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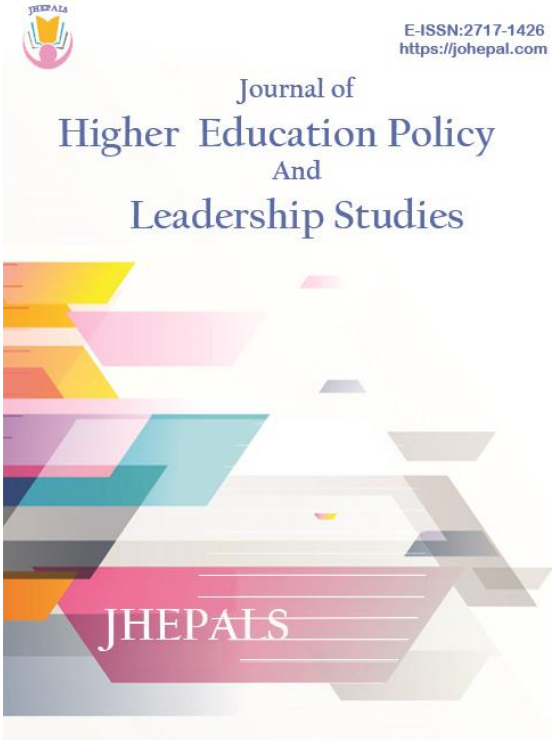

Book Review: **Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes**

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Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes

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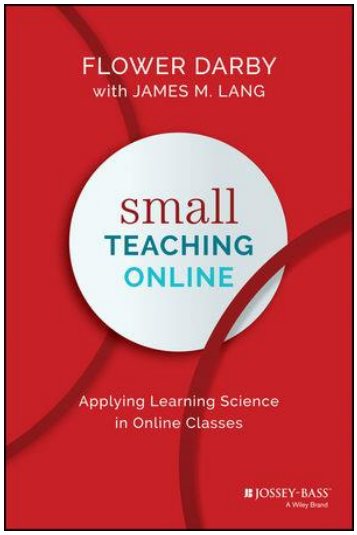

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Online, blended, and hybrid learning models are becoming increasingly popular as the education paradigm shifts to include more inclusive, diverse, and accessible learning environments. With the transition from traditional on-campus classes to online classes, educators must be prepared to teach effectively in both learning environments as students are met with significant challenges that impact how they communicate, engage, and learn (Xie, 2021). As a continuation to the original *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* by James M. Lang, instructional designer and online teaching expert Flower Darby gives educators practical strategies that are rooted in educational research including best practices for applying the science of learning to online learning environments with the aim to motivate and engage students. In this practical guide for novice and veteran

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educators, Darby explores the challenges of online instruction and provides easy to implement small teaching strategies that motivate students to learn and succeed in higher education.

While online learning presents challenges for educators and students, Darby reveals learning and teaching strategies that not only positively impact student learning but also motivates educators to improve their online courses and find enjoyment in online teaching. The small teaching approach is all about making small changes in course design, teaching practice, and communication to support, engage, and enhance student learning. The emphasis on implementing a small teaching approach is on designing brief teaching and learning activities, making small course design modifications each time a class is taught to improve its delivery, and making minor adjustments to the way educators communicate with online students. The book is presented in three parts with nine major chapters. Each chapter includes the following components: an introduction, research to support the small teaching strategy, detailed models for incorporating a small teaching strategy into practice, guidance for creating personal small teaching strategies, quick tips or brief reminders, and a conclusion. In this way, educators are provided practical research-based strategies that can be implemented in small steps to achieve excellence in online teaching. What is so refreshing about this book is that Darby shares with the audience her own experience, challenges, and success stories from being an online instructor and how her teaching has evolved over the years by simply incorporating small teaching strategies into her course design.

In Part 1: Design for Learning, readers get a closer look at how to design online courses with intentionality, including the importance of utilizing a backward design model which ultimately aligns assessments and activities to the course goals and objectives. With this model, Darby explains how brief video announcements, quick video introductions to each module, and written instructions can be used to help learners understand the purpose behind the various assessments and activities that they will engage in. Increasing engagement by providing frequent feedback is also discussed. Providing timely meaningful feedback aids in developing students metacognitive skills which is foundational in supporting students in becoming self-regulated learners; a skill often underdeveloped in online learners (Theobald, 2021). Part 1 concludes with leveraging media and technology tools to create mini lectures, short announcements to clarify instructions or address misconceptions, and guidance on how to select technology tools to solve a problem.

In Part 2: Teaching Humans, the importance of building relationships and connections with students and the course material is explored as Darby takes into account the social and emotional aspects of learning. To build a sense of community in online courses, Darby underscores the inclusion of online discussions to increase student-to-student interactions, making the presence of the instructor known by posting frequent video or text announcements, and conveying care and support for students by creating flexibility in class for those “life happens” moments. Darby also discusses small teaching strategies that provide creative ways to give students quality feedback, including creative virtual office hours and recorded audio or text feedback on formative assessments. Lastly, Chapter 6 details small teaching strategies that foster student persistence and success. Compared to learning that primarily takes place on-campus, online students tend to have considerably

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higher attrition rates (Stone & Springer, 2019). Therefore, Darby offers a few small teaching strategies to help including sending personalized emails for students who need a little extra support, creating a goals contract to help students plan for success, scaffolding assignments, teaching students effective study habits, etc.

In Part 3: Motivating Online Students (and Instructors), Darby details giving students a sense of control over their learning experience by creating autonomy, making connections by activating prior knowledge and providing students with organizing frameworks during lecture such as guided notes (partial outlines) and concept maps which encourage active engagement and aid students in seeing connections between concepts. In the last chapter, Darby concludes with small teaching strategies to develop the online instructor. Darby explains that taking an online class, seeking exemplars, and building self-efficacy are all essential components in becoming an effective online instructor. In this chapter, Darby also suggests books and other online resources for instructor's continuing development.

Overall, *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes* is an excellent practical resource for educators seeking to improve their online courses by taking small incremental steps to support student learning and engagement. This book benefits all types of educators and learning environments, including face-to-face, flipped classroom, blended, etc. From personal experience, I found inspiration in this book during my transition from face-to-face instruction to a hybrid learning model. I found the small teaching strategies provided by Darby to be invaluable resources that made my transition effortless and less stressful. Each year, I seek to improve my courses and I find solace in knowing that the small teaching strategies that I've implemented thus far are rooted in the science of learning and grounded in research. Being a research-informed educator is what I strive for and Flower Darby has put me one step closer to obtaining excellence in online instruction.

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Human Participants

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