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James M. Lang

Assumption College, lang@assumption.edu

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ADVICE

What Will Students Remember From Your Class in 20 Years?

By James M. Lang | SEPTEMBER 30, 2018

One rainy September day, a small group of faculty members gathered around a conference table in a seminar room at my college to puzzle over an extraordinarily difficult question: Twenty years from now, what do we hope students will remember from our courses?



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The answers were slow in coming, but fascinating. Some of us hoped students would remain intrigued by the subject of our course or discipline. "It would be great to imagine," said the biologist, reflecting on his genetics class, "that my students would remember being actually excited about the process of science and discovery, ... and that they remember feeling much more confident about science."

A historian wanted his students to remember that history matters: "I want history to be real and relevant to my students. I want them to see the past in the present. I want them to see practical use in history." Another historian hoped students would remember the complexities of history: "I do want every student to remember — tomorrow, next semester, and 20 years from now — that history is not written in stone and that history is more complicated than the general public usually believes."

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We sat with this question for more than an hour and a half, each of us attempting to formulate a response, offering comments on the answers of others, and occasionally lapsing into silent reflection. But 90 minutes later, none of us left that room with a clearly articulated vision of our 20-year goal.

Our answers were vague, broad, and aspirational. The things we wanted for our students, in the longest possible run, proved difficult to articulate in the language with which we normally described our teaching.

But one thing became painfully clear in the weeks that followed as we continued the conversation in person and in writing: None of us listed specific course content as something we hoped our students would recall in 20 years. The biologist made this point most clearly: "Everything I learned as an undergraduate, 25 years ago, is out of date. The same will be true for my students in 25 years."

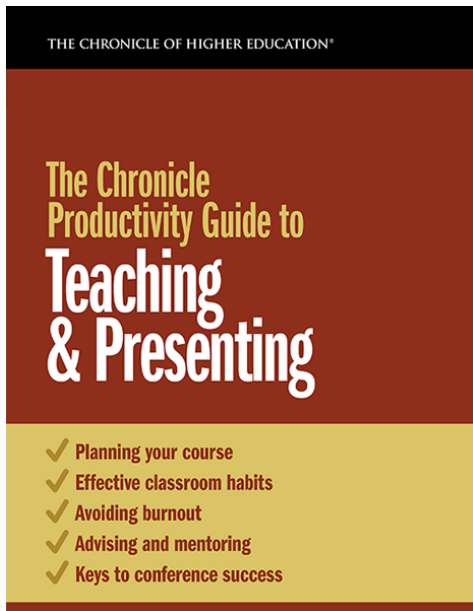
Although that statement might not translate as cleanly into a discipline like mathematics or literature — we'll still be reading Shakespeare in 20 years, I would wager — the fundamental point remained true for all of us. What I want students to have retained from my English courses has very little to do with any specific poem, story, or play we read in class, or any theory we debate. It has much more to do with some kind of fundamental change I hope to effect in how they think, communicate, or interact in the world.

It turned out we weren't at all focused on hoping students "remember" some set of facts or ideas for 20 years, as we had framed it in the original question. Instead we hoped to have transformed our students in some fundamental way — to help enrich their intellectual lives, to make them into better people, to give them the skills and knowledge they would need to make the world a better place.

Since that first meeting, back in 2015, I have continued to ask the 20-year question every fall to a small group of faculty members who participate in a course-design academy on my campus. We meet monthly to discuss the literature on teaching and learning in higher education, to observe one another's classes, to talk about our work with students — and then, in light of all that, to design or redesign a course.

I keep asking the 20-year question every fall because it helps faculty members see more clearly what really matters to them in their courses. We ask and answer it at the beginning of our sessions — before we have spoken at all about things like course content, tests and assignments, or course-management systems.

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ADD TO CART

The question provides a means of pushing faculty members toward the process of "backward design," an approach to education that is common parlance in the faculty-development world, but still unfamiliar to many professors. The premise is simple enough: In designing a course, start with the end in mind. First decide what you want students to walk away from the course with — knowledge, skills, habits of mind — and then work backward into selecting the materials, activities, and assessments that will help them achieve those goals. Many faculty members work the other way around — first selecting the content of the course and then devising objectives based on the content.

Of course whenever I've mention backward design in these meetings with faculty members, I've never had much success lighting their intellectual fires. The 20-year question, by contrast, tends to make people sit up and think. It poses such a specific and fascinating challenge to our normal ways of thinking about a college course that it captures people's attention and inspires some deep reflection.

After taking four groups of academics through this process, I have seen some clear patterns emerge in their responses. Twenty years from now, they want students to have retained:

- **Passion for the subject.** Their most fundamental wish is for students to see the beauty, wonder, or joy that can come from encounters with the material. This year a biologist wrote about a protein that she totally "geeks out" on, and wished the same for biology majors in her courses: "I imagine that most students felt some spark of curiosity and joy along their own journeys in science. I want them to keep that curiosity and joy for as long as they can." I feel that myself in relation to the literary works I teach: I would love for students to never lose sight of the joy of reading great literature.
- **A sense of disciplinary literacy.** That isn't about recalling certain facts. It's about students maintaining a critical, reflective stance toward the subject matter throughout their lives. For example, many faculty members hope students will keep an informed and skeptical perspective toward popular press accounts of science, psychology, or anthropology. Professors want students to remember to check the sources or examine the logic behind the latest diet fad, happiness cure-all, or revolutionary new theory about human nature.
- **An understanding of how the discipline matters in other realms.** Some faculty members hope their students can continue to use the tools of their discipline to consider and negotiate other fields and issues in the wider world. The scientific method is not just for science, after all. Almost everything we encounter in life can — and probably should — be historicized. And attentiveness to the power of language, which I hope students will obtain in my writing courses, should serve them well in many contexts.

- **An eye for the big picture.** This one is hardest for faculty members to articulate, and they raise it tentatively. But I frequently hear them express a hope for some fundamental, long-term transformation in students — that they will become better citizens in a democracy, more empathetic humans, more ethical practitioners in their fields of work. "I seek to emphasize the skills and qualities," one historian said, "that will allow students to engage in thoughtful citizenship throughout their lives."

Scratch almost any of those four objectives, and you'll find a larger desire — perhaps the very deepest one of all — even if it never comes out in precisely these terms: the hope that our courses will help students live better lives. We want them to live lives of wonder, to be happy, to thrive, to be successful, to be good people. We believe that our disciplines and courses have the capacity to contribute to those goals.

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.

- 'How Much Do You Want Your Final to Count?'
- Small Changes in Teaching: The Last 5 Minutes of Class
- Small Changes in Teaching: Making Connections
- Small Changes or Big Revolutions?



Each fall I take advantage of this opportunity to rethink one of my own courses, and each year I am surprised at what I find. This year I reflected upon what I hoped students would take away from a senior seminar I am teaching on 21st-century British literature and culture. I had to teach that class just 45 minutes after discussing the 20-year question with my colleagues. I have never walked into a classroom with a clearer sense of purpose

than I did that evening. Articulating my 20-year goals reminds me of what drew me into my discipline, reignites my passion for my work, and orients me toward what matters most in my course content.

In some ways, of course, the 20-year question is a completely artificial exercise. We can't have any idea what students will retain at that distance. The historian Kevin Gannon has written about the notion that teaching is an act of "radical hope," and nothing brings out that notion more than envisioning how you might have affected the lives of your students 20 years after they have left your classroom.

If you've never pondered this question before, gather a group of colleagues and pose it to them. See what kinds of radical hopes emerge. And then — most impossible task of all — consider what it would look like to bring that radical hope into the classwork you will do with your students tomorrow.

James M. Lang is a professor of English and director of the D'Amour Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College, in Worcester, Mass. He is the author of Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons From the Science of Learning. Follow him on Twitter at @LangOnCourse.

This article is part of:
Small Changes in Teaching

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