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Teaching and Learning Center

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Small Changes in Teaching: The Last Five Minutes of Class—Good Ideas from Jim Lang, Assumption College, Worcester, MA

Sometimes good things come to us unexpectedly. This is not about my sudden lottery winnings that will enable me not only to retire next week, but also to finance immediate construction of a new library for Winthrop. (Don't faint, Mark Herring—remember what last Friday was.)

No, this is about an email I received last week that Michelle Wolf forwarded to Dana Bruneau, but sent by mistake to Patrice Bruneau. As a true Zen master of all things email, Patrice forwarded it to his wife, who sent it along to me. It was a link to a blog from *ChronicleVitae*, a source I had never heard of and would never have otherwise seen. So thanks to Michelle, Dana, and Patrice!

The blog is called "On Course," written by Jim Lang, Professor of English and Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College in Worcester, Mass. Professor Lang is in the midst of a six-part series, using ideas taken from his

recently-published book, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons From the Science of Learning*. (I am so impressed by his ideas and his approach that I have ordered his book for the library, although that might not happen until the next fiscal year.)

Having covered previously how to use the minutes before class and the first five minutes of class, this blog post is entitled "Small Changes in Teaching: The Last Five Minutes of Class." As he says, our general impulse is to use the last five minutes of class to cram in as much information as we can. I have had times that I was still shouting out stuff while many of the students were filing out. Not very effective teaching, I am afraid.

As I understand it from reading about his book, Lang's approach is to take concepts from learning theory and identify practical tactics for everyday use. I like this idea very much, and I may jump the gun on the

library and buy this book for myself.

His first suggestion is the "minute paper," a concept I am familiar with and something I have written about before. The idea comes from an excellent book, *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*, by Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross. (We have two copies of this book in Dacus Library.) You can use the minute paper at any time in class, pausing and asking students to write for one minute (or a bit longer) about a topic, concept, problem, or question. I was talking about this technique today in a TLC session on successful class discussion: having students write down their ideas *before* discussing them is an excellent way to make discussion deeper and more meaningful, as well as a great way to get more students involved.

Lang suggests taking the final minutes of class and asking students to answer

“One of my goals as a teacher is to help my students reach the point where they no longer need me. Ultimately, the student becomes the teacher, the teacher of herself or himself. That is a long road and arduous road, but as Jim Lang shows us, we can help them get there by mindfulness toward such things as the first and last five minutes of class. Or as Lang calls it, ‘small teaching.’ What a paradox: from small teaching comes great learning.”



Continued from page 1

two questions: what was the most important thing you learned today, and what questions do you still have? As he says, this quick writing exercise is valuable for both the students and the teachers. The students engage in a metacognitive exercise and reflect on their learning, and their responses provide important feedback to the teacher.

His second suggestion is “closing connections.” As Lang says, students need to learn to make connections between course content and their lives and the world. With five minutes to go in class, he asks to students to write down five ways the class material connects to contexts outside the classroom: their lives, the news, media, current events, popular culture, and so on. He says that students will do this with amazing speed if you tell them they can leave when they are finished—although I have my suspicion that such a reward might encourage them to skimp on the activity.

His third suggestion he calls “the metacognitive five.” The learning sciences, Lang writes, provide us with evidence that most students have poor study habits (big

surprise!), but that like most of us, they have illusions of fluency. Before the midterm, he asks them to write for two minutes about how they studied for the test. He matches these responses to the scores on the test, then he makes slides that compare the strategies of students who did very well with those who did poorly. He takes five minutes at the end of class after the exam has been returned to show students the differences.

His final strategy is “closing the loop.” In an earlier blog on using the first five minutes of class, he suggested several practical opening strategies, and here he says to loop back to those: questions about the day’s main content, questions about what they had learned the class before, or questions about their prior knowledge of the topic.

I like Lang’s practical ideas very much, not only because I can see the ways I could use them, but also because they are based on established theory while still being useful, applicable to many disciplines, and helpful to both me and the students. We are often so focused on coverage of our course content that we are apt to sacrifice course mastery.

If I manage somehow to cover everything I feel I am supposed to, great. But if my students aren’t really learning, and I mean *really* learning, that content, what is the point? In addition, such metacognitive practices will help them not only learn the content, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, learn *how* to learn.

One of my goals as a teacher is to help my students reach the point where they no longer need me. Ultimately, the student becomes the teacher, the teacher of herself or himself. That is a long road and arduous road, but as Jim Lang shows us, we can help them get there by mindfulness toward such things as the first and last five minutes of class. Or as Lang calls it, “small teaching.” What a paradox: from small teaching comes great learning.

Here is the link to his blog, which will also link you to his others on the topic. I know I will be following him now, and I thank Jim Lang from afar:

<http://tinyurl.com/jcprwdt>



Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

If you have a request for a session you would like to see, please email me and I will try to arrange it. And if you have a session you would like to present, please email me. We will set something up as soon as we can!

A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

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People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

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The 3rd Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

Many thanks to everyone who attended and presented at our conference on Saturday, February 6. We had 102 attendees, who heard excellent presentations and an inspiring keynote speech by Dr. Dan Mahony. Special thanks to Dana Bruneau for her work in organizing the conference.

Thought For the Week

"Let us adopt geologic time. Then--time being money--there will be no more poverty."
--Mark Twain