

# Building Community and Keeping Students' Attention: Teaching and Learning Scholar Offers Advice to UA Faculty

University Communications  
September 2019

A nationally recognized scholar on teaching and learning gave UA faculty advice on stoking students' curiosity, fostering community in the classroom, building patterns and structure in teaching routines and more during presentations on campus last week.

James Lang [1], a professor of English and director of the D'Amour Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts, was brought to campus by the Center for University Education Scholarship [2]. His presentations, given Thursday and Friday, were designed to help faculty start the semester off right and gain skills to be more effective teachers, especially with distracted students.

Lang has written five books on teaching and learning. His most recent, "Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning [3]," was published in 2016. He also writes a monthly column on teaching and learning for The Chronicle of Higher Education [4] and has conducted workshops at more than 100 colleges around the world.

## Cultivating Curiosity

The best teachers, Lang said, stoke curiosity in their students by raising problems or questions that a course aims to solve or answer ? and they do it on the first day of the semester. That often begins with the course's syllabus, he added, calling on faculty to avoid course descriptions that simply list the topics that will be covered.

"Many of us are engaged in research that is very specific. We're like miners under the surface getting at something that we know is really valuable," Lang said. "Students are at the surface, looking down in the hole, going, 'What the hell are you doing down there?'"

Lang suggested writing course descriptions that open with a series of key questions or challenges, an approach that can be more effective at piquing students' curiosity from the beginning.

Lang demonstrated this with a peer instruction activity in which attendees were asked to anonymously answer a question via an electronic poll. Once the answers were provided, attendees discussed why they chose their answers.

Before Lang revealed the correct answer, he pointed out that he was able to hold the room's attention through curiosity ? and by getting attendees emotionally invested in the correct answer by asking them to provide answers of their own.

## **Engaging Students and Building Community**

Many courses suffer from only a small portion of students being engaged, Lang said. Fixing that, he explained, often may be as simple as allowing more time after a question is asked for students to think of their answers or not calling on anyone until a certain number of hands are raised.

He also addressed the technique of cold-calling ? calling on students unexpectedly to ensure everyone participates in a course discussion. The technique is often derided in higher education, he said, but added that teachers can choose to set the tone of the situation.

"You can think about it as 'I'm challenging you to a duel,' or you can think about it as 'I'm inviting you to a feast,'" Lang said. "I would like to hear what you have to say because I think you have something valuable to offer to this conversation."

For a more structured approach to engaging students, Lang pointed to peer instruction as a valuable method. The process, he said, often involves the instructor posing a question, students providing individual responses via, for example, a poll, and then having students justify their responses in discussions with each other.

Doing an activity like this as early as possible in the semester, Lang said, helps define participation expectations for the rest of the course.

Engagement often depends on establishing a sense of community in a course, Lang said, making engagement one of the most important aspects of setting the tone early in the semester.

## **Creating Patterns That Change**

Because the human mind looks for patterns to make sense of confusing topics, Lang said, patterns and structure should be used in teaching to cultivate attention. An example of this is having a teaching routine that segments a course into defined sections that students come to expect rather than covering topics at random.

But this approach requires a balance, he added, since repetition can hinder attention. Changing the order of a routine, the way a classroom's physical space is used, or the methods a teacher uses to engage students, he explained, are ways to keep the patterns while maintaining attention.

"We should have a pattern to our teaching that's visible, and it should involve change," Lang said. "It should involve moments of transitions where students can kind of step back, allow their brains to take a short little break, and then step into the next item, whatever that might be, with a renewed attention."

## **Teaching Mindfully**

Lang said studies ? including one conducted at his own teaching center ? have not shown that brief mindfulness exercises in class will result in overall academic improvement or increased attention. Those exercises "just don't seem to be enough to get the benefits of mindfulness for learning, or for your long-term attentional capacities," he said.

But teachers can still use mindfulness in their classrooms by paying attention to how students' attention ebbs and flows and accepting that attention levels will change. Teachers can then decide what changes should be made to support students' attention. As an example, he pointed to the work of [Christopher Emdin](#) <sup>[5]</sup>, a teacher and author who studied preachers in black churches, and their ability to engage audiences with a simple phrase: Can I get an amen?

"What is the 'can I get an amen' in your classroom," Lang asked the audience. "What is the equivalent of that that you can do to help your students?"

Lang also advised faculty to build "attention exercises" into their courses, or activities that give students the time to discuss among themselves parts of the course content that capture their attention, in effect helping them build the skill of being attentive.

### 'Attention is an Achievement'

Lang argued that while distractions are pervasive, deliberately cultivating attention in students should be every teacher's focus.

He urged faculty members to have more compassion for themselves and their students when it comes to keeping attention during lectures.

"Because of the fact that we are at least partially built to have dispersed awareness, you might actually say that dispersion and distraction are the normal state of the human mind, and attention rises out of that like an island or like the tip of the iceberg," Lang said. "Attention is an achievement."

CUES's mission is to provide UA faculty with the resources to explore evidence-based teaching and learning. CUES was established in late 2016 with a \$3 million gift from an anonymous donor.

The center's events, held throughout the academic year, include inviting outstanding speakers to campus for presentations that bring together faculty from across the University, said CUES Director **Guadalupe Lozano**.

"These tend to be ? and have been so far ? national speakers who really are well known and are therefore in a fantastic position to help build capacity among our faculty, strengthening what the UA already knows about innovation in teaching and learning," Lozano said.

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### Links

[1] <https://www.assumption.edu/people-and-departments/directory/james-lang-phd>

[2] <http://cues.arizona.edu/>

[3] <http://www.jamesmlang.com/p/small-teaching.html>

[4] <https://www.chronicle.com/search?q=%22James+M.+Lang%22>

[5] [https://www.ted.com/talks/christopher\\_emdin\\_teach\\_teachers\\_how\\_to\\_create\\_magic/transcript?language=en#t-69073](https://www.ted.com/talks/christopher_emdin_teach_teachers_how_to_create_magic/transcript?language=en#t-69073)