

Staying 'On Course'

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On Course: A Week-by-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching. By James M. Lang. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008, 336 pp., \$26.95 (HC), ISBN 978-0-674-02806-7.

Readers may already know James Lang from his regular contributions to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. In the fall of 1999, when I was just beginning to write my doctoral dissertation, Lang began writing a column on the vicissitudes of the academic job market. Like many graduate students of the time, I followed Lang's articles faithfully, shared his anxieties while worrying over my own prospects, and cheered when he eventually landed a plum position. From the fall of 2000 until the spring of 2006, Lang wrote a second series of articles for the *Chronicle* that charted the course of his tenure-track career at Assumption College. These eventually became the basis for his well-known autobiographical work, *Life on the Tenure Track: Lessons from the First Year* (Johns Hopkins, 2005).

I confess to being a fan of Lang's *Chronicle* pieces, and in the interest of full disclosure I should reveal that last fall, as the Faculty Director of Fitchburg State College's Center for Teaching and Learning, I invited him to my campus as a paid speaker. We teach at neighboring colleges in Central Massachusetts, and Fitchburg State had just embarked on an ambitious new faculty mentoring program. It was only natural to have him kick off the academic year, especially as the Center had distributed complimentary copies of *Life on the Tenure Track* to all incoming faculty. In the event, I found him as gracious and generous in person as he is thoughtful and engaging in print.

I only wish this latest offering by Lang had been available in the fall. *On Course: A Week-by-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching* is a "how to" guide for those just beginning to teach at the college or university level. As with *Life on the Tenure Track*, the present volume came out of a similarly titled set of articles in the *Chronicle*. A handful of "On Course" entries from the fall of 2006 served as rough drafts of chapters in the book, and, along with nearly a score more, they have provided the basis for what Lang calls "a modest and realistic approach to teaching" (xi). He suggests that new faculty read the book before the first semester gets underway and then mine it as a reference guide throughout their early career.

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The seventeen chapters of the volume roughly correspond to the fifteen weeks of a semester with the addition of a prologue and epilogue. Lang downplays this structural “conceit,” and it doubtless derives from the strictures of writing for a periodical. In any event, each chapter treats a discrete topic, offering analysis of methods or approaches, occasionally some firm “dos” and “don’ts,” and a brief annotated list of mostly print resources. New faculty will appreciate the thoughtful advice on syllabus development (in the Prologue), the in-depth analysis of the particular virtues of lectures and discussions (Chapters 3 and 4), and the frank treatments of such subjects as students’ personal lives (Chapter 8), cheating and plagiarism (Chapter 9), and student evaluations of faculty (Chapter 13). As an experienced instructor, I found Lang’s recommendations for “first days” (Chapter 1) and for battling the end-of-semester “doldrums” (Chapter 11) most enlightening. On balance, though, the book really is targeted to junior faculty.

Other legacies of the constraints of writing for the *Chronicle* do crop up. One or two chapters present topics in a clunky, reference-manual style. This is especially the case with the chapter on classroom discussions (Chapter 4), which ends awkwardly with an FAQ, while the chapter on “common problems” (Chapter 12) is entirely given over to the same format. In other instances, Lang privileges methods that are most applicable for Humanities courses. Indeed, his focus is sometimes so narrow that he can neglect methods which do not stress writing (e.g., in Chapter 6), and he seems shy about fully exploring examples from the sciences. In one example from a typical science course, I found myself wanting Lang to explain exactly how students cram the post-Newtonian conceptualizations of motion that are taught in the modern physics classroom into an Aristotelian “mental model,” because it would have allowed him to flesh out the problem of student biases (pp. 158-163). But in the end both the organizational

oddities and the overemphasis of the Humanities seem natural here: in the former case, Lang *intends* the volume to serve as a reference manual, and in the latter he writes from his own experiences and leaves instructors to discover their own discipline-specific applications.

Other teaching guides have their virtues. Wilbert J. McKeachie’s venerable *Teaching Tips* (now in its twelfth edition; Houghton Mifflin, 2006) has a more comprehensive bibliography of teaching and learning scholarship and probably treats more topics at a higher level, while Linda B. Nilson’s *Teaching at Its Best* (second edition; Anker, 2003) is more inclusive of non-Humanities disciplines. However, *On Course* surpasses these with the fullness of Lang’s analysis on the subjects he treats and the charm of his relaxed, almost conversational prose. In short, Lang has drawn from his considerable classroom experience to think through the practical consequences of his advice, and he has done so without the usual soporific and technical style of the earlier guides. This engaging book should be required reading for all new college and university teachers. ■■