

2-8-2016

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Recommended Citation

Lang, James M. "Small Changes in Teaching: Making Connections." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Feb. 8, 2016). <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Small-Changes-in-Teaching-/235230>.

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Small Changes in Teaching: Making Connections

3 ways that faculty members can help students link course content to the world around them

By James M. Lang | FEBRUARY 08, 2016



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Last week I stepped out into the backyard at 10 p.m. on a cold, crisp evening. While the dog took care of his business, my eyes wandered up to the night sky and my mind drifted to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Frost at Midnight": "I was reared/In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,/And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars." I had just taught the poem in my British-literature survey, and Coleridge's depiction of the stars as a city-dweller's lifeline to the natural world struck me with fresh intensity.

The next morning I climbed onto the elliptical in my basement for my thrice-weekly torture session, and started watching the second episode of *Run*, a short-lived British television series depicting life

among London's tough underclass. As I watched a heartbreaking story about the fate of a recent immigrant to the city, I made a mental note to recommend the show to my survey students when we read Zadie Smith's short story "The Waiter's Wife" later in the semester.

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?

Small connections between course material and everyday life pop up all the time, in almost any course I teach in my field. That probably happens regularly to you, too, both with your classes and your research projects. When we are deeply embedded in our intellectual pursuits, the world seems to orient itself around them. New connections form continually. Reading the news, watching our screens, talking with peers or our children — all of those things become moments of potential connections with our disciplinary passions.

That phenomenon, according to research in teaching and learning, is what separates you (an expert in your field) from your students (novice learners in your field).

As the authors of *How Learning Works* argue, "One important way experts' and novices' knowledge organizations differ is the number or density of connections among the concepts, facts, and skills they know." Experts have thick tapestries weaving together all of the many things they know. New experiences are threaded easily into that tapestry, continually expanding and reshaping it.

By contrast, new learners tend to have information, ideas, or skills lodged in their minds in discrete, isolated places. Connections that seem obvious to us may never occur to them. New information and experiences do not automatically slot into the places where we (as the experts) might expect them to go. And while we can help by giving students suggestions for how to organize their knowledge and make connections, true learning occurs when students make new connections on their own.

If we want students to develop expertise in our fields, then, we have to help them thicken up the connections — from the first week of the semester to the fifth, from the last course they took in our discipline to this one, from the course material to their lives outside of class. The more connections they can create, the more they can begin to formulate their own ideas and gain a wider view of our fields.

In this series on small teaching changes we can make to improve student learning, I wrote first about the moments before class starts and, last month, about the first five minutes of class. Now let's look at three easy ways that faculty can help students develop thicker webs of connection with our course material.

The commonplace book. One of the earliest methods that readers and scholars used to create connections among the things they knew was the commonplace book. A unique combination of diary and scrapbook, commonplace books served as a repository in which people could record passages from their favorite books, treasured quotations and epigrams, inspirational Bible verses, recipes, thoughts, and almost anything else that the person wanted to preserve or remember. They were such a useful and popular item that the English philosopher John Locke wrote a guidebook for commonplace-book writers.

Commonplace books can serve the same function for students today as they did for people hundreds of years ago — helping them retain and connect what they know and what they are learning. You can ask students to use good old-fashioned notebooks or whatever digital platform you prefer (such as Evernote). The random juxtapositions that happen when people keep commonplace books not only helps with retention and connection, but it can also spur creative thinking as students see course topics intersecting with other ideas in new and original ways.

You could ask students to keep commonplace books on their own time, but see if you can reserve 10 minutes at the end of class once or twice a week for a "Connection Ten" — 10 minutes in which students can make entries in a course commonplace book, either paper or electronic. Ask them to:

- Write down the most important thing they learned that day, and why it matters to them or to society.
- List one way in which the day's course content manifests itself on campus or in their home lives.
- Identify a television show, film, or book that somehow illustrates a course concept from class.
- Describe how today's course material connects to last week's.

Make this a regular, low-stakes activity (i.e., collect their commonplace books once or twice a semester and give them a participation grade). Instead of ending class by trying to rush in one last point while students are packing up, use commonplace books to engage students directly one last time before the semester ends (more on those crucial final minutes of class in next month's column).

If you have a few extra minutes, invite a handful of students to share their ideas. You will find yourself surprised — as I have many times in these conversations — at the fascinating connections that students make between your course material and the world around them. But you won't hear those connections — and they might not get made at all — unless you ask for them.

Social-media connections. If you don't have time in class for Connection Ten, try bumping the activity to social media. I have experimented with Twitter for this purpose in the past, but you could also use Facebook, Instagram, other social-media sites, or even the discussion boards of your virtual learning environment. I like social media for this because, as we all know too well, students have their phones with them everywhere. Popping onto a course-specific social-media site to post something — or using a course-specific hashtag on Twitter or Instagram — can be done instantly when the connection occurs to them.

Build in a low-stakes assignment like this throughout the semester, or offer it as an participation option for quieter students. Assign them to post one or two links a week to a connection they have observed or discovered. An economist might use Instagram to ask students to post pictures of commerce in action from their daily lives; an environmental scientist might ask students to post to a class Facebook page their images and observations of interactions between the natural and built environment of the campus; a mathematician might require students to Tweet when they see math in action on television or film. (For more ideas, you can listen here to a great podcast about the use of Twitter in college and university courses.)

Here, too, set aside up to 10 minutes in class once a week, throw the social-media feed on the screen, and ask three or four students to tell you what they posted. Having them articulate the reasoning behind their posts helps deepen the connection for them.

The minute thesis. A dozen years ago I began using an in-class exercise at the end of the semester to help students see connections across the various works we had read. I wrote the names of the seven novels we had read on the board in a single column. In a second column I wrote a list of themes from the books.

I handed a marker to a student in the front row and asked her to walk up to the board and circle a single theme, and then draw lines connecting that theme to two different novels. Then I asked students to spend a minute thinking about a thesis that would explain how those two novels both connected to that theme. A brief silence ensued, and then a tentative hand was raised and a tentative student made a tentative statement. I praised the remark and asked for another idea. More hands raised, more confidently, and more ideas emerged. After five or 10 minutes, I stopped the discussion and handed the marker to another student, asking him to circle a new theme and connect it to two different novels, and the process began anew.

Over the course of a class period, students created dozens of brief thesis statements that connected the novels and themes in new and interesting ways. Later, many of the students took ideas they had expressed in that class and developed them into their final papers.

I use this brief little connection-building activity in the final week of every class I teach now. The potential variations in how you might conduct it are endless: Use three columns instead of two. Have students create the columns. Selecting one of the students' ideas and spend 10 minutes spelling out what the argument might look like. To have a look at the messy but densely interconnected weave of authors and concepts in a British-literature course after playing the minute thesis, and another from a faculty development workshop, you can view two samples on my blog.

Deep knowledge is connected knowledge; we have that as faculty members, and we want it for our students. With an investment of just a few minutes every class period, or even just one class period a week, you can help students see the stars of your course content in an entirely new light.

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*This article is part of:
Small Changes in Teaching*