

Mastering the Boring Basics

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It's usually late in the job interview when I pose one of my favorite questions to faculty and administrative candidates — after they've already spent a good amount of time talking about their work in the loftiest of terms. They've described their guiding values and philosophies and touted their most-successful projects and lessons. That's when I say: "So far we've talked about the visionary aspects of your position. Now I'd like to talk about the execution. Specifically, much of teaching/administrating is small and procedural. Tell me how you handle the 'boring basics.'"

Some candidates respond with aplomb; some struggle. But perhaps my favorite candidate of all time turned to me immediately and said, with urgency, "Oh! But the boring basics are never boring, or basic!" (He got the job.)

I wholeheartedly agree. The topic of how we handle the basics of our profession is important enough, and has enough recent literature behind it, to warrant a series of columns. So here in Part 1 of this series, I'd like to discuss the insights — and my own classroom adaptations — of James M. Lang's [Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons From the Science of Learning](#). His book, also the subject of [a series of columns](#) in The Chronicle, examines small, functional changes in our teaching that can have a big impact in the college classroom.

One of Lang's recurrent metaphors in *Small Teaching* is athletics — a comparison that rings true to me both as a professor and as a former [roller-derby competitor](#). Lang's central point is that athletic training focuses not so much on the singular high point of a game — the glorious once-in-a-lifetime-Hail-Mary play — as it does, repeatedly and consistently, on fundamentals. Professors, too, he suggests, can benefit from practicing "small ball" — maximizing those 5-to-10-minute periods of class that might otherwise be wasted or squandered. His goal is not wholesale change. One of the most refreshing aspects of the book is that it assumes that most professors are already quite respectable masters of their major modes of instruction. So instead, he focuses on small, easily forgotten "activities that instructors could turn around and use in their classrooms the next morning or the next week without an extensive overhaul."

Some of the key takeaways of his book provide some possible answers to interview questions about the “boring basics” of teaching.

Be mindful of how you spend the minutes before class. Perhaps the biggest change I made after reading Lang's book was, for me at least, a legitimate sacrifice: I began to regularly arrive at each of my classes 10 minutes early. If you are anything like I used to be, your first minutes of class might easily be a whirlwind of confusion: handing out materials, getting technology up and running, catching up with students who missed the previous class, and the like. None of those housekeeping chores actually helps you connect with students or engage them in immediate learning.

By consciously arriving at class early — sometimes before the previous professor has even vacated the premises — I can, as Lang argues, accomplish much more.

Standing in the hallway with students and walking into the classroom with them, I find I have time to make conversation at a much more personal, authentic level than when I'm rushing in a minute before the class is supposed to start. We can talk about their other courses, or about their families and weekends. The extra time allows me, too, to post on the blackboard a regular “Do Now” assignment — a thinking or writing question that students can consider immediately as they wait for class to start. I'm finding that, with my audience primed for instruction, less time is wasted, and the opening minutes of my classes are considerably less hectic.

Be even more mindful of how you end class. In the past, I might have felt slightly smug about the end of my classes in that, once I start teaching a class, I tend to control my time well. Typically I have left time to review what we've accomplished in that day's session.

But Lang proposes a much better way to end class: Ask students to review the day's content. In other words, rather than rehashing what you've already said, it's much more effective to ask the students, “Can you tell me about one of the major concepts we explored today?” Even more useful, Lang writes: Ask students to devise a possible exam question or follow-up assignment based on the day's lesson.

In *Small Teaching*, Lang also reminds us of the importance of giving immediate feedback to students on their work and ideas. Teaching takes a lot of energy, intellectual and emotional. It is far too easy for an overworked instructor to delay the step of responding to students until they have produced a polished final product. Because providing feedback is so costly on our psychic energies, we might even have unconsciously decided that students don't deserve feedback until we feel like they've worked as hard as we have. But the best teaching happens when instructors assess student work, and help them adjust, at all stages of the process — as they struggle with beginnings, muddle through middles, and fine-tune ends.

Thus, adding constant, customary feedback as your default final activity for the day (“Before I dismiss you, I want to come around and examine your opening paragraphs/answers.”) can be a very powerful choice.

Emphasize mini-activities that encourage metacognition. Research has demonstrated again and again that active engagement is key to lasting learning. But in critically examining my own teaching against Lang's insights, I saw ways in which my more procedural, everyday practices had failed to align with that finding.

Like many instructors who assign a lot of reading, for example, I quiz students briefly at the top of class to ensure they've done the work. But in the interest of squeezing quizzes into just five minutes of class time, I've generally asked questions that only require one-word answers or simple facts from the reading (“What does the birthmark look like on Georgiana's face?”).

But the same five minutes, Lang reminds us, could be used to quiz students in more active ways:

- Apply a concept: “In two to three sentences, describe an insight from Nathaniel Hawthorne's ‘The Birthmark’ that could be applied to a contemporary situation.”

- Make a prediction: “Based on ‘The Birthmark,’ list three values you think might be important for our next reading, *The Scarlet Letter*?”
- Set the stage for a future, larger assignment. (“If you had to make a single argument about ‘The Birthmark’ in an essay — which you will do in the next two weeks — what might your argument be?”).

Likewise, asking students to work through why they are thinking, studying, or writing in the ways that they are is also time well-spent. In a sense, you are forcing them to manage their meta. “What procedure (Post-It Notes? Notes on a separate page? No notes at all? Reading in print or on a screen?) did you use to read ‘The Birthmark,’ and how well did it work for you?” is yet another quiz question that is less boring, and less basic, than those I’ve relied on before.

Ultimately, by focusing less on the one-off showstopper lessons, and more on the everyday procedures of teaching, professors can coax more significance and substance out of their daily routines. Lang’s book is a valuable resource for professors willing to fiddle with their fundamentals in the light of contemporary cognitive science — and for job candidates who want to be prepared to discuss the boring basics of their syllabus.

Note to readers: Part 2 of this series will explore the suggestions of Doug Lemov’s [Teach Like a Champion 2.0: 62 Techniques that Put Students on the Path to College](#), a book intended for K-12 educators — and not without its detractors — but one that, nonetheless, offers valuable lessons for college faculty members.