
Book Review

***Small Teaching Online* by Flower Darby with James M. Lang**

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Journal of Online Higher Education

ISSN: 2575-1204

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Whether you are new to teaching online or already an experienced faculty member, *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes* will inspire you to take a step back, breathe, and engage with your practice in a different way. This book is based on the small teaching principles that were devised by James Lang. Lang, an author of multiple books related to instruction in higher education, created the small teaching concept as a way to engage busy higher ed faculty in the process of thinking deliberately and practically about their instruction. In this collaboration, Lang provides the introduction and some theoretical perspective while Darby speaks specifically to faculty who specialize in higher education that is online. Darby draws from her wide experiences in online learning as both an instructional designer and faculty member.

One of the many elements of this book that sets it apart from others is that Flower Darby is not only a skilled writer, but also a skilled teacher in her narrative. Each chapter begins with a relatable instructional anecdote. Notably, these are written with a focus on instruction and are relatable for anyone who has any instructional experience, whether face to face or online. In one chapter, Darby recounts her experience as a dance teacher attempting to move her students toward mastery. She notes the dual method by which most teachers begin any teaching career: “emulating my favorite teachers of the past and by trial and error” (Darby & Lang, 2019, p. 27). From this fundamental start, she explains how she built a successful instructional practice by paying careful attention to both student successes and failures and reflecting on the instruction that she had provided and how it impacted those successes and failures. These themes run through the book and provide the foundation upon which Darby builds the small teaching principles that fit into the online higher education experience.

This book is a practitioner’s dream. It is ideally designed to provide just-in-time tips and tricks for busy faculty to adopt and implement in their online courses quickly and confidently. The chapters, while logical to read chronologically, are also very reader friendly and can stand-alone. This is particularly useful for faculty to find “in the moment” inspiration and excellent advice, indexed by topic, to provide ideas for immediate needs. In addition to the well-organized format, the content covers what I have found to be the trifecta of online instruction. Chapter topics are situated under the broad concepts of design, teaching humans, and motivating online students.

Right from the start, Darby reels you in, situating your understanding of the online learning environment, then she turns the tables and provides a learner's perspective. The chapters, themselves are engaging anecdotes and analogies to underscore the importance of the principle being discussed. Once you're leaning in for more, you receive a well-explained theoretical underpinning that is carefully framed in terms of online learning. Like any good teacher, Darby ties up the chapter lesson by providing easy to implement quick tips and a conclusion that anchors back to the rationale for this instructional practice.

In addition to a scaffolded presentation, Darby practices what she is preaching by infusing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles across the continuum of this book. UDL is a framework for instruction that is designed to remove barriers from learning (CAST, 2018). In this book, Darby does just that by providing engaging and relevant scenarios that all learners can relate to, clarity surrounding the theoretical curriculum underpinning, and different examples of how the practices in question can look in an online classroom setting.

Small Teaching Online is an excellent book for your personal library. The reading is light and relatable, the tips are reasonable and carry significant student impact—not to mention that the writing is very inspirational. Darby writes in a way that encourages you to want to do better for your students and reflect on your processes as a teacher. The reading experience is cozy and more closely mirrors having coffee and conversation with a trusted friend than reading a book about teaching online. As an experienced educator, I found significant value in this book and have made a home for it close to my computer for quick reference. If you teach online, you need a copy of this book. Your students will thank you.

References

CAST. (2018). *UDL and the learning brain*. Retrieved from <http://www.cast.org/our-work/publications/2018/udl-learning-brain-neuroscience.html>

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