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Lang, James M. (2010) *On Course: A Week-by-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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Reviewed by Margaret A. Swanson
Delta State University

In his book, *On Course: A Week-by-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching*, Lang targets new teachers in higher education—new faculty on the tenure track, adjunct professors, or first-time teachers in graduate programs. His guide is organized in a week-by-week fashion that is not intended to be taken literally. In fact, Lang encourages readers to finish the book a month before the semester starts and then refer back to specific weeks as the semester progresses.

Lang presents three reasons for writing the book. First, he wants to offer new teachers a guide that he would have found useful in his first year—what he calls “a modest and realistic approach to teaching, one that has been tested and proven in the classroom as well as being informed by the

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research on teaching and learning in higher education” (p. xi). His second motivation was the creation of his monthly column in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “On Course,” in 2006. Lang admits that he drew upon his column for the book, but he considers the book mostly original. The final reason for *On Course*, according to Lang, is to provide an alternative to the teaching guides already available. Specifically, he sets his book against Ken Bain’s *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), Wilbert McKeachie’s *Teaching Tips* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2010—13th edition), and Barbara Gross Davis’s *Tools for Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995). Lang believes his work is more personal than these manuals, which he feels are too removed from the classroom, impersonal, objective, and abstract. He strives to make the book an in-depth, bottom-up approach from a professor in the trenches. His ultimate goal in writing the book is “to ensure that you have a fundamental awareness of how students learn, and to offer you concrete strategies to help them learn in a limited range of environments, both real and virtual” (p. 45-6).

Lang starts his book with “Before the Beginning: The Syllabus,” which is followed by 15 “weeks” and concludes with “After the End.” Each chapter begins with an introductory story or anecdote from the author, illustrating the topic of the chapter. Lang then launches into his main points about the topic, which is followed by the practical information for how to apply the practices or theories in the classroom. Every chapter concludes with an annotated list of the resources Lang mentions within the chapter.

“Before the Beginning” addresses how to draft the course syllabus. Week 1 covers the first days of class. Weeks 2 – 5 deal with teaching—using technology, lecturing, discussing, and teaching in small groups. Assignments and grading receive a nod in Week 6. Issues with students arise in weeks 7 – 9. Lang covers life outside of the classroom in Week 10, which is followed by re-energizing the classroom in Week 11. Week 12 is a Q & A style chapter covering common problems a first-time teacher encounters during the first semester. Weeks 13 and 14 wrap up the semester with discussions of student ratings and evaluations as well as the last days of class. Lang addresses teachers as people in Week 15 and concludes the

book with his final chapter, “After the End: Top Ten Resources.”

In many ways the book’s organization, or “conceit,” as Lang terms it, fits with the structure of a semester. Week 1 deals with the first days of class and Week 14 addresses the last days of class. However, the organization isn’t necessarily intuitive. For instance, Lang highlights students as learners and students as people in weeks 7 and 8 respectively. His reasoning for discussing students at this juncture is that new teachers are too overwhelmed with the basics at the beginning of the semester to consider teaching theories. The subjectivity of the week-by-week organization leaves something to be desired because no one can anticipate the right “week” to address each topic. Lang does an admirable job in structuring his guide, but he is smart to encourage his readers to read through the entire book before the semester starts.

The beauty of Lang’s book is that it does not overwhelm the reader. Lang draws on his years of experience in the classroom and in academia to present a realistic picture of what a new teacher’s first semester will look like. He is not bashful when it comes to giving his opinion. His years of experience have given Lang a decided view on how to lay out a syllabus, draft an assignment, or handle student issues. Being opinionated is not necessarily a drawback in a guide designed for people seeking advice. Indeed, opinions are needed to make an effective teaching manual. However, there are instances where personal opinions can be detrimental to the overall aim of the book. For example, Lang unequivocally states that he believes it ethically wrong to have a relationship with a student, whether or not he/she is one of your own students. The issue of professor/student relationships is murky to say the least and a discussion of the topic is much needed in this type of guide. However, Lang’s discussion of the topic would not have suffered by leaving out his personal beliefs.

One other drawback to *On Course* is that professors who find themselves facing a large (100+) class will have to adapt a lot of what Lang says to fit teaching such a large course. Lang’s book is perfect for small classes but leaves room for improvement for those facing larger groups. In particular, his sections on classroom discussions and small groups will require adaptation. Moreover, Lang discusses

teaching assistants in a very tangential manner. For many first-time teachers, handling teaching assistants can be as difficult as handling students. A separate chapter on managing teaching assistants might prove useful.

All in all, Lang's *On Course* is an engaging and helpful tool for new teachers in higher education. His prose is both witty and serious as each topic warrants. He does not overwhelm the reader with theory, but he draws upon enough to satisfy the pedagogically-minded. The resource section at the end of every chapter offers a treasure-trove of materials for further guidance. Finally, Lang uses his experiences in the classroom to present a well-researched, well-written, and realistic guide to help teachers survive their first semester in a college classroom.

About the Reviewer

Margaret A. Swanson is the Instructional Resources Center Librarian at Delta State University. Her areas of interest include teaching, higher education, technology, institutional repositories, Web 2.0 and Library 2.0, 19th-century British history, and women's and gender history.

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Editors

Gene V Glass

glass@edrev.info

Gustavo Fischman

fischman@edrev.info

Melissa Cast-Brede

cast-brede@edrev.info
