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ADVICE

Small Changes or Big Revolutions?

A new book says the higher-education model is too broken to be fixed piecemeal

By James M. Lang | JUNE 19, 2016



Marta Antelo

"The institution of school," according to the anthropologist Susan Blum, "has outlived its usefulness."

She makes that forceful claim in her new book, *"I Love Learning; I Hate School": An Anthropology of College*, which offers a comprehensive indictment of the American higher-education model today. Many of us who do research and write about teaching and learning in higher education (present company included) believe fundamentally in the enterprise but see room for improvement. But Blum sees a fatally flawed system and thinks incremental changes won't cut it.

We can't fix higher education completely, she writes, "because its foundation is flawed. And we can't fix it piecemeal because it is a system. As with fundamental changes to conceptual systems in the history of science, the only solution is a radical transformation."

Blum rests her case on a broad, learned, and interesting range of sources, including her own years of experience as a faculty member at multiple campuses. She has read deeply on the history of higher education, on traditional and alternative schooling models, and on theories of human cognition.

She draws, finally, upon the results of her own research. Her team interviewed 300 undergraduates about their college experiences and their attitudes toward school and learning, and surveyed another 200 anonymously on those topics. The interviews included one in which a student uttered the phrase that became the book's title: "I love learning; I hate school." The speaker was a high-achieving college student, and Blum notes that when the student uttered that phrase, the interviewer — another high-achieving college student — exclaimed that she, too, hated school.

What, Blum wondered, could explain the disconnect between a love of learning and a hatred of college courses?

The book answers that question by contrasting how people learn in schools (of all sorts) with how they learn on their own. The vocabulary she uses to illustrate that contrast is telling: She refers to learning outside of school as "learning in the wild," and learning within school as "learning in the cage." Humans were born to learn in the wild, she suggests; students are forced to learn in the cage.

The first two parts of her book recount the myriad problems that plague learning in the cage of higher education, some ancient and some recent. She points to the way in which grades distort the learning enterprise, the student cultures of drinking and hooking up, the frequent mismatch between the goals and interests of professors and students, the dry and arid nature of many college courses. She also draws upon some of the arguments of her previous book *My Word! Plagiarism and College Culture*, an excellent analysis of the spread of plagiarism in student writing.

After a long and painstaking analysis of academe's multiple failures, she steps into the role of an anthropologist of human learning in the third section of the book. I especially appreciated that section, in which she ranges comfortably between anthropology, biology, and cognitive psychology to explore how we learn in nonschool contexts. She cites many forms of education "in the wild" — "learning by doing, learning through play, observation, imitation, trial and error, guided participation, and apprenticeships, in which young people or novices are assigned to an expert to learn a craft or a trade."

Small Changes in Teaching

In this series, James M. Lang argues that simple changes in our pedagogy — in things like course design, classroom practices, and communication with students — can have a powerful impact on student learning.

- Small Changes in Teaching: The Last 5 Minutes of Class
- Small Changes in Teaching: Making Connections
- Small Changes in Teaching: The Minutes Before Class
- Small Changes in Teaching: Giving Them a Say



What she does not find in these forms is anything like what we ask students to do in the classroom. In the cage of higher education we require students to learn by sitting still in chairs, listening quietly (or distracting themselves with their devices), being told what to learn and why it matters, spurred by grades and competition, with little play or emotion. Those practices have created a fundamental mismatch between natural learning and classroom learning — a mismatch that explains the book's title.

Blum closes the book with a call for a revolution to draw learning in the classroom closer to learning in the wild. The details of her revolutionary vision don't appear in very sharp relief, as she herself acknowledges. She offers some examples of how she has worked to transform her own courses but leaves readers to envision their own paths forward. "Mine is a dream," she says in one of 15 disclaimers she writes about her argument, "but new ideas have to come from dreams."

Blum's dream deserves the consideration of all of us who believe in the promise of higher education. I have little doubt that much of what we have been asking students to do in college for the last few hundred years doesn't fit very well with the ways in which we evolved to learn about and thrive in our environments. We are kidding ourselves if we believe students are learning deeply from sitting in 300-seat lecture halls, watching professors read from PowerPoint slides, and taking a couple of multiple-choice exams on the material.

But while I believe that the kind of transformation she advocates would represent a significant step forward, I am far less convinced that such change will occur by revolution. More than 4,000 nonprofit colleges and universities, and another 3,500 for-profit ones, together employed nearly four million people in 2011. According to Blum's estimates, spending by those institutions accounted for more than 3 percent of U.S. gross domestic product. The vast scope of American higher education makes it a massive, slow-moving animal.

But that doesn't mean it can't move at all. It can. And I remain convinced that — rather than revolution — the best way to promote major change in learning is to pursue the kind of small changes in teaching that I've been advocating in this space (and in my own book) for the past six months.

The revolution, if it ever occurs, won't begin with faculty members reinventing higher education from scratch; it will begin when we focus on revolutionizing the first five minutes of class, on seeking new ways to help students make connections, or on giving our students more control of their own learning.

My own experience as a faculty member and a director of a teaching center has shown me this time and again. When one small step in the classroom makes a positive difference, we tend to take another, and then another. And when those work, we consider big steps. Slowly, gradually, we move toward teaching innovation, and can begin to see pathways toward new visions of higher

education.

By contrast, I have seen too many faculty members smile politely through speeches or workshops attempting to revolutionize their teaching — and then they change nothing. Good teaching takes time and effort, which is why we are reluctant to abandon our current approaches unless we are convinced that we will see a major payoff. But most of us want to do right by our students, and if we can see a small step that will help us teach more effectively, we take it. In those small steps are sown the seeds of deeper change.

I spent two years working with a faculty member who had expressed interest in renovating his courses in a major way. Once or twice a year he would stop by my office and ask me for resources to help him overhaul his teaching according to one of the major alternative pedagogical models he had just learned about. And then every semester I would run into him on the campus and hear him sheepishly tell me that he hadn't been able to make any changes; he was just too swamped.

Finally I asked if he would be willing to try one small new thing — a simple change to the final five minutes of his classes. He was, and he did. Not long after that semester concluded, he finally undertook one of those major renovations he had been mulling for so long. It took that one small change to help him see his way from learning in the cage to something resembling learning in the wild.

We should take very seriously the critique of higher education offered by Susan Blum; the book is excellent, and I highly recommend it. Blum does the profession a service by drawing our attention to the ways in which traditional educational structures put barriers in the way of our students and their learning. She has a powerful command of educational history and theory, and her insights and anecdotes rang true to me throughout the book.

But I part company with her when she argues that "we can't significantly improve a conceptually flawed system; we can only replace it," or when she refers to small improvements to teaching as "tinkerings" that do more to embed the system in place than to change it. Massive change can occur through sudden revolution; it can also occur through slow evolution. Dreaming large about the ideal college classroom and thinking small about how to help the students in our courses today are not mutually exclusive activities: We need them both.

We owe it to our future students to dream big. We owe it to the students in our classrooms today to start wherever we can, even if that means taking only one small step forward tomorrow morning.

James M. Lang is a professor of English and director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College in Worcester, Mass. His new book, [Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons From the Science of Learning](#), was published this year. Follow him on Twitter at [@LangOnCourse](#).

This article is part of:
Small Changes in Teaching

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