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‘How Much Do You Want Your Final to Count?’

By James M. Lang | MARCH 13, 2018



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When it comes to teaching, Toni Weiss loves to tinker. Although she’s been teaching the same two economics courses at Tulane University for most of her career, she has never taught them exactly the same way twice.

She’s the kind of faculty member who, despite having won plenty of teaching awards already, enrolled last summer in Ken Bain’s summer institute, looking yet again to improve her courses and her students’ learning. The institute presented her with a new challenge: Find ways to give her students more

control over their own learning.

That’s a fine goal — but how do you do that if, like Weiss, you teach introductory lecture courses that routinely enroll 200 students per section?

At a time when academics are giving more and more attention to teaching and learning, the one type of course most resistant to pedagogical improvement is the large-enrollment class. In January I wrote about the difficulty of devising innovative teaching strategies in survey and introductory courses. Having a lot of students only heightens the problem. Pedagogical experiments that work well in a class of 20 or 30 might seem impossible in a course of 100 or more. When you are facing 200 students in an auditorium, the default mode is to lecture at them and then assess them as infrequently as possible, preferably with easy-to-grade multiple-choice exams.

The summer institute offered plenty of suggestions on how to give your class more control, but few of them applied to large courses, and Weiss left the program stymied but curious. In the weeks that followed, she developed a strategy that she put into practice last fall, and shared with me when we ran into each other at a recent conference. It struck me as an ingenious method to achieve an important goal (student engagement) in a challenging context (large classes).

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If we want students to take ownership of their education, we have to find ways to hand over some control of their learning. As I argued in a previous column, one of the easiest ways to do that is to give students more choices in a

course. Those choices can relate to the course content, to the ways in which they demonstrate their learning, or even to classroom policies and procedures.

As Weiss discovered, giving students more choices is a daunting task in any large course but even more so in an intro class, in which enrollment mostly consists of students in their first or second year of college. The more college courses are under their belts, the more aware students become of how their own choices affect their learning. A first- or second-year student might not have the same capacity to make wise educational choices that a junior or senior would.

The solution for Weiss: Create a structure that allows students in her economics courses to make meaningful choices about their grades — but within a limited range of possibilities.

Instead of designating a specific percentage of the final grade to each exam and assignment (for example, the midterm is 25 percent of your final grade), she assigned a range of percentages (i.e., the midterm is 15 to 19 percent of your final grade). Then she allowed students to choose from within the range the percentage they wanted to earn for a specific assessment.

Here's how she described the concept on her fall 2017 syllabus: *"Grading: In order to give you more control over your education, you may determine the weight of each assessment category as a percentage of your semester grade."* The ranges she offered were listed as follows:

- Clicker points: 6 to 10 percent.
- Journal entries: 6 to 10 percent.
- Myeconlab: 11 to 15 percent.
- In-class projects: 12 to 16 percent.
- Midterm No. 1: 15 to 19 percent.
- Midterm No. 2: 17 to 21 percent.
- Final exam: 20 to 24 percent.

Then her syllabus explained: *"You need to submit your grading plan to me, via Canvas, by Friday, October 6th. By that time, you will have seen examples of each type of assessment. If you don't submit one, or if the one you submit doesn't add up to 100%, then the midpoint of each range will be used."*

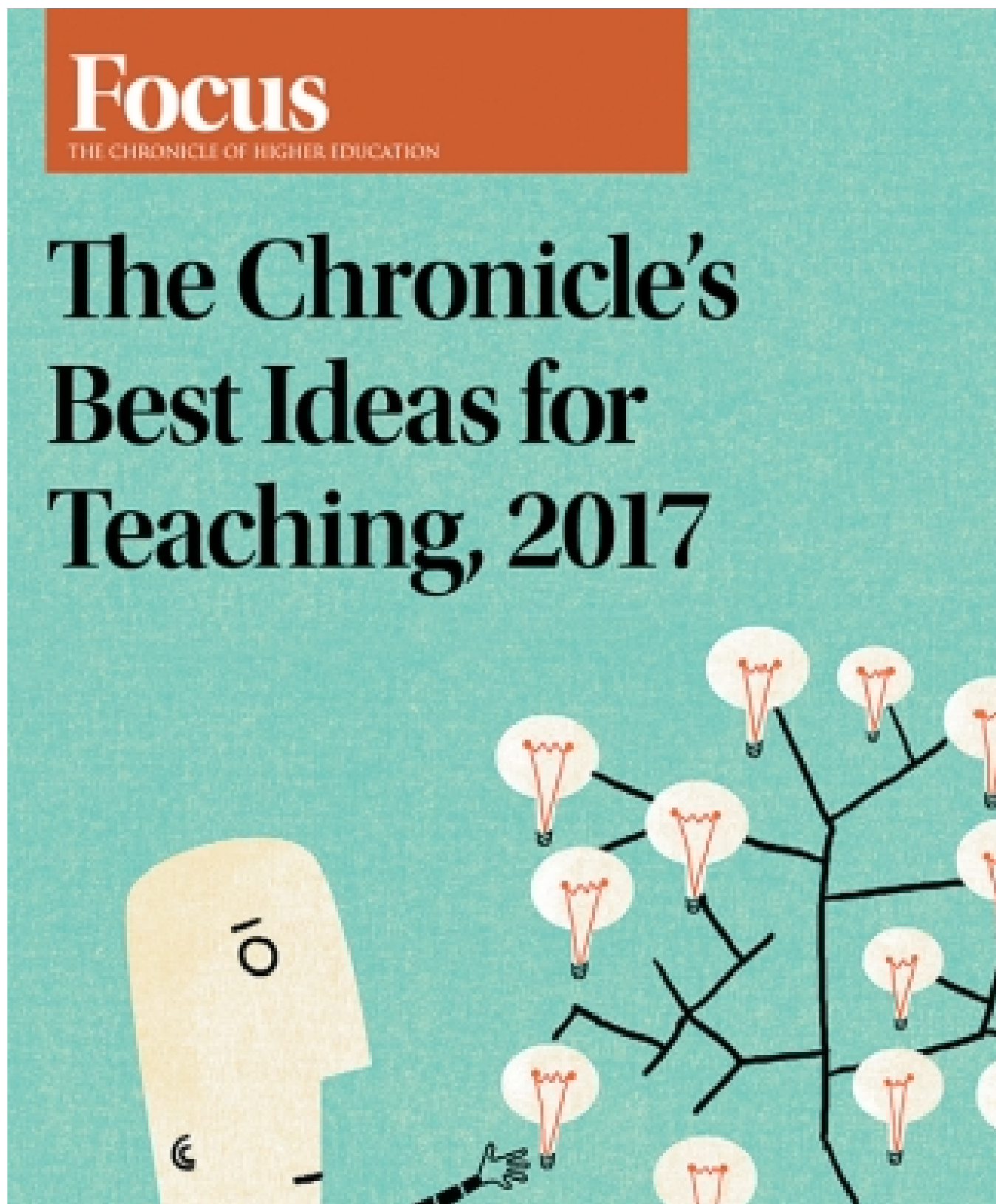
At the end of the semester, in addition to the standard course-evaluation questions, Weiss asked students to evaluate the new grading system. Using a five-point scale (with five at the positive end), she asked them to rate the following prompt: "I appreciate being able to choose the weighting for each assessment toward my semester grade." The average of the responses from more than 400 students, across two sections of the course, was 4.7.

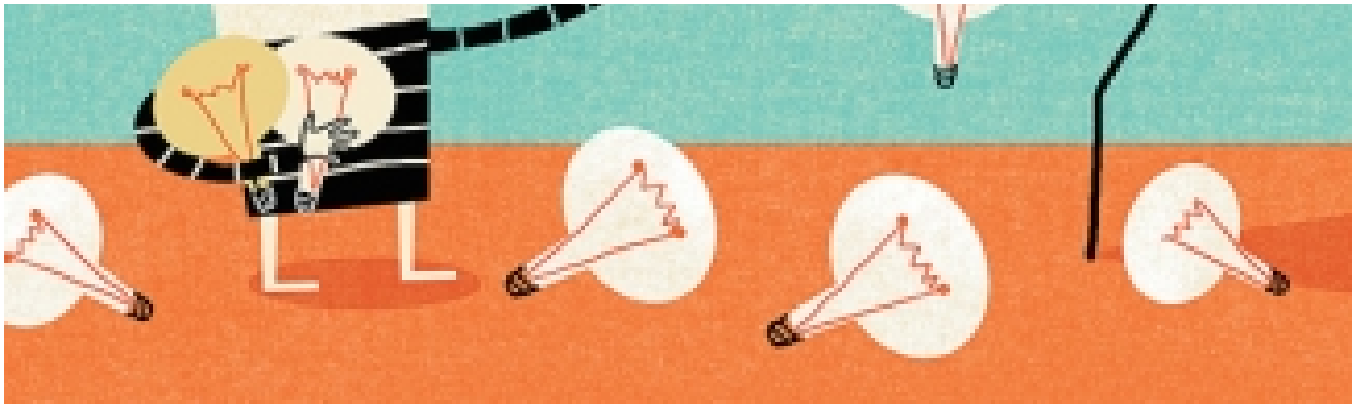
Besides giving students a stronger sense of control in the course, Weiss's strategy also encourages them to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses as learners. To make smart decisions on that front, students have to do a little self-analysis: Do I tend to zone out during class but then study intensely outside of class, which helps me perform well on tests? If so, I should choose the higher percentages on the midterms and the final. Do I sometimes freeze up on exams, but I'm in class every day and always do the homework? If so, I should commit to the high end of the range on the clickers, journal entries, and in-class projects.

Letting students make those choices can shift their perception away from the notion that tests, in-class work, and homework are a top-down means of separating the wheat from the chaff. Instead, they can begin to see that: (a) The various assessments are different ways to demonstrate their learning, and (b) they have a role to play in deciding what

they value most in their own performance. The percentage ranges in Weiss's course are tiny, but the message they send is large.

At this point, many readers may be shaking their heads — just as I did when she first described her strategy to me — and wondering how Weiss can provide an individual grading scheme to every student in a class of 200. Technology, she said, has made that much easier than it sounds.





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So I asked her if she could provide a simple explanation that I could share with readers: "I set up a 'quiz' in our LMS (Tulane uses Canvas for its online learning-management system), with each assessment category being one multiple-choice question and the choices being the different weighting options. After all of the students completed the quiz, I downloaded their responses into an Excel spreadsheet. I then created a formula pairing each assessment category with its chosen weight. Since each line of the gradebook was set up the same way, I just copied and pasted the same formula for every student."

I confess: I have zero knowledge of how spreadsheets work, and so her explanation left me a little baffled. Readers can buttonhole their favorite quantitative social scientist, or an instructional technologist on campus, to make it work for them. (For interested and slightly more tech-savvy readers, Weiss was kind enough to post a more detailed description of the technical part of this process on the website of Tulane's Center for Engaged Learning and Teaching, where she is associate director.)

The response to her new grading system was overwhelmingly positive, but of course not everyone appreciated it. One student provided an unsolicited comment in the open-ended section of the course evaluation: "Weighting our own grades kind of felt like digging our own graves" (which suggests a potential future as a writer if economics doesn't work out). Students have been conditioned to jump through hoops held by the teacher for so long that, for some of them, getting a degree of freedom of choice will prove intimidating. But such a significant majority of Weiss's students welcomed their small new freedom that she has continued the experiment into the current semester.

Thoughtful approaches to student engagement and assessment in large classes — like the one Toni Weiss has developed for her economics students — demonstrate how the research on effective teaching and learning in higher education can make its way into the most complex of teaching contexts. And the solutions there offer pathways to creative thinking even for those of us who have the good fortune of teaching small classes.

James M. Lang is a professor of English and director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College, in Worcester, Mass. His latest book, Teaching the Literature Survey Course: New Approaches for College Faculty, co-edited with Gwynn Dujardin and John A. Staunton, was published this year by the University of West Virginia Press. Follow him on Twitter at @LangOnCourse.

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