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ADVICE

Small Changes in Teaching: The Minutes Before Class

3 simple ways you can set up the day's learning before the metaphorical bell rings

By *James M. Lang* | NOVEMBER 15, 2015



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When I first started teaching, the open space of a 50- or 75-minute class period seemed an eternity. Like many a new faculty member, I worried about having enough material. I wanted to ensure that, if discussion faltered or if I rushed through the lecture too quickly, I would have options to fill the remaining time. My greatest fear was using up

everything I had and finding 30 minutes still left on the clock.

Twenty years later I seem to have the opposite problem: not enough time in the class period to accomplish everything I have planned. It seems so difficult to me now to do much of substance in 50 minutes. I don't know whether to blame that shift in perspective on the fact that I have more teaching experience or that I'm just older. I suppose those two possibilities don't untangle very easily.

In my early years I would walk into the classroom with just a minute or two to spare and spend the final moments before class putting my papers in order, preparing whatever technology I might be using that day, and gathering my thoughts. If we started a little late, no problem — there was so much time to fill! But lately I have turned around on this practice as well, arriving at the classroom earlier and earlier. I've become my father's son, doing the academic equivalent of arriving at the airport hours before my scheduled departure.

2-Minute Tips:

Produced by Carmen Mendoza and Julia Schmalz

The more time I spend with students in that brief space before the start of class, the more I recognize that those warm-up minutes actually represent a fertile opportunity. I can use the time to enhance the learning that will take place in the hour that follows, to build a more positive atmosphere for class discussion, or simply to get to know my students a little better.

Over the next several months I will be making the argument in this space that small changes to our teaching — in things like course design, classroom practices, and communication with students — can have a powerful impact on student learning. To

kick off the series, let's focus on what we can do in those potentially empty moments before class, the ones I used to fritter away with shuffling papers or collecting my thoughts.

Some faculty have to move hurriedly from one course to their next and might not have the luxury of an extra few minutes prior to class. But for those who do, I think you will find that a very small investment of time can pay substantial dividends. Consider the following three ways that you can set up the day's learning in the few minutes before the metaphorical bell rings.

How are you? Last year faculty on my campus met for dinner to discuss *How College Works*, by Daniel F. Chambliss and Christopher G. Takacs. The book documents a long-term study the authors conducted to understand which aspects of the college experience had the greatest impact on students — both during their undergraduate years and afterward.

Their most consistent finding: Students cited the relationships they formed as the most important and memorable aspect of college. Those relationships began with fellow students, but also included connections with faculty and staff members. The number and intensity of those relationships not only predicted students' general satisfaction with college, but had the power to motivate them to deeper, more committed learning in their courses.

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?

While we were discussing this research over dinner, a colleague told us about an experiment she had been trying in her classes. Although she considers herself an introvert and finds small talk difficult (as do I), she had made a determined effort to arrive a few minutes before class and speak to an individual student or two each day. She rotated around the room, so that eventually she had chatted with each of them. The interactions were simple and brief: She asked how they were doing, or commented on something she had overheard them discussing, or inquired about their major or other interests.

The results, she said, had been impressive. Students were more talkative in discussions. The atmosphere in class took on a more positive, productive tone, and she felt more connected to her students — even the ones who normally liked to hide out in the back row. Moreover, many students praised the practice in her end-of-term course evaluations.

The research in *How College Works* helps explain why. In her pre-class conversations my colleague was creating an opportunity for relationships to form — more substantive than the ones that arise from routine classroom interactions. And if Chambliss and Takacs are correct, simple practices like this one have the power to make a significant improvement on both student learning and the college experience.

Display the framework. In a different book — *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* — Susan A. Ambrose and her co-authors point out that key differences exist between the way novices (students) and experts (faculty) understand and process new material. Experts have a clear picture of the framework of their discipline and can quickly recognize how new ideas alter or confirm their understanding. Novice learners tend to see facts, concepts, and skills as discrete, isolated pieces of knowledge, without any awareness of the connections that join them all together. A key difference between experts and novices is "the number or density of connections among the concepts, facts, and skills they know," they write.

Their finding suggests that, in any given class period, we need to help students understand how to better organize the material. Ever looked at students' notebooks after a lecture in which they've been given no help on the organizational front? You find lots of facts and concepts written down, but very little understanding of which points deserve emphasis or how different ideas relate to one another. Part of the problem may be poor note-taking skills, but another factor is that connections that seem clear to us can mystify our students.

All of which leads me to a very simple recommendation: Before class, put up on the board the day's agenda in whatever form you choose — perhaps a broad outline of the lecture material or a list of discussion topics. Keep your agenda there and visible

throughout class. As the session progresses, continue to remind students where they are within the framework for that day's material. The point is to let students see in advance how the class will be organized, even if you occasionally veer from that posted agenda.

This approach may have the added benefit of demonstrating to students that your course does, in fact, have an organization to it — something that seems obvious to you but not necessarily to them.

Create wonder. My final recommendation comes from Peter Newbury, an astronomer who now serves as the associate director of the Center for Engaged Teaching at the University of California at San Diego. In a wonderful blog post called "You Don't Have to Wait for the Clock to Strike to Start Teaching," he describes a teaching activity that he employs to stir interest and curiosity in class on that day's material.

Drawing inspiration from the "Astronomy Picture of the Day" — a NASA website that posts a new and fascinating image from the cosmos every day — he suggests that instructors post an image on the screen at the front of the room and ask two questions about it: "What do you notice? What do you wonder?" Before class starts, let the image direct the informal conversations, Newbury argues, and then use it to guide a brief discussion during the opening minutes of class.

Chief among the benefits of this strategy, Newbury says: It can activate students' prior knowledge, helping them form connections with what they already know. It also offers both the instructor and the students the opportunity to discuss how the images connect to previous course material. Obviously you could substitute anything for the NASA picture of the day: a great sentence in a writing class; a newspaper headline in a political-science class; an audio clip for a music class; an artifact in an archaeology class.

But what I really love about this technique is the simple message it conveys to students from the instructor: "I find this stuff fascinating, and I think you will, too; let's wonder about it together." I can't think of a better way to spend those moments before class officially begins.

The small decisions we make in our courses have the power to affect learning in big ways. Preclass activities like the ones I've described here can enrich any type of traditional college course, and even — with some tweaks — online learning experiences. So whether you are flipping your course or sticking with a lecture that day, consider how you might use the moments before class to prepare your students for learning.

*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*, will be published in March of 2016. Follow him on Twitter at @LangOnCourse.*

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