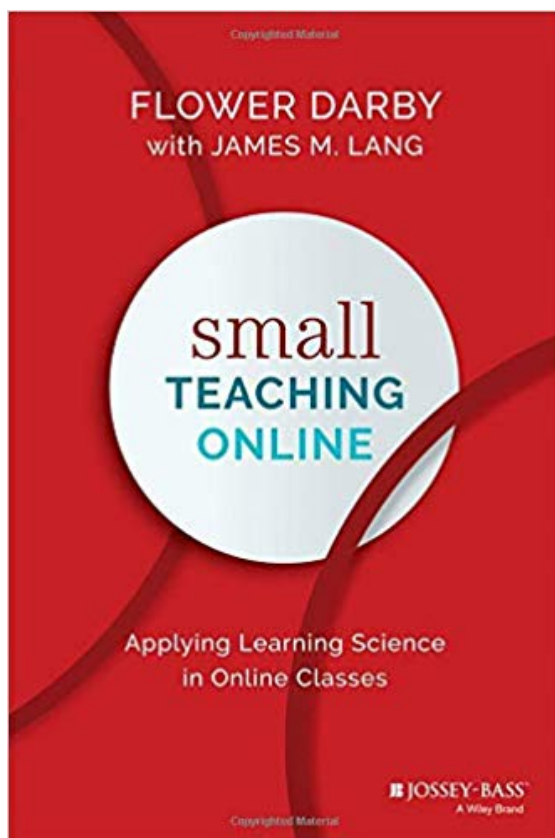




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Flower Darby, with James M. Lang
(2019) *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass (ISBN 978-0-8153-6163-3 [Hbk], 288pp)



This book endorses the idea of small changes to teaching practice in the context of distance learning. However, even if you are not delivering distance learning, there are useful ideas and tips here for everyone. This is a US-based publication, where there are now over 6 million students a year who are engaged in learning at a distance. Although there has been little growth in the UK in terms of 'pure' distance learning students

(HESA, 2019), there is a growing interest in flexible approaches to learning (Universities UK, 2018). Therefore, this book is interesting because it supports the immediate need to develop teaching practice through small, manageable, research-informed changes, whilst also helping us to reach forward to explore the bigger potential questions around flexible delivery.

This is a sister publication to James Lang's (2016) *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*, and it developed from a chance meeting between Lang and Darby. (For a review of *Small Teaching in Innovations in Practice*, see Burke [2016]). They found they had a shared belief in the idea that by paying attention to the small details of delivery it would lead to success for both teacher and student. They argue that "it can be overwhelming to imagine the big picture all at once. Instead, focus on today." Therefore, through careful and deliberate changes followed by reflection, we can slowly sharpen the tools to support our students. The authors are honest in their declaration that not everything will work first time, and this makes a refreshing change, as much of our design for teaching is provisional and has to be negotiated as we deal with an increasingly diverse student body. They advise, "Pick something small. Try it. Note what worked and what didn't. Refine your approach. Try it again."

One frame of reference that runs throughout the book is Universal Design for Learning (UDL). This attempts to combine what we know about the differences in how

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individuals learn and attempts to construct a single approach that recognises and accommodates these differences. It emerges from accessibility and inclusivity agendas to promote a more flexible design of teaching and assessment in order to support all possible learners.

The first part of the book concentrates on learning outcomes and ‘designing backwards’ from these. This is very similar to the more UK orientated ‘constructive alignment’ approach where the design of the assessment and curriculum is developed to support the learning aims (Biggs, 1996). The second part focuses on community building and belonging, by examining feedback to reduce attrition rates. This theme is further expanded in part three, where the focus is on creating independent learners and in helping to cultivate internal motivation. Distance learners continue to be a vulnerable group, owing to a propensity to lose motivation, not only caused by the delivery method, but also by personal factors that underline the reasons for selecting distance learning over traditional methods..

The book has a friendly, conversational style, which does not presume a high level of expert knowledge in this area. Each chapter has stories and examples to draw you into the experiences of the main author. The structure of the book, built around the idea of small changes, means that it is easy to dip into a particular area of interest and get some useful practical tips, or a sense of the research in that area. Below are some examples that stood out for me.

In one example, Darby discusses how one needs to be very careful when explaining an assessment. It must be concise and clear. For instance, what are the learners doing,

why, and how will this help them in their careers? In addition, the author advises providing an example that clarifies the type of work and the level. This is probably something we all consider; however, Darby presents an argument for being even more attentive to this. She links this approach with the research by Mary-Ann Winklemes on ‘Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) in Higher Education’. Here the focus is on carefully discussing and communicating with students before work on an assessment has started; concentrating on the long-term purpose and relevance of the assignment to the students’ lives and career choices. TILT also focuses minds on what students are being asked to do, the steps to follow and avoid, the criteria for success (such as the rubric), what excellence looks like and, finally, an annotated example of work where the criteria have been applied. Darby highlights the impact of the TILT model when compared with a group that did not follow the framework which, itself is illuminating.

In another notable example, Darby discusses the efficacy of producing short (i.e. no longer than six minute) videos to support students on particular concepts, thus focusing on *the essential* information. The reason for this paired back approach is linked with the redundancy effect, which is part of the wider theory of cognitive load. Put simply this concerns the movement of information in working memory to long term memory and the things that support and impede it. In other words, ‘learning’. Extra distracting information can prevent this process because it simply causes a blockage and can lead to the student focusing on the wrong things. A simple example Darby uses as an illustration, is talking over slides that contain text before

allowing time for the students to read that text: in our hurry to teach we are overloading the cognitive learning process. By reducing the text on the slide the working memory has time to process things into long term memory. Overall, this is a fascinating book with numerous insights that will engage many practitioners.

Reviewed by **Jim Turner**

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