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James M. Lang
Assumption College, lang@assumption.edu

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Small Changes in Teaching: Giving Them a Say

Three ways to improve learning by giving students a measure of control



By James M. Lang | APRIL 03, 2016

Over spring break, I helped lead a student trip to Ireland in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising. We toured the country with a guide and learned about the pivotal role of the Rising in Ireland's political and cultural history. I brought my 11-year-old twins on the trip, hoping the experience would continue to cultivate in them a love of travel and learning.

Observing how the twins responded to the different educational events we had planned offered me another perspective on a learning principle that has become increasingly important in my own teaching.

One afternoon we visited a small historical site and listened to a long-ish lecture from the curator. I kept my eye on the twins, knowing how this might test their patience, but they both seemed attentive throughout. Later, on the bus back to the hotel, I asked them to tell me what they had learned. Neither could recall a single thing. They had been paying what Jay Howard has called "civil attention," instead of actually listening. They had learned nothing.

Small Changes in Teaching



In this series, James M. Lang explores ideas on everyday classroom learning.

- The Minutes Before Class
- The First 5 Minutes of Class
- Making Connections
- The Last 5 Minutes of Class
- Giving Them a Say
- Space It Out
- Small Changes or Big Revolutions?

Near the end of the week, with plenty of lectures and walking tours under our belt, I left the students in the hands of my co-leader and took the twins to a small museum on medieval and Viking Dublin. I promised them we could stay as long or as briefly as they liked; I would follow their lead. This time, they wandered through the museum at their own pace, skipping some sections completely while stopping at others to read the placards, do the activities, and study the exhibits. They followed their own interests entirely, and afterward, spoke enthusiastically about what they had learned.

No doubt one reason they responded differently to the two experiences was because the lecture was passive and the museum was interactive. But clearly that wasn't the only issue, since the twins also zoned out on some of the very active walking tours. Instead, I would attribute most of the difference to one factor: In the museum, they had choices — complete freedom to choose what they wanted to learn, and how. They were in control.

Education theorists sometimes distinguish between two orientations that students take toward learning: mastery or performance. Performance-oriented learners want to do well on tests, essays, or other assessments. Mastery-oriented learners want to grasp the material for its own sake, because they find it interesting, relevant, or beautiful. Plenty of research suggests that a mastery orientation creates deeper and longer learning.

That same research suggests that we can help orient students toward mastery by giving them choices. As biologist James Zull has written in *The Art of Changing the Brain*, "one important rule for helping people learn is to help the learner feel she is in control." Likewise, the authors of *How Learning Works: 7 Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*, argue that mastery arises when we "allow students to choose among options and make choices that are consistent with their goals and the activities that they value."

That said, you may well feel — as I do — that you know more than students about your subject matter, and, hence, you know best what they should learn. You can't just take them to the museum of your discipline and let them wander around freely. They might well, as my twins did, skip entire sections of your discipline that are essential to a full understanding of the subject. Some faculty and

educational structures do offer students complete control over their learning in this way, but most of us aren't — or don't want to be — in that position.

But that doesn't mean we can't offer our students *some* control over their learning. The quest to produce mastery learners is another challenge ripe for a small teaching approach. In the four previous columns in this six-part series, I have argued that we can make substantive improvements to our teaching and to student learning by paying closer attention to how we organize the minutes before class starts, the first five minutes of class, the last five minutes of class, and the opportunities we give students to form connections.

In this column, I propose three small ways in which we can take existing courses and offer students the chance to assert some measure of control over their own learning.

Student-generated exam questions. Traditional exams represent one of those moments in a course in which students seem to lose all control. They come into the room at a specific date and time, sit down, and complete tasks that we have set for them. One obvious way to offer students some choices within an exam is to create more questions than you want them to answer — if you want students to write four short essays for an in-class exam, for example, you could allow them to choose from six or eight questions.

But a more meaningful way to give them some control is to allow them to write their own exam questions. And then promise you will use some proportion or version of those questions on the actual exam. Taking 30 to 45 minutes of class time and asking students to work in groups to generate exam questions not only will give them some sense of control over the test, but also will serve as an excellent review activity.

I give essay exams in my "British Literature Survey" course, and a couple of the questions always require students to analyze passages from the works we have studied. The class prior to the exam, I ask students to work in small groups to identify the passages they would most like to see on the exam questions. With seven or eight groups, I end up with a long list of possibilities, and I always choose from it. I suppose the class could collude to limit the choices to two or three works, but that has never happened, and so we have reached a happy medium in which they get to help determine the works appearing on the exam and I still have plenty of choices.

Open assessments. I have been intrigued in recent years with assessment systems in which students are offered a wide range of possible assignments and get to choose which ones to complete to earn the grade they desire. I profiled the work of one teacher who uses such a system, John Boyer, in my book *Cheating Lessons: Learning From Academic Dishonesty*. Bonni Stachowiak, host of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast, spoke about her own use of open assessments in a recent episode.

Adopting this approach in my own classroom would represent a large conceptual step forward for me. I just haven't been able to see my way there yet — or even decide if it makes sense for me.

Instead, in true small-teaching fashion, I've taken one mini-step in this direction. On my syllabus this semester, I left open 10 percent of the grade for an undetermined assignment, and told students on the first day of class that we would decide together what that assignment would be. The default would be a paper, I said. But if we could come up with an alternative they liked better, I would find a way to make it work.

That idea actually came from a conference paper by Chris Walsh, associate director of a writing program at Boston University, who spoke about using a "blank syllabus" in his literature-survey courses. He doesn't actually hand out a blank document. Instead, he has some blank spaces on his syllabus that the students help him to fill throughout the semester with readings they would like to see included from their anthology. I loved the idea of having at least one small blank space on my syllabus, in terms of the work they would do, and will perhaps even expand its size a little further next semester.

Class constitutions. Some readers may have another objection to offering students more choice and control: Perhaps you are preparing students for an external exam or are teaching in a predetermined curriculum. Fair enough. But that doesn't mean you can't still give students a sense of ownership in the course.

Cathy Davidson has written about her experience in creating a class constitution. It sets the ground rules for a course and helps establish the idea that your classroom is a community of learners working together toward a shared purpose. You can take this notion as far as Davidson does, allowing the class constitution to determine most of the operating rules, or you can take a slight step toward it in small teaching fashion.

Many of us, for example, continue to wrestle with policies on the use of cellphones, iPads, and laptops in the classroom. Others struggle with whether (and how) to award participation points. Or we wonder about what our policies on late work or absences should look like. There are no "right" answers in any of those areas, which leaves them open for teachers of good will to make different decisions. A class constitution approach would invite students into that decision-making process.

Practically speaking, you might hand out a draft syllabus on the first day of class, and then present the areas in which you want students to help you establish certain class rules. (You can obviously set limits and define certain rules that are nonnegotiable for you.) You could invite students to comment on the course website and/or have them discuss these issues in groups. Once the class has made a collective decision, you can remind students that it is your responsibility to ensure that the class abides by these new rules.

Ceding control over any aspect of teaching can be scary, which may be why my own progress in this area has been so gradual. But if you find the prospect intriguing — if these ideas resonate with your own experience as a teacher or learner — see if you can offer students one new choice next semester, either in how they demonstrate their learning to you or in how your class forms its community rules.

In doing so, you just might nudge them one step closer to the goal we have for every student: taking ownership of their own education.

*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 just published in March. Follow him on Twitter at @LangOnCourse.*

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