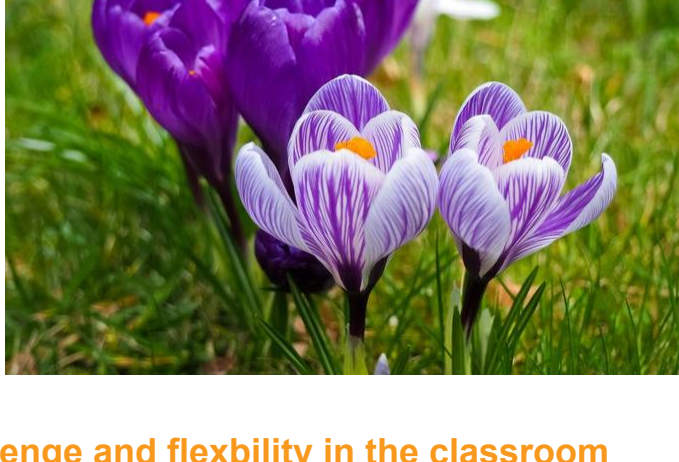


NCTL Newsletter - Spring '23, No. 2

From the Jane B. Nord Center for Teaching + Learning

Reflections on Learning and Retention

In this newsletter, I reflect on recent issues of flexibility and retention, and offer strategies and resources for supporting effective learning. I also include an updated programming calendar with a newly-added course (re)design institute.



Balancing challenge and flexibility in the classroom

Of all the teaching articles I have read this semester, [this one on student expectations for flexibility](#) hit the hardest by capturing pressing contemporary challenges. Becky Supiano does an excellent job showing compassion for both students and faculty in a post-learning-disruption context of flagging motivation, delicate resilience, rampant anxiety, and assumptions that course assignments and content delivery should be alterable. While some amount of flexibility is helpful for meeting our students' various needs and situations, too much can impede learning, lower motivation, and exacerbate anxiety. Structure and challenge are necessary. Supiano's article offers several examples to help faculty navigate decisions that center learning by striking a balance between flexibility and structure.

Answer the what, how, and why questions

It is important to explain our teaching methods. When we talk to our students about our courses and coursework, we need to include what they will do and how they can succeed as well as why we have certain policies and structures. This supports metacognition and [reduces anxiety by minimizing ambiguity](#), especially for our neurodiverse students.

During our last all-employee meeting, someone asked how we can support student retention. This is an effort that calls for [institution-wide participation](#) where faculty can play a crucial role. Here are some important points to consider:

- **Small class size does not ensure success.** While smaller class sizes can improve curricular quality, the [benefits may not be the same](#) for all students across identities and background experiences. Effective course design and inclusive teaching practices are essential to greater parity of successful learning.
- **Students need to know how they are doing.** [Early and frequent feedback](#), including low-stakes assessments, allows students and faculty to see how learning is progressing and can help identify students who may need additional support.
- **Students need to know what they are doing.** Instructional clarity (clear explanations, effective use of examples) and strong organization (effective use of class time, connection to course objectives) are [correlated with course achievement](#) and [retention](#).

The Nord Center can help in all of these areas, including designing easy and effective assessments, doing course observations, connecting course objectives to learning activities, and utilizing inclusive teaching methods. Consider signing up for our [course \(re\)design institute](#) to collaborate on course design with your peers, [book an in-person or virtual appointment](#) to discuss ideas, or stop by our office (105 A, right across from the faculty/staff lounge).

Spring Programming



Save the date! We have a few more sessions planned for Spring, including a CIA TRI Conversation and the Course (Re)Design Institute.

MARCH

THIS WEEK: Sharing Classroom Practices. [Tuesday, March 21, 12:30 - 1:30](#). Select faculty share innovative approaches and practices. There will be time for questions and discussion.

Lunch is provided. [Register here](#)

Student Development Theory Primer. [Friday, March 31, 12 - 1 PM](#). In this session, Kari Weaver and Jesse Grant will lead a discussion about theories of student development. These theories can help us understand how students might experience the world, what they might need from their experiences in higher education, how they engage in thinking, and what matters for their holistic growth across multiple identities, backgrounds, and experiences. We will share materials prior to the session to allow participants to explore varied theories.

[Register here to receive materials and attend the session.](#)

APRIL

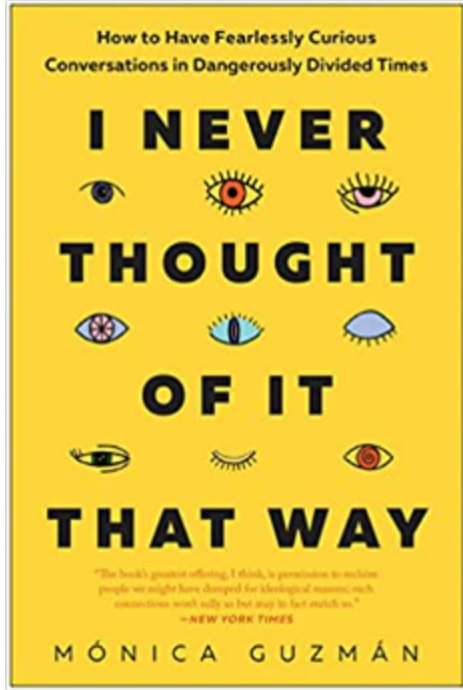
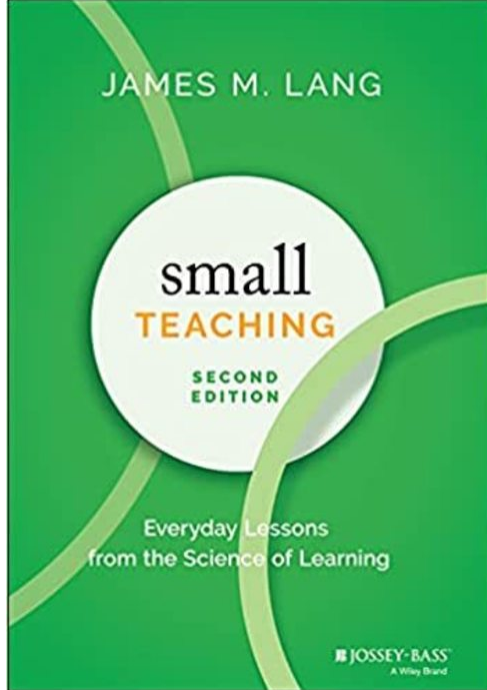
CIA TRI Conversation: The harm of silence: How can we learn to acknowledge issues of inequity in ways that are both powerful and respectful? [Wednesday, April 19, 11:45 AM - 1 PM](#).

These conversations are meant to help us enact our institutional values of transparency, responsibility, and inclusion. Sessions include facilitated dialogue around poignant and provocative questions. [Register here](#)

MAY

Course (Re)Design Institute: The Nord Center is excited to host a retreat-style course (re)design institute that allows for focused time and collaboration in course design. Whether you are designing a new course or restructuring elements of an existing course, this opportunity is for you! Each session includes lecture, working time, and collaboration. Food and beverages are provided. [You can sign up for full days or single sessions](#) on Tuesday, May 16 and Thursday, May 18.

Spring Reading Groups



Small Teaching:

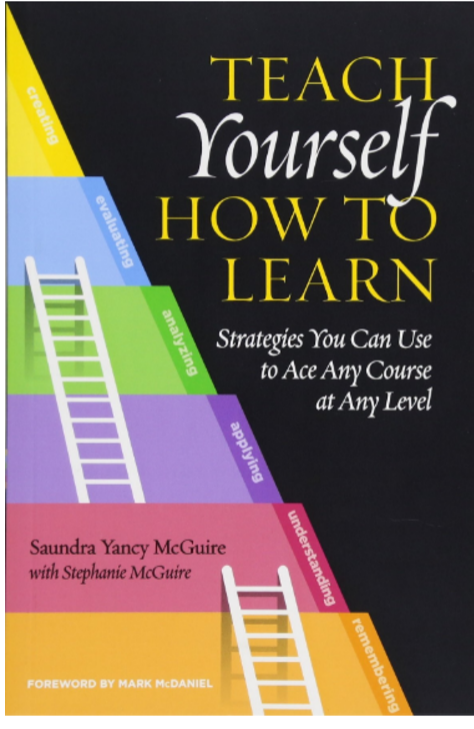
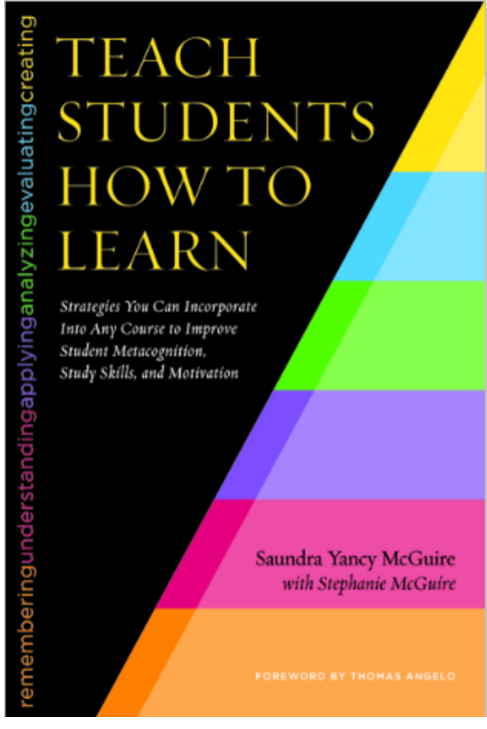
We kicked off our reading group by discussing the first three chapters of [Small teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning](#). This book pulls from cognitive theory to describe easily implemented strategies for improving student learning. The first three chapters were on predicting, retrieving, and interleaving. The information in these chapters both affirmed some of what I already do in the classroom and challenged some of my assumptions about how learning works.

Anyone is welcome to attend the next meeting on [Tuesday, March 28 at 2 PM in Room 111](#). We will discuss part two of the book on understanding, covering the chapters on connecting, practicing, and explaining. [Our library has provided unlimited digital copies of this book.](#)

I Never Thought of it That Way:

Our next meeting of the reading group on [I Never Thought of it That Way: How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times](#) is [Friday, March 24 at 11 AM in Room 104](#). In this book, the author describes how to overcome fear and work toward understanding and learning from people with different worldviews. Our library has [print copies](#), [e-books](#), and an [audiobook](#) copy available

Learning Opportunities



Over the break, I read Saundra McGuire's book, [Teach Students How to Learn](#). Dr. McGuire addresses key areas of learning including metacognition and motivation and offers several strategies for teaching students how to embrace challenge and learn effectively. Our library offers digital copies of this book and her student-facing resource, [Teach Yourself How to Learn](#). You might offer select chapters from this additional resource to students as part of your course reading. For example, chapter 2, "Why don't all students already know how to learn", can help students understand why high school felt so much easier than college.

If you do not have time to read the faculty-facing book, consider checking out the appendices, which include a compilation of strategies for instructors and resources for presenting learning strategies. You can also listen to Dr. McGuire discuss these ideas in several podcasts, including [this overview](#) and [this exploration of metacognition](#). You can also see [slides from her keynote presentations](#) discussing the importance of a growth mindset and barriers to motivation such as learned helplessness.



11610 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44106 USA
800.223.4700 | 216.421.7000

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