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USING JAMES LANG'S "SMALL TEACHING"

"Small Teaching" with First-Year Undergraduate Students

Kate Yanina DeConinck
University of San Diego

ABSTRACT

This contribution to the forum on James Lang's *Small Teaching* analyzes one instructor's implementation of Lang's techniques in a world religions course for first-year undergraduate students. Two types of strategies are considered in depth: those that use prediction to help students acquire and retain knowledge of class material and those that cultivate connections to previously mastered material and encourage active learning. For example, one activity asked students to use prediction as a tool for preparing for local guest speakers, helping to unsettle preexisting stereotypes and assumptions. Another activity asked students to create concept maps to draw connections across religious traditions. Ultimately, the author argues, these "small teaching" strategies did not require substantial work or resources from the instructor or her students but went a long way in fostering learning and critical thinking. The insights gleaned from this article could be applied to other courses and teaching contexts.

KEYWORDS

teaching, pedagogy, small teaching, world religions, religious studies

I first read James Lang's book, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*, during the spring of 2018 while I was in the process of designing a new version my world religions course.¹ This particular iteration of World Religions in San Diego² would be offered in conjunction with my University's first-year core curriculum

1 This article was initially presented as part of a panel at the 2019 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion. The author wishes to thank her co-panelists, Dr. Laura Taylor and Dr. Natalie Williams, for a productive conversation about this text as well as Dr. David Howell who presided over the session. She extends her gratitude also to the Teaching Religion Unit, which organized the panel, as well as Dr. Thomas Pearson, who invited the panelists to submit their work to The Wabash Center Journal on Teaching.

2 I had already offered Introduction to World Religions twice and had taught World Religions in San Diego once at the University of San Diego. I had also offered versions of these courses at four other universities and colleges in the past, sometimes at small private liberal arts schools and, in other cases, at large public universities or online. I was deeply familiar with the material and course learning objectives but was looking for new activities and modes of engaging my students. <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/DeConinck-Syllabus.pdf>

program, meaning that all of the students in this class would be freshmen.³ In order to promote a stronger sense of community among first-year students, enrollment in this course would be smaller than my usual lower-division courses (twenty-two students rather than the standard thirty-five). This smaller setting seemed like the perfect opportunity to experiment with some of the strategies and approaches that Lang describes in *Small Teaching*.

Part of my interest in Lang’s work also lay in thinking through how it could complement or complicate other models and approaches that I was currently using in my classroom. For example, I utilize team-based learning (Michaelsen, Knight, and Fink 2002), an instructional strategy that groups students into small, consistent teams with peers who have different learning styles and skills from their own for the duration of the semester. Team members interact with one another regularly in class to complete activities and discussion questions, and they also work on a large ethnographic project throughout the term. Given how central team-based learning is to my pedagogy, I was curious to see how many of Lang’s strategies could be successfully adapted for team activities. I was also intrigued by the growing body of literature centered around teaching first-year students (Nunn 2018) and how *Small Teaching* might likewise provide models for helping students, especially first-generation college students, transition from high school to university life.⁴

While reading Lang’s book, I found that some of his strategies aligned with things that I was already doing in my classes. For example, chapter 7 draws from scholarship about emotional involvement in the learning process to suggest strategies for cultivating enthusiasm, trust, and compassion between instructors and students inside and outside of the classroom. Small gestures and ways of connecting with students before, during, and after class matter, Lang argues, and he suggests strategies such as walking around the room before class begins in order to connect with more than just the students seated in the front row (2016, 109). Lang also draws from findings by Chambliss and Takacs (2014) to argue that detailed and personalized feedback on assignments provides students with a motivational boost. He writes, “[w]hen the students see that instructors are actually reading and critiquing their work, they become motivated to work a little harder at their writing—and that harder work pays off in some immediate gains in their writing abilities” (2016, 109). Both tactics discussed in this section of the book are ones that I was already consistently using in my classes; however, it was affirming to read scholarly evidence supporting these ways of engaging students.

Other sections of *Small Teaching* offered strategies that were new and inspiring to me, especially those gleaned from chapter 2 (about predicting) and chapter 4 (about connecting). I decided to focus on these selections in particular while redesigning my course for first-year students during the fall semester of 2019.

In chapter 2, Lang theorizes that prediction aids in focusing classroom learning, even if students are radically wrong in their predictions. He writes:

when you are forced to make a prediction or give an answer to a question about which you do not have sufficient information, you are compelled to search around for any possible information you might have that could relate to the subject matter and help you make a plausible prediction. That search activates prior knowledge you have about the subject matter and prepares your brain to slot the answer, when you receive it, into a more richly connected network of facts. Prediction helps lay a foundation for richer, more connected knowing. (2016, 49)

In my class, I decided to adopt prediction as a strategy to help my students prepare for and then reflect upon the guest speakers we hosted in class. World Religions in San Diego encourages students to consider how the history and core

3 It may be helpful to know that University of San Diego is a private Roman Catholic research university. In the fall semester of 2019, the University’s undergraduate enrollment was 5,919 students and 40 percent of our students identify as Catholic. For more context and information about student demographics, please see the [USD Fact Book](#) and [Undergraduate Profile](#).

4 To provide more information about my teaching context, I offer a few notes here to describe the students in this particular semester and section of the class, which included twenty-two learners in total. In a confidential pre-semester survey, six of my students claimed gender pronouns of he/him/his and sixteen claimed gender pronouns of she/her/hers; no students claimed they/them/theirs, zie/zim/zir, or other preferred pronouns. Four students were first-generation university students and two students came from international backgrounds. Of those born and raised in the US, half (n = 11) had been raised in California, 22 percent had lived in multiple states growing up, 9 percent came from Colorado, and another 5 percent each came from Arizona or Oregon. All of my students came to university directly from high school without a gap year or period of working beforehand. This survey revealed a diversity of religious identities as well; twelve students (55 percent of the class) identified with some type of Christianity—most commonly Catholicism—while three students claimed hybrid religious identities and another three described themselves as nonreligious, unsure, or searching. Two students self-identified as Buddhist, one student as Muslim, and one student as secular Jewish. Some students had attended religious school throughout their lives, but eight students (36 percent of the class) had never had a course specifically about religion before.

teachings of five different religions play out in lived, complicated ways in our local community. Over the course of our sixteen-week semester during the fall of 2019, our class hosted five guest speakers, one from each of the religious traditions we were studying in class. Leading up to each of these visits, I asked my students to look at a given religious community's website and to write a short reflection about their initial impressions and expectations for the visit. This gave them the opportunity to consider how media and online portrayals of a community inform their preconceived notions about that community. Following the visits, students were again asked to write a short reflection, this time describing what stood out to them the most and what they learned from our speaker.

This simple exercise in prediction proved to be incredibly valuable. Following Lang's model of "prediction, exposure, feedback" (2016, 41-42)—in which students make a prediction, are exposed to something directly, and then reflect on what they have learned—many of the learners in my classroom were able to unearth their own preconceived notions without my having to say a word. Consider, for example, some of the written predictions that I received from students before we hosted the speaker from our local Buddhist meditation center:

"My impression of this community after looking at their website is they're welcoming and very open to visitors. The most important thing to this community (from my perspective) is that they value stepping away from everyday life to relax and refocus."

"In terms of the beliefs and values of [Buddhist center], it seems like they strongly value the well-being of others. Their guided meditations and theme-specific classes are all centered around helping people become better versions of themselves and improving their own personal well-being. They even host public events and discussions to help others remove stress and anxiety from their lives. Even to someone unfamiliar with the [Buddhist center's] community, it is easy to see how much they care about others and their well-being."

"I would like to ask our visitor why Buddhists have to shave their heads, what the difference between modern and traditional Buddhism is, and what the process of becoming a Buddhist monk is like."

These initial written reflections gave me insight into students' existing ways of imagining "Buddhism." For example, they immediately picked up on the values of compassion (*karuna*) and the desire to avoid suffering (*dukkha*) that lie at the heart of the Mahayana tradition. At the same time, some students continued to imagine Buddhists as monks with a distinct style of dress and so forth. You can probably imagine the look on some of their faces when our guest speaker—a thirty-something-year-old blonde woman in jeans and blouse—arrived. Here are some of the written reflections that I received after the visit:

"It was so interesting to be taught about Buddhism from the perspective of a layperson, who worked and was also a mother. It gave me a modern and accessible perspective of Buddhism."

"[Our visitor's] commentary on how looking at everyone as suffering beings helps you understand people and appreciate problems really resonated with me."

"I was not expecting the session with [our visitor] to go how it did. I was thinking we would be talking to a Buddhist monk, but instead I walked into the classroom and saw a middle-aged mom sitting there. It sort of threw me for a loop because I had an image of an Asian monk in my head. Of course I know that religion can be spread throughout the world but I am still a little shocked that [our visitor] told us that she had a good solid community of people just like herself that go to the temple and practice Buddhism."

Some students' predictions were reinforced, but their understanding of the tradition we had been abstractly studying in class was made more specific and grounded through their encounter with the speaker. For others, though, this experience of predicting what the visit would be like and then reflecting upon what they had actually experienced was deeply transformative, as evidenced in the comments from the third student. Thus, this sort of activity was especially powerful when it came to unsettling students' assumptions about sites and persons in our own local community.

The other section of Lang’s work that I chose to employ in this class was chapter 4, which addresses how to help students identify connections between new material and material that they have previously mastered. He writes, for example, that “a simple way of understanding how to build comprehension in our students would be that it consists of helping them forge, rich, interconnected networks of knowledge—ones that enable each existing piece of information in our content area to connect with lots of other information, concepts, and ideas” (Lang 2016, 96). This way of thinking about building connections aligns with existing scholarship about memory and how our neural connections tend to build pathways in relation to one another (Lang 2016, 61-62). Lang proposes a variety of strategies to promote this sort of deep understanding, but I was particularly intrigued by concept mapping. Lang describes concept mapping as a “manageable task for a small group of students to undertake at the conclusion of a lesson or a unit of material” that “offers the additional benefit of being an interesting and (in the best of all possible worlds) even enjoyable activity” (2016, 104). Reading this section of the chapter made me wonder if this type of drawing activity would indeed be enjoyable for first-year students, especially those who have more visual learning styles. This strategy also seemed to align with my use of team-based learning and team activities.

As an experiment, during our unit on Hinduism, I had students work with their teams to create a visual map or illustration showing the connections between key concepts related to reincarnation (samsara, dharma, moksha, and so forth). After each team had created their visual diagram, they explained it to the rest of the class and, with some feedback, made any changes to more accurately depict these concepts. A couple of weeks later, once we had moved into our unit on Buddhism, I asked the teams to revisit their maps and amend them with new vocabulary and with attention to how Buddhist practitioners might map notions of life, death, and rebirth in a different way. The result of this activity and the discussion that ensued was a productive sort of confusion. Students had a particularly hard time figuring out how the Buddhist concept of anatman/anatta (the doctrine of no self or soul) could be drawn or visualized in comparison to the Hindu idea of atman (the self or soul that is carried forward in cycles of rebirth). However, once each team had figured out what this might look like, the concept seemed to gel in their minds in a way that it had not in past classes or semesters. In fact, some students asked me if they could hold onto their drawings and they used them as visual study guides for their next exam. This activity allowed students to see connections and comparisons across traditions, while reinforcing knowledge they had previously mastered.

The most appealing aspect of Lang’s work may be the fact that it provides general frameworks and strategies that are supported by scholarship on teaching and learning and can be easily adapted into a variety of courses on the study of religion. In the case of my class, my students’ scores on the Buddhism exam were higher than in past semesters, which implied that something about these strategies seemed to be effective for them. I also observed that using the mapping exercises helped them cultivate a strong team dynamic early in the semester. Students who were artistically inclined had a chance to showcase those talents with their teams—and teams without an artist in their midst were able to laugh over their shared attempts to draw. Additionally, the prediction exercises that we utilized throughout the semester helped prepare students for their final paper assignment, which also involved comparing media depictions of a given topic/tradition to complex realities. I was encouraged by these and other outcomes that resulted from implementing Lang’s ideas in my classroom and plan to make small changes in some of my other classes moving forward.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate Yanina DeConinck, Th.D., is a teaching professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Diego. Her areas of specialization include anthropology of religion, religion in the US, and religion in the wake of mass tragedies. She regularly offers courses on world religions, Catholicism in the US, the Holocaust, and more.

