



THE WABASH CENTER

# JOURNAL ON TEACHING

USING JAMES LANG'S "SMALL TEACHING"

## Structured Reading Groups: Incorporating James Lang's *Small Teaching* in the Theology Classroom

Laura M. Taylor

*College of St. Benedict and St. John's University*

### ABSTRACT

This paper explores James Lang's *Small Teaching* as a useful resource for developing and incorporating structured reading groups in the required upper-level theology courses at the institutions where I teach. The purpose of the reading groups is to increase student engagement and facilitate deep learning, with each reading group role patterned on one of Lang's models or principles of knowledge, understanding, and inspiration.

### KEYWORDS

small teaching, reading groups

In his work, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*, James Lang introduces a "small ball" approach to teaching and learning that is intended to "spark positive change in higher education through small but powerful modifications to our course design and teaching practices" (2016, 5). Lang's innovative pedagogical strategy brings principles from cognitive theory to bear on classroom instruction by using relevant research on learning and higher education as the foundation from which to develop small teaching techniques designed to promote sizeable improvements in student learning.

According to Lang, the benefit of this deliberate, structured, and incremental approach to teaching is that instructors can have a considerable effect on student learning through minor and relatively simple modifications to their courses. For example, drawing on the growing body of evidence in memory research that demonstrates the positive effect of retrieval practice for acquiring and retaining knowledge, Lang proposes a small teaching activity in which instructors use the opening or closing minutes of class to ask a series of low-stakes questions that require students, either orally or in writing, to practice retrieving prior information covered in the course. Having students regularly recall foundational knowledge through brief activities such as this, he argues, helps to strengthen and improve their memories, which in turn leads to more durable and complex learning (2016, 29-32).

Although the majority of the small teaching models and principles found throughout Lang's work require minimal preparation and grading and can be put into practice in a single class period at any point in the semester, Lang also notes that instructors can develop a more comprehensive learning strategy for their courses by drawing systematically from the three sections of *Small Teaching*, aptly titled "Knowledge," "Understanding," and "Inspiration," in their course design (2016, 11).

This paper describes a pedagogical strategy I developed and implemented using Lang's small teaching techniques in upper-level theology courses at the undergraduate, liberal arts institutions where I teach. This approach uses structured reading groups as a central component of the course in order to facilitate and inspire deep learning. While the reading groups themselves are an example of a more deliberate and comprehensive learning strategy discussed by Lang in the closing chapter of his book, the individual roles associated with the groups fall under umbrella of small teaching practices and can easily be detached from the reading groups and used successfully in a single class period.

Structured reading groups bear a strong resemblance to literature circles, which have traditionally been used in elementary and middle-school literature classrooms. First introduced in 1993 by Harvey Daniels, this pedagogical practice was designed to boost student interest in reading and literary discussions by giving the student a choice of texts to read and developing thought-provoking strategies to encourage student engagement with the text. According to Daniels' model, students meet regularly with their small groups to discuss their selected reading, and each student is given a different role to play in the circle. Examples of the roles developed by Daniels include, "Discussion Director," "Illustrator," "Summarizer," "Connector," "Literary Luminary," and "Word Wizard." These creative and complementary roles are intended to inspire students to develop their own unique insights, questions, and responses to the text. Speaking on the efficacy of this student-centered, collaborative approach to learning, Daniels states, "Teachers who implement literature circles in their classroom are recreating for their students the kind of close, playful interaction that scaffolds learning so productively elsewhere in life" (2001, 25).

More recently, instructors in higher education have begun to adapt these literature circles into their classrooms to promote higher-order thinking skills. I was first introduced to reading groups through Heather Macpherson Parrot and Elizabeth Cherry's article, "Using Structured Reading Groups to Facilitate Deep Learning" (2011). In this article, Parrot and Cherry document the specific group work format they successfully developed in order to promote critical reading skills and active discussion of course material in their sociology courses. Similarly, Tricia Van Dyk's article, "Teaching Moral Philosophy through Literature Circles," describes this pedagogical technique as an effective method for making course material relevant and engaging to students from a variety of identities and backgrounds (2019).

Influenced by Lang's small ball approach to teaching and looking for a comprehensive format to boost student engagement and learning in my upper-level theology courses, I decided to experiment with the reading groups format. In the eight semesters that I have implemented readings groups in my classes, students have consistently rated the reading groups in their final evaluations as one of, if not *the* aspect of the course that contributed most to their learning.

The reason that the reading groups are so effective at sparking student learning, I argue, is twofold. First, they are designed to facilitate and inspire deep learning by drawing systematically on the principles, methods, and activities explored in each of the three parts of *Small Teaching*—knowledge, understanding, and inspiration. Second, and not unrelated, the reading groups provide a unique collaborative and student-centered approach to learning in the theology classroom.

To begin, I design my upper-level theology courses to accommodate at least six reading group meetings over the duration of the semester. For each of the different courses I teach, I work to create a unique set of reading group roles, which I develop based on the specific learning goals for that course, as well as the evidence-based models, principles, and small-teaching activities outlined in each of the three sections of Lang's *Small Teaching*. Many of these roles also have the additional benefit of meeting the liberal learning goals for the common curriculum at the institutions where I teach.

Early in the semester, I divide students at random into groups of five, give or take. The groups then determine amongst themselves which member will be responsible for which role during the first group meeting, and the students rotate roles throughout the semester, so that each student plays a different role for each meeting. On the days in which the reading

---

groups are scheduled, the reading groups meet in class for approximately thirty-five to forty minutes. Then, for the duration of the class, the groups come together and discuss with one another the various questions, insights, and connections raised in the individual groups.

The “Discussion Leader” is an essential role for the group process. In addition to developing questions to help their group members understand and think critically about the main points in the text, the discussion leader’s responsibility is to keep the meeting on track and to make sure that everyone participates. I have also found that the “Passage Analyst” plays a key role in encouraging the students to engage the text meaningfully, whether individually or collectively. The passage analyst’s job is to locate several passages in the reading that they consider to be particularly insightful, compelling, or challenging and to create a plan to discuss and analyze these passages with the group. Each of these two roles help students to develop knowledge in the course and to use basic intellectual skills to deepen their understanding.

In the first section of *Small Teaching*, Lang discusses the importance of helping students gain a solid knowledge foundation in the course content. Here, Lang warns that instructors should not be quick to dismiss helping students learn and remember facts or concepts in favor of higher order activities, such as creating new knowledge. He writes, “Knowledge is foundational: we won’t have the structures in place to do deep thinking if we haven’t spent time mastering a body of knowledge related to that thinking” (2016, 15). Accordingly, in my upper-level courses that require more difficult and theoretical theological readings, I often employ the role of “Theological Term-inator,” which entails identifying theological concepts or ideas in the reading that the student found to be either foundational for understanding or with which they are unfamiliar. The Theological Term-inator then looks up these concepts and explains them to the group. The role of “Cartographer” (or concept mapper) can also be effective in this capacity.

In the second section of his book, titled “Understanding,” Lang explores the cognitive skill of connecting as a means by which instructors can purposefully guide students toward deeper learning experiences. Drawing on current research in neuroscience, Lang contends that one of primary differences between the way a novice and an expert develop their knowledge base is their ability to connect the information, ideas, or skills they know. While instructors can undoubtedly help students begin to think about how to make important connections, Lang notes that studies have shown that when students are able to make new connections for themselves, the learning is more profound. Thus, Lang argues that small teaching activities that help to facilitate the formation of new connections leads to deeper and more meaningful learning experiences (2016, 91-100).

Given these findings, I have begun to include the role of “Creative Connector” in every reading group. This role asks students to make at least one connection between the reading group text and something outside of our class. These outside ideas include, but are not limited to, articles from credible media sources or a cultural, social, political, or economic ideas from their other coursework, or in the case of my students, a more popular choice is to connect an insight from the reading to a TV show, literary work, movie, artwork, poetry, or campus event. I am often impressed by the profound connections that my students make, and on more than one occasion, I have saved these connections to use the next time I teach on the topic.

I have also experimented with some reading group roles that have been less successful. For example, I have found that in my upper-level theology courses, students have not yet built the range of cognitive skills necessary to perform the role of “Devil’s Advocate” outlined by Parrot and Cherry. This role asked students to challenge ideas in the article by developing a list of critical questions and arguments that might be raised by the author’s critics or by those with differing viewpoints (2011, 365). The lists that my students developed were often weak, flimsy, or contrived. Similarly, I also experimented with the role of “Reporter,” whose job is to take notes on the discussion and summarize its main points. My students consistently reported that they did not find this role to be as engaging as the other reading group roles and that it often felt like busy work. Based on this feedback, I no longer assign this particular role. Instead, I ask each group to share their main discussion points with the other groups at the end of the class period.

The final section of Lang’s *Small Teaching* explores the idea of inspiration as a component of deep learning and emphasizes the importance of getting students to care about the course material. In the chapter on “Motivation,” Lang points to several key elements in the research on emotions and learning that he believes are ripe for exploration by college and university faculty, and which I think are implicitly and explicitly present in the reading groups. First, he argues, emotions can help us

capture the attention of our students (2016, 173). When we feel strong emotions, our attention and cognitive capacities are heightened. Second, he proposes that in order to help drive student's minds in purposeful and productive directions, we should focus on infusing learning with a sense of purpose, and especially self-transcendent purpose, which he notes is one of the strongest predictors for learners who persist through challenging academic tasks. Lang highlights that fact that the most powerful form of learning arises when students can see the capacity of their learning to make the world a better place (2016, 174-175).

Considering Lang's summary of the research on purposeful learning, I developed the reading group role of "Activist," which asks students to explore the relationship between faith and justice. This role, along with the "Intersectional Identifier," offers students a space to think critically about systems of oppression, such as sexism, racism, and xenophobia, and to reflect on the theological resources for such work. More importantly, these roles encourage students to begin listening to the voices of the marginalized and oppressed and to contemplate how they might take small yet courageous steps to foster concrete practices for social transformation in their own communities and to become co-creators of a more just and peaceful world.

In their final course evaluations, students have consistently referred to the motivational capacity of the creative connector, activist, and intersectional identifier roles. As, one of the students in my feminist theology course wrote, "The reading group roles created a dynamic space for intentional, critical thought. My two favorite roles were the creative connector, because making personal connections makes learning very relevant and applicable beyond the classroom, and the feminist activist, because I loved the idea of 'being a little bit brave.' I will take that idea with me where I go from here in life."

A third element in the research on emotions and learning that Lang highlights is the idea that emotions are social and catching (2016, 176). For example, numerous studies have shown a positive correlation between the instructor's passion and enthusiasm for the subject and student motivation. But, as Lang points out, this is only part of the story. Drawing on Dan Chambliss and Christopher Takacs' research in their book, *How College Works*, Lang underscores the immense influence that a student's personal connections and relationships in the classroom can have on their learning (2016, 176).

The effect of interpersonal relationships on creating positive learning experiences in the classroom is the second reason I believe structured reading groups are so effective. At their core, reading groups capitalize on the benefits of peer-to-peer connection insofar as they foster conversations among students and encourage their experiences, perspectives, and connections to emerge as equally important in the creation of classroom knowledge (2016, 190). The reading groups also give students the opportunity to attend to the challenges of communal relationships and work, especially as they practice communicating across differences. One of my students gave voice to this idea in their final course evaluation, stating: "Reading groups [contributed most to my learning]. Discussions were always fun and lively. They were my favorite part because I got to see the different perspectives of my groupmates. This made it easy to engage and formulate my own opinions and also respect opinions that did not necessarily match up with my own."

In addition to using the reading group roles to formulate a more comprehensive learning strategy in my upper-level theology courses, I have also separated out the various roles and used them individually in my introductory courses as small, low-stakes teaching activities. For instance, I might ask students to come prepared to class with two passages from the reading that they want to discuss with their classmates or to make an everyday connection between our course content and an outside idea.

A drawback of structured reading groups for those instructors looking to incorporate a small ball approach to teaching and learning is that the reading groups can potentially require a significant amount of grading, depending on how instructors choose to assess student learning and their overall class size. Although the reading groups essentially run themselves once they have been set up, in order to for them to truly be a productive space for student learning, students must come to class having read the assigned text and adequately prepared for their designated roles. To ensure this will happen, I have found that at the very least I have to assign a short, written component for each role. For example, I ask the discussion leader to write their questions for the group, as well as their own answers to these questions.

While I typically prefer to grade the written assignments on a scale of one to ten and to offer substantive feedback to each student when I can, an instructor could easily make my grading more efficient by limiting their comments to those assignments that need improvement and using a scale of check plus, check, and check minus. Regardless of how one chooses to assess student learning in the reading groups, it is worth noting that most students tend to appreciate the fact that their grade is based on an evaluation of their individual work rather than that of the entire group.

Overall, I have found the benefits of incorporating structured reading groups in my classes far outweigh the potential time commitment associated with grading student work. In my observation, the reading groups, when developed in conversation with the principles, models, and activities found in the three sections of Lang's *Small Teaching*, lead to an effective comprehensive learning strategy. Reading groups, among other things, encourage students to think, create, evaluate, listen, question, connect, interpret, explore, analyze, consider other's perspectives, reflect, collaborate, discuss, lead, remember, imagine, and to consider how they might make a difference in the world for more than just themselves. In other words, reading groups give students a reason to fall in lifelong love with learning.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Daniels, Harvey. 2002. *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*. Portland, ME: Sternhouse Publishers.

Lang, James. 2016. *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*. San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass.

Parrot, Heather Macpherson, and Elizabeth Cherry. 2011. "Using Structured Reading Groups to Facilitate Deep Learning." *Teaching Sociology* 39, no. 4: 354-370. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X11418687>.

Van Dyk, Tricia. 2019. "Teaching Moral Philosophy Through Literature Circles." *Teaching Philosophy* 42, no. 9: 265-278. <https://doi.org/10.5840/teachphil201987109>.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura M. Taylor is Assistant Professor of Theology and Gender Studies at the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University in Central Minnesota, where she teaches courses on constructive theology, womanist, *mujerista*, and feminist theologies, theologies of liberation, and gender studies. Her current research interests are the nexus of Christology and immigrant justice.

