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

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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.”

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**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 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
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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!

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Thought For the Week

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