

Faculty Inquiry Group Final Report: *Small Teaching Online*

Prepared by Anne McGrail with contributions from FIG Participants

FIG Participants:

Aryn Bartley , Amy Beasley , Rachel Knighten , Anne McGrail , Ingrid Nordstrom , Jennifer Von Ammon , Kevin Steeves [unofficial participant] Tracy Henninger [unofficial participant]

Meeting Dates:

[Spreadsheet](#)

November 18, 2020

December 9, 2020

January 27, 2021

April 1, 2021

April 22, 2021

[May 5, 2021 Spring Symposium]

June 10 [Final Gathering]

Overview:

This year our group met on Zoom five times to discuss *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes* by Flower Darby with James M. Lang (Jossey-Bass 2019). We also met on May 5th as presenters at the Spring Symposium at Lane to share our findings and experience and demonstrate a couple of the changes that we made in our teaching based on our experience in the FIG. This report includes meeting notes that outline concepts from the book by Flower Darby; a short bibliography of resources inspired by Darby's book; and slides, notes and links from FIG participants' CTL Symposium Presentation on May 5, 2021.

Meeting Notes

[Here are the notes that I took on my reading, with comments from our meetings interspersed.](#)

The notes outline the main concepts in Darby's book and the most salient ones that we discussed in our Zoom meetings.

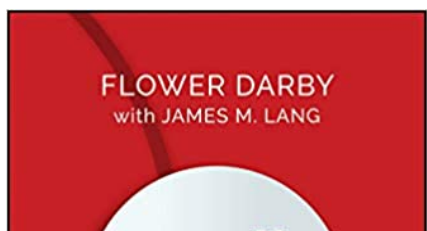
Further Reading

[Further Reading Inspired by *Small Teaching Online*](#)

CTL Symposium Workshop Presentation:

Small Teaching Online FIG: Incremental Improvements in Your Courses and Pedagogy

Aryn Bartley, Amy Beasley, Rachel Knighten, Anne McGrail, Rachel Knighten, Jennifer Von Ammon



What word or phrase describes your experience with online teaching this year? Answer in the chat.

“The concept of small teaching is simple: **small** and **strategic changes** have enormous power to improve student learning. Instructors face unique and specific challenges when teaching an online course. This book offers small teaching strategies that will positively impact the online classroom.

This book outlines practical and feasible applications of theoretical principles to help your online students learn. It includes current best practices around educational technologies, strategies to build community and collaboration, and minor changes you can make in your online teaching practice, small but impactful adjustments that result in significant learning gains.

• *Explains how you can support your online students*

- Autonomy
- Connection and building community
- Engagement
- Cognitive Presence, Teaching Presence, Social Presence
 - Cognitive presence (engagement with learning, reflection, meaning-making, drawing connections, etc.)
 - Social presence (presenting oneself to others as a “real person,” communicating openly, sharing emotion, group cohesion)
 - Teaching presence (thoughtful educational design, facilitation of learning in the course)

Which of these have you found most challenging about your online classes?

Here are some “small teaching changes” we have made or affirmed, inspired by our FIG

Ingrid: Introductory Writing Assignment

Jennifer: RAIN Practice

Aryn: Google Classroom Slide [H/T Meggie Wright], Guided Student Forum

Anne: Liquid Syllabus

Rachel: Weekly Announcements

Amy: Progress Journals

Ingrid Nordstrom

What I found useful:

The strategies Darby described reinforced what I had already learned about online teaching through the ATC training I've participated in, so a lot of what I read (e.g. creating video lectures, responding regularly to discussion forums, clear and frequent communication) wasn't new. But as I read the book, I thought a lot about who I am as a teacher. I've always considered myself much better in the classroom, because I connect with students more effectively in that environment: I tell stories about my own education (mis)adventures, quip about my daughters' antics, complain about my decision to drink a fourth cup of coffee before class, etc. In my online classes, I haven't created space for these kinds of candid conversations. Darby explains that typically "an individual online student worked through content alone and submitted assignments from afar" (104). And while some students (and teachers, I suspect) thrive in this kind of atmosphere, many don't. I for one feel that this approach can be really isolating and, if I'm going to be totally honest, I haven't always enjoyed teaching online.

What resonated most profoundly for me was Darby's emphasis on connection: connection between the course work and students' own lived experiences as well as connection with peers, the instructor, and the course content (159). Since for the most part my classes were already built, I spent much of the past few months focusing on how I can build space into my classes for more connection on a human level.

Here is an example of how I used it in my class:

I always assign an introductory writing assignment in which I ask students to tell me about themselves, their history as students and writers, and anything else they want me to know. Usually they write about their major, how much they dislike writing classes, and how they hope to learn about commas and semicolons. For the past two terms, I revised that assignment so that the prompt is, essentially, "How are you?" Here's an example from this term:

It has become a cliché to say that we are living in "unprecedented times," but honestly, there's no better way to describe this past year. We've had to adapt to life in a pandemic by moving classes, work, and relationships online; we've had to wade through some pretty murky political waters; we've had to respond to wildfires that threaten our community. It's been really tough. So the prompt for this assignment is simple: How are you?

Essentially, I want to get a sense of how you're doing. What challenges are you encountering—physically, mentally, and emotionally? What are you looking forward to this term? What are you feeling anxious about? This is an introductory assignment that I will use to get to know you both as a writer and as a person, so if there's anything you think I should know, this is a great place to share it. For example, if you're working full time from home and helping your fifth grader adapt to virtual learning, I want to know that! If you were displaced by the fires and are taking classes from a friend or family member's guest room, that's also useful information. Share only as much as you're comfortable with, but don't worry, this assignment will be entirely confidential.

Students have been writing long responses in which they tell me all about their challenges and successes from the past year, and I like this because they are more open than they would be if I only asked about their writing experience and it gives me a chance to respond personally in the feedback box.

What was inspiring about reading this in a FIG:

What was most valuable for me about this FIG was having the opportunity to connect with colleagues a bit more informally. Like most people, I'm suffering from a bit of Zoom fatigue, but the FIG meetings were something different -- a chance to talk about our challenges and, sometimes, triumphs. It was an opportunity to connect during a time that has felt so isolating.

Jennifer Von Ammon

What I found useful: In Chapter 4, "Building Community," Darby explores how community is built deliberately with effort and intention, and one of the most powerful ways to create community is by honoring our shared experience as humans. Darby argues that the more students see their instructors and fellow students as people, not just "names on a screen," the more fully engaged they will be in the course. Building and strengthening our empathy for our students—and encouraging them to do the same with themselves and each other—can create a stronger online learning environment and true connection. This "small" teaching strategy overlaps with the book's primary focus on connection, community, and autonomy.

Here is an example of how I used it in my class: Practicing empathy in the form of [Tara Brach's RAIN practice](#) is an exercise I'm developing in response to Darby's call to convey "caring and support." One of my first WR 121 assignments is to write about a personal experience and reflect on insights that arise as a result of the writing process. Students work with Barry Lopez' "Landscape and Narrative" and explore internal and external landscapes in this essay unit. By engaging in [RAIN](#) with a curious and open mind, students have the chance to build greater self-compassion and self-awareness. RAIN stands for **recognize** what is happening, **allow** life to be just as it is, **investigate** with curiosity and kindness, and finally **nurture** yourself and your experience with loving presence. This final step may involve placing your hand gently on your heart or imagining being in the presence of someone who loves you, perhaps another person or a pet.

What was inspiring about reading this in a FIG: Since practicing social distancing has been both isolating *and* exhausting (i.e. Zoom fatigue), it's been a practice of self-care to choose carefully where I expend energy. Working with engaging material with other like-minded colleagues was a pleasure. The book offers concrete practices that I could implement easily, and the conversations were inspiring, so even though I tend to be overscheduled with work and family obligations, the time spent on the FIG Zoom sessions were surprisingly energizing.

Rachel Knighten

What I found useful:

What I most appreciate about Small Teaching Online is the emphasis on concrete strategies that can be implemented quickly and easily, even mid-course, with the knowledge that they are grounded in learning science.

Here is an example of how I used it in my class

I found Darby's emphasis on cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence a helpful way to think about how I engage with the class. One specific change I made after reading her book was to develop a formula for the communication I send out to students each week that focused on her ideas of cognitive and social presence. In my announcements I include: a) big takeaways from the students' work that week in which I connect what I observed in their work to class themes (cognitive presence) b) a song, meme, or article I've found meaningful that connects to the course (social

presence), and a tip of some sort (Moodle, Portales (our curriculum), or language study resource).

What was inspiring about reading this in a FIG

What I found most inspiring about reading this book in a FIG was hearing how my colleagues were interpreting the reading and the ways they were adapting what they read to how they teach. Since we came from a few different disciplines, colleagues described different activities than I usually hear about in the context of language methodology, which gave me new ways to approach my own classes.

Aryn Bartley

What I found useful:

Darby focuses on the way you can improve the student experience through small changes. That is less overwhelming than feeling like you have to revamp everything.

A more specific useful insight: Darby describes how an effective education experience needs three types of presence:

- Cognitive presence (engagement with learning, reflection, meaning-making, drawing connections, etc.)
- Social presence (presenting oneself to others as a “real person,” communicating openly, sharing emotion, group cohesion)
- Teaching presence (thoughtful educational design, facilitation of learning in the course)

She emphasizes the use of online discussion board as a place where these three kinds of presence can be nurtured, and suggests using introductory discussion boards (with required responses!); open-ended, meaningful prompts; and, when necessary, smaller discussion forums. She suggests active instructor engagement in the discussion forums. She also suggests setting one date for the initial response and a later date for replies.

Here is an example of how I used it in my class

I use introductory discussion forums and content-based discussion forums, in which I participate (but I don't respond to all posts).

This term, I am trying out using an optional but recommended “Student Forum” where students can connect. I am offering prompts for the student forum. We’ll see how it works.

What was inspiring about reading this in a FIG

I appreciate hearing my colleagues’ on-the-ground experiences of teaching and learning from their stories of what has/hasn’t worked. FIGs are a great way to connect with others as teachers.

Anne McGrail

What I found useful about *Small Teaching Online*:

Darby’s focus on deliberate planning, on principles of intentional design, strategic release of content. Also “Control-value theory: Pekrun. “High control and high value will both independently and synergistically contribute” to students’ positive motivation to learn and perform.”

How I Used it in My Class: Focusing on connection and social presence, I created a “[liquid syllabus](#)” to “humanize pre-course contact” for my new Comedy class. [Slides here.](#)

The most useful and salient concept I found was inspired by Darby but actually came about when I started doing some related research on “[humanizing syllabi in STEM courses.](#)” The liquid syllabus is just one way of “humanizing” syllabi. I found many exemplars of “humanized” syllabi such as this [Ethnic Studies course syllabus](#) that I seek to emulate and this [Math class that I found inspiring.](#) And this assignment for “[Flash non-fiction](#)” where students write a 500 word autobiographical essay about a “mentor text” in their life is one I’m going to try in 2021-22.

What was inspiring about reading this in a FIG:

Over the course of several meetings we developed a community of practice energy that was very sustaining. In this year of the pandemic and many tedious Zoom meetings, the clear focus and shared goals of working with Darby’s book built a sense of community among us. Darby’s book itself often confirmed what we were doing but also moved each of us just a step further in thinking about our online teaching and our students. I was inspired with the concepts and research that Darby brought up and then when I went searching for more information I came up with this concept of the “humanized” syllabus

which I now think will change the integrated social/emotional learning components of my course.

Amy Beasley

What I found useful:

In the very first pages of the book, Darby describes a brand new college student, excited and nervous, showing up to a classroom on the first day. The classroom is empty, desks are scattered, the lights are off; the student hunts around and manages to find a syllabus with a schedule and a bunch of rules, but not a lot that reveals what the class will actually be like. There's no connection, or immediate sense of how to engage. The student is, of course, overwhelmed and confused and disheartened.

She compares this to what it can be like to encounter an online class for the first time. This stuck with me throughout the entire book – from the initial impression and tone that my class creates, to the way that I hope it invites students to share ideas openly and take the kinds of risks they need to take in order to learn; to assignments that I hope will give them the agency and flexibility to pursue interests and share views that matter to them. (I tell my students that this is what the class is about, but is that what students really experience when they move around in the space? Or does it present a wall of rules and expectations and deadlines? The weekly schedule and assignments and policies/expectations are easy to find, I think; how to create that welcoming and lively environment for inquiry and learning?)

Here is an example of how I used it in my class

This lends itself well to small changes, I think. I've started including welcome videos, and in some classes videos introducing each week, to create a more personal connection. I've got a weekly "Progress Journal" (which is not new) that's private, between a student and myself, where we talk about how things are going in the class. I've loosened up the deadline policy just a bit, letting students know that if they hit a rough patch in the term they can recover without harm to their grade. I've got other ideas brewing, too, having to do with ways to create deeper discussions in forums (instead of just single responses to one initial post) – and I am pondering ways of making the Moodle space more visually welcoming.

What was inspiring about reading this in a FIG: I gained much in the way of ideas and inspiration from talking with my colleagues about their interpretations of this book and hearing about the “small changes” they made or were thinking about making.