

“Try One Thing”

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Twenty-five years ago, in his classic essay on the scholarship of teaching and learning, Randy Bass (1999) discussed challenges we find in problematizing teaching. Simply put, whereas people often find discussing problems in their research to be generative and engaging conversations, few people want to share problems they are having in their teaching. Even inviting others to describe teaching challenges they are experiencing, in a supportive way, feels more like an accusation than an invitation to conversation. While problematizing traditional research drives scholarly work, Bass argued teaching is not yet viewed in that manner. Years later, I believe he remains correct.

I've pondered these words a great deal in my more than two decades as a full-time faculty member in political science, and in my first three years as director of my university's Faculty Development Center (during which time I continue to teach each semester). Melding my own experiences in teaching with those of my colleagues, I notice challenges in how we change teaching practice. When faculty confront issues in their teaching, whether it is incorporating more active learning, pursuing more equitable grading practices, or making their classrooms welcoming spaces that support larger diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, faculty generally do not want to hear how poorly they are doing (insecurity is not unheard of in academia). They often struggle in thinking about how they might make large-scale changes in their approach, due to the time and other challenges associated with doing so. These efforts also require a degree of vulnerability with which few people are completely comfortable.

Given the voluntary nature of participation in the programs my center runs, it is safe to say that the faculty who show up at our workshops on DEI are generally among our strongest practitioners and proponents of broader DEI goals. We are, proverbially, preaching to the choir

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(although, in fairness, as a colleague has reminded me, sometimes the choir does need to rehearse). Faculty members who most need to revisit their approach to DEI are often the least likely ones to show up in our center, as I am sure is the case in other teaching centers as well.

Our approach to DEI has come to center around what we call “Try One Thing.” This idea goes by different names in other places; for example, James Lang’s (2021) work on *Small Teaching* has made an exemplary contribution to our thinking. Lang’s ideas of small teaching, like ours on “Try One Thing,” suggest that most faculty do not have the time, desire, or comfort level to implement large-scale change in what they are doing; often, they do not even need to do so. Making effective and meaningful adjustments can happen in small doses. “Try one thing,” I tell my colleagues, emulating much of Lang’s approach. If that works, come back for more advice, and try something else. If *that* works, consider visiting the Center to learn even more new ideas!

I’ll offer one example from my own class on the potential power of small change. For many years, I have thought myself to be a supportive individual around LGBTQ+ issues, in the classroom and in my personal life. Supporting this marginalized segment of our university and global community has always been important to me. I have had many conversations with students who expressed concern about how their families would treat their sexual orientation, or gender identity, and needed a sympathetic ear. I am honored each time students approach me in this way, but profoundly worried for the pain and angst this causes them. As such, while I do not personally identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, supporting students who do is important to me.

One year, as I was thinking about my approach, I realized I could make one (very) small step toward this end. Each semester, I hand out index cards on which students fill out the standard first day information – name, hometown, year in school, possible major, something interesting about yourself. That year, for a change, I invited them, if they wished, to also include the pronouns they use. Adding this statement in class took perhaps seven seconds of class time; for large numbers of students, it likely went completely unnoticed. But I would be willing to bet

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that several students in the room felt seen and welcomed, because the middle-aged white guy in front of them understood the importance of pronouns to them and offered his support.

This small step cost me very little class time, and risked doing nothing more than offending students who are uncomfortable with notions of gender identity (a risk I was willing to bear). My small action hopefully created a welcoming space for students in my classroom. Other small steps – listing the location of the LGBT Resource Center on my syllabus, including data on the impact of sexual orientation on voting when we discuss election results – offer small ways to address the goals of DEI in class (on just the narrow topic of sexual and gender orientation). Similar steps can be taken around supporting other traditionally marginalized groups, including racial and ethnic minorities, first-gen students, disabled students, etc.

Did what I did actually make a difference? It is hard to know, of course, since by their nature, small steps often go unseen by many. I would also imagine that the impression students might have formed when I acknowledged the issue of pronouns was augmented by the actions I took (or did not take) in class all semester. I would not imagine, for example, that students would note this on their course evaluations, as those were filled out three months later. I simply have no evidence that what I did “worked,” nor do I anticipate hard evidence would be present. This step, and similar small steps, are probably unseen by most students, but might make a difference to some (if only to convince them that I was someone worthy of trusting at the beginning of the semester). That payoff seems worth the (very) low cost of my small gesture.

While I would never suggest that somebody avoid taking these larger steps to improve their work in the DEI realm, nor deny that some faculty really do need to make big leaps in their approach, my advice to most people thinking about these issues is to start small. Try one thing and build from there. Doing so is an effective way to build momentum on the path to meaningful change, one step at a time.

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References

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