains. Lecturing learners about what resonates with us is helpful but fleeting. Our role is to create connectable moments and invite learners to fill the synaptic gaps between disconnected neurons with their epiphanies. How exactly do we develop structured opportunities and ask learners to make connections between our class materials with the world around them? For example, by using prompts and focus questions such as:

- How does something you learned in class today connect to something you have learned before?
- Provide learners with a skeletal mind map and let them slot disconnected details with newfound relationships into a fully developed network.
- How is American English/culture similar to or different from the target language/culture?
- What does this remind you of that you've experienced in your life?
- Identify a film, song, painting, story, or book that somehow manifests an idea from class.
- Connect today's class material to a current event that's in the news right now.

The author concludes the Connecting Chapter with a wallpaper project depicted in George Orwell's novel *A Clergyman's Daughter* from 1935 in which the school children produce a panoramic chart of English history by connecting elements across time and space. The teaching method clashes with parents' expectations at the time but is inspiring even in the digital era.

5. Practicing

- The key is mindful learning. Mindless repetition is not what we are after in this kind of practice.
- When practicing, it is essential to have a meaningful feedback loop: trying, making mistakes, correcting, and trying again. Self-correction, peer-correction, and instructor-correction all have their own merits.
- For a presentation assignment, rehearse the first two minutes of their presentations in class about two weeks before the actual presentations.

6. Explaining

- Ask learners to self-explain what they were doing.

- Ask learners to explain something to other learners. Learners can better help each other understand how to connect disconnects. Both parties gain a deeper understanding.

Part III

Inspiration is about helping everyone grow in an inclusive classroom, especially under the post-failure condition.

7. Belonging

Spotlight the collective strengths, talents, and life experience individual learners bring to the table. Single out every learner for good personal work. Praise learners for their excellent efforts. Affirm to learners that their performance reflects the efforts they put into the learning. Emphasize the importance of persisting through early failures; help individual learners find alternative pathways to overcome challenges. Provide a higher structure to normalize struggle and help-seeking. In doing so, individual special treatments are unnecessary.

8. Motivating

A sense of purpose, especially self-transcendent, plays a unique role in motivating learning. Self-transcendent motivation is a desire to change the world positively. Helping others can help bring meaning to one's life and give one the innate drive to persist through learning difficulties.

Our attention, enthusiasm, and compassion can boost individual learning. Emotions are social and contagious. Learners as well as all of us play a crucial role in charging the motivation battery over social-emotional learning. Small modifications in communication to convey warmth would encourage learner engagement.

9. Learning

In this final chapter, the author and his mentor, Ken Bain, share a fundamental idea: teaching is not about teaching. It is about helping a human being learn, and it is about learning how to help other human beings learn. This is a mental shift to make!

To round up the book review, does the book *Small Teaching* fulfill its purpose? Five-to-ten-minute small, continuous changes are feasible on a daily basis within the existing pedagogy framework, curriculum, and course structure. They can improve knowledge retention, deepen understanding, and inspire everyone in the classroom. These research-based practices are simple, practical, and sensible.

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