Bonni: [00:00:00] Today on episode number 240 of the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast, Flower Darby shares about her new book, Small Teaching Online, coauthored with a familiar past guest, James Lang.

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Bonni: [00:00:26] Hello and welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. I'm Bonni Stachowiak and this is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating and learning. We also share ways to improve our productivity approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be more present for our students.

Bonni: [00:00:53] Today's guest was introduced to me by ACUE, some of you who have been listening regularly might remember that the Association of College and University Educators and Teaching in Higher Ed partnered together and we started that when we realized how many experts both organizations had featured in common. It's just been a great partnership.

Bonni: [00:01:16] Flower is a senior instructional designer at Northern Arizona University. She's also online faculty at NAU and Estrella Mountain Community College. Flower has taught for over 22 years in a range of disciplines from English, to Jazz Dance, to Educational Technology, to Pilates. Flower's online teaching experience spans 10 years, 75 classes, and more than 2,000 students. She loves to see students thrive through excellent teaching practice whether that teaching takes place in person or online.

Bonni: [00:01:51] Today Flower Darby and I share a conversation about her new book Small Teaching Online, which is co-authored with James Lang. Fower, welcome to Teaching in Higher Ed.

Flower: [00:02:04] Thank you. It's great to be here.

Bonni: [00:02:06] I'm so glad to have been introduced to you by ACUE and I will admit, I was fascinated from the very beginning just because you wrote a follow up to a book that has really transformed my teaching and transformed so many professors teaching all around the world. So I know that it also had an impact on you. Could you talk about how you first got connected with James Lang and a little bit about the origins of the book that you co-wrote together?

Flower: [00:02:32] Yes. It's been a really exciting journey. It's been an honor. Small Teaching, again, has made a big impact from so many faculties teaching practice. And Jim came to my university, Northern Arizona University, in January 2018 and gave his talk on small teaching. Somebody raised a hand to asked the question, how do you do this online? And Jim said, "well that's the first question that people always ask. And I don't know. I would need a co-author. That could be a good book." I thought about it for a few days. And I said Me. Pick me. I want to write that book with you because there's a need for it.

Bonni: [00:03:12] And had you already read Small Teaching or was coming into your institution the first that you'd heard about this concept of the little things we can do that have a big difference in our teaching?

Flower: [00:03:21] I read it in-depth prior to his talk because I would say going to be hosting a table conversation. And my primary role at the university is as an instructional designer and even apart from the workshop that day, it's really good to have in your back pocket approaches and things like that you can discuss with faculty one on one when we're working together.

Flower: [00:03:44] So the idea resonated with me immediately because I've done it myself. You hear about an approach and you think about implementing it and you think that's too daunting. I can't do that. So I really could see the value and the need for applying his approach to online teaching as well.

Bonni: [00:04:02] Talk a little bit about some of the big themes that are coming out when we start talking about online learning that are real challenges for us and how you wanted to incorporate that into the book.

Flower: [00:04:16] Well I think the biggest challenge regarding online learning is its newness. It's brand new. It's maybe at a stretch, 20 years old. And we just don't have the experience with it either as students or as teachers. I do think this is going to change with time and additional research. But the fact is right now it's a new modality for both teachers and students.

Flower: [00:04:40] We don't have the experience. Many of us faculty have not been online learners. Again, I imagine that will change. But we don't even know what it looks like. I was meeting with faculty this morning who wanted a tour of an online course because she had never been in one. And you contrast that to our experience being students in physical classrooms for decades and being teachers in physical classrooms. We bring a lot of experience we have thought about how we want to teach there. We just don't have that depth of experience with online classes and neither do our students. So it's new ground. We're pioneering and we're learning as we go and there's work to be done there.

Bonni: [00:05:20] You say that it's new. And I think some people might be concerned about the use of that term, You use "new" in contrast to what? I mean just frame that for us because it's not like it just was you know last Tuesday or something. Talk a little bit about that distinction.

Flower: [00:05:35] Thank you. Well I've given some thought to this idea that we've taught in person for thousands of years. We have thousands of years of experience teaching in person in different formats in classrooms, in coaching sessions, and we know how to do that. We have thought about it. We've experimented. We have studied it.

Flower: [00:05:54] We've done a lot of work in neuroscience and cognitive psychology to learn how people learn. That's when I say we don't have the depths of experience and the breadth with online learning compared to how long we've been teaching in person, online learning is in its infancy.

Bonni: [00:06:10] Yeah. One of the things that we find when we start to coach faculty in in-person classes is that they do look to the model of how they learned when they were in college. And for many of them it came from a position of predominantly lecture being used as the method of what I would say is content delivery. And much of the actual what I would call learning happening outside the class. And now we've started to discover that actually we could use methods like active learning, like retrieval practice, lots of different ways to I want to say even cherish, but to really make the biggest use out of the time we have in person. But so many times we don't have the models to go from. So professors will find themselves going back to what's comfortable because that kind of change really can be uncomfortable especially because the first time you start to try an approach, it may not go the way you expect it to go. You may have some more signs of our failures more evidence of a failure versus if we go with our norm.

Bonni: [00:07:21] Where do you see that same thing happening in online classes where- I mean you said that some of us, most of us wouldn't even have taken an online class. But even if we have, where do you see that disconnect happening there for us wanting to have something to emulate but maybe we don't have something to do that with?

Flower: [00:07:40] Well many students and faculty have less than ideal online experiences. In fact, a recent report came out from the Educause Center on Action Research (ECAR), and they found that 9% of the 13,000 faculty respondents said that they prefer to teach online. That indicates to me that 91% would rather teach anywhere else.

Flower: [00:08:08] And so my thinking here is that when we have experienced an online class as a student, or maybe we've observed another online teacher to help us get ready, or maybe very commonly were given content the first time we're going to teach something, we use somebody else's content. Well usually, I'm going to make the argument that those are less than ideal. They're not necessarily exemplary approaches. And I'm going to chalk that up again to how little time we've had to study how to do online learning well. But oftentimes we've seen poor examples and we think that's how it's done. And we continue in that vein and that's regrettable.

Bonni: [00:08:44] Where do you see the most common challenge or a most common challenge of emulating something that should not have been looked at as a model?

Flower: [00:08:54] In my experience I still see many online courses that resemble electronic correspondence courses more than a highly engaging interactive online learning experience. So posting some readings, maybe a few videos, or even less effective just the PowerPoint slides without any narration or talking through them and then requiring a quiz and maybe some discussion. We can go a lot further than that, but that is a very common example of what people might be exposed to first. And they literally can't conceive of doing anything else. They don't have decades of experience going into different online classrooms and experiencing different teachers approaches. So they see one way is the only way they've seen and those are the patterns that they might fall into.

Bonni: [00:09:43] One of the things that I notice and this is an anecdotal observation is that some faculty will really want to hold themselves back. One example would, "I don't want to ever be on the video." And there's lots of

reasons why someone might not want to be on a video, but I don't want to second guess that. Yet at the same time, I often times think it comes from a sense of "well I don't want to put myself out there like that," or "that that would make me uncomfortable." And I think well, the class that you are teaching, if you are actually teaching and learning is happening, learning can be uncomfortable. So sometimes if we can open ourselves up a little bit to allow more of a sense of that presence. One thing I do want to say just that you mentioned how little research has been done. But I did hear at a conference, a guy had done some look at whether the learning was different on a screen cast if the professor's face was showing on the video and if it wasn't, learning wasn't any different. So you might produce the same learning outcomes if you've got your slides and you don't ever have your face there but a sense of presence, a sense of connection, a sense of caring, that can make a difference.

Bonni: [00:10:57] Again, I don't think we have enough research evidence to say that emphatically but I certainly have found that to be anecdotally true in my own teaching. And then also just watching other people. I see people put walls up in online classes. I also see them do it standing behind podiums and sticking to the script perfectly and not leaving enough room for the unexpected in they're teaching.

Flower: [00:11:18] There is research that shows that students definitely engage more when they can see their instructors face and hear the voice. And at least hearing the voice is most important because we use so much vocal intonation and emphasis. But when you are willing to capture your face as well, it does impact student engagement. And as Jose Bowen likes to say "engagement precedes learning." If you want to learn- you have to want to be there in order to learn.

Flower: [00:11:46] One of the things I asked faculty who are new to perhaps screen casting or recording a mini lecture video, I ask faculty how comfortable they were the very first time they stepped into a classroom to teach in person. Most of the time they remember that there was a learning curve there and a sense of discomfort and I just coach them that this is very similar. With more practice, you'll get more comfortable. Recently in my online class I recorded a quick announcement video from my treadmill desk and I was just walking along in my workout clothes and talking to my students because I had been grading while I was on that treadmill desk. With practice will come that comfort level, but I know what you're saying in terms of it's just again a new experience for faculty. They don't have the confidence yet, many of them.

Bonni: [00:12:33] There's a couple different ways I distinguish the types of videos, the ones that are just announcements, I try to do those in a single take. I don't- I'll record the same thing as I did the last time but I have this sense that it's different, it's a different day so we're looking into the next week a class and I'm going to re-record those weekly announcements. And to the way in which we can be on treadmill desks or I saw- oh I wish I had done a better job of bookmarking this because someone had done a intro to her class, which was a little bit more produced than what you and I are talking about Flower, but it was one of those car dashboard camera things.

Flower: [00:13:14] Yes.

Bonni: [00:13:15] And I wish I could remember what she did. It was so silly and then I was just talking with Michelle Pacansky-Brock and she was saying someone had done a video where they filmed were they look like they're looking at each other, you know the Brady Bunch side by side thing. And you know those do take longer and you do want to spend a little bit more time on them so that they maximize every minute of time. I mean those those take some planning and some effort to really do those right. But those means of just connection, walking on your treadmill desk can't be beat. I don't think.

Flower: [00:13:49] Well and to your point of re-recording content that you've delivered several different times, it is the case that these students are new to you.

Bonni: [00:13:58] Yes.

Flower: [00:13:58] And they are going to be perhaps working on different challenges or facing different questions or the group dynamic is different. And so absolutely, record that quick in the moment opportunity to explain things in a way that makes the most sense for this group of students. It's well worth the time.

Flower: [00:14:14] Now I would also argue, I agree, those highly or more highly produced videos can be really fun and effective but I encourage my faculty to go ahead and do the one take shot for those casual announcements or sometimes I'll even do a two to three minute mini micro lecture. And I leave the times in the video when I trip over my tongue in and sometimes my hair is out of place and occasionally my children pop up behind me in the video and then I say go away and I leave that and I share that with my students because it does make it so much more authentic. Again in the classroom, it is not the case that we are always perfectly articulate in our speech and sometimes we're having a

bad hair day and sometimes we're distracted by a plane flying by out the window, whatever it might be. So bring that into the online class too. The authenticity is so important.

Bonni: [00:15:02] I sneezed once in the middle of a pen cast and they just thought it was the funniest thing. And it brought more of an opportunity to connect. And I guess the only thing I would say is that us saying that doesn't mean then that you apologize for it and spend the time there because that's really- when you're in an online environment, we do need to be conscious of the time, how little time and just the attention span being so different when we're in front of a computer or some other type of screen, many times our learners are in front of mobile devices such that yes if we do the sneeze, yes if our kids come in, and yes these are unexpected things that will bring the attention back. But then we don't want to say "oh I'm so sorry that I just sneezed. Oh I don't know why I did that. I should probably delete this..." But then I guess so that's where we go. No no no no no no no you're wasting my time. The sneeze was good. Stop with the sneeze. Go to your next point.

Flower: [00:15:55] That's a great point, Bonni. And one of the things in fact, I don't think I've ever commented in that way but what I do is I pull a funny face right into the webcam and I just make a funny expression like "oops" and I just keep talking.

Bonni: [00:16:08] This is where I wish we were on video so we could see your face. I love that. One of the things I know is so important to you in your work and in your teaching and coaching a faculty to be better at this has to do with the idea of empathy. How do we draw our need to have empathy for our students and do that better in an online environment?

Flower: [00:16:30] Well I begin really focusing on this topic through an experience that I had in the ACUE course, you mentioned ACUE at the beginning of this conversation. They have an online course experience for faculty and we as a faculty cohort, we experienced that last year and we're continuing. I facilitated it but I also took the course as a learner. And I was stunned by what we learned by being online students. I was going to say online students again, but for many of the faculty that was their first experience being an online learner.

Flower: [00:17:05] And we were in a course experience it's the equivalent of a three credit hour graduate course as endorsed by the American Council on Education. It's rigorous. There are deadlines. And my faculty and I experienced so many aha moments when we ourselves felt at a loss, we didn't know how to

do something. A family member became unexpectedly ill and we missed a deadline and we felt like throwing in the towel because clearly we must be done.

Flower: [00:17:32] So that kind of an online learning experience is really impactful to help us remember what it's like. One of my current faculty and my cohort submitted an assignment and somehow the PDF came through blank. Her answers were not in it. And she literally- it was the first assignment that was due. She thought that she was done. She thought I messed this up and there's no going back. It's over. And I had this conversation with her like, well first of all, no it's not over. That was a technical glitch. But then I said but this is what we do to our students. We set expectations and standards and those are important but finding ways of building some flexibility so that our students are not defeated when the first little unexpected thing goes wrong, finding ways to build in some wiggle room to remember- that's one of the things that my faculty really learned and I did is juggling a full time job, family obligations, and taking this online professional development course. Hello... That's what our students are doing.

Flower: [00:18:38] So remembering how difficult it is to compete or learning for the first time to balance those competing demands, really very impactful and lead me to think quite a bit about how we develop empathy for our online learners especially. There are so many challenges associated with online classes. And in the book I do spend some time encouraging readers to put themselves in their online students shoes and imagine the course experience from the online student perspective. I think it can be a really interesting way to reframe our thinking and our approach.

Bonni: [00:19:14] One of the things that I really admire in this space have shared about before is to be sure that whatever expectations we're setting map to whatever context someone will be exhibiting these skills in the future. As an example, if you're going to have a strict policy around due dates, then that should map to the profession or the context in which you're going to be preparing them for.

Bonni: [00:19:37] So in the business world if you don't get the proposal or the RFP back to the people on time, then you're not going to get the sale or you're not going to get to grow your business or what have you. And so I do- I am someone who I like to set a culture that says we start things on time. We fulfill our commitments. I cannot tell you how my team has changed in two really important ways.

Bonni: [00:20:00] One is just the empathy because these things do happen. So building in some kind of flexibility. I don't personally like to build it into every assignment. Some people do that it drops the grade every one day or whatever. But that has not really aligned well with my own teaching philosophy. But having some kind of wiggle room. And I know you like to have you know a couple of times during the term or the semester where students can submit something later or redo an assignment and building that kind of structure in.

Bonni: [00:20:30] But the second reason why I found it transformative is it is just so much easier. I have to nagivate again figure out if that really is worthy of trying to gauge the what's being described in an email or in person office up whether it's quote on quote "worthy" of the extension or whatever. What I'm looking for over the term or the or is just the trends. One mistake should not have a huge- you're talking about your colleague the first time she submited something. That's the first time they're doing it is when we certainly should have flexibility to give them that confidence to pursue through the course.

Flower: [00:21:10] That's right. And my favorite approach- and again it's so important as you mentioned to find one that aligns with your teaching philosophy. I love the oops token, which is the concept I first learned about in Linda Nilson's book On Specifications Grading. And I incorporate that. And that is just a get out of jail free card. I don't necessarily need to know all the gory details of what's happening- and that sounded somewhat insensitive I didn't mean it that way. But essentially if you need a little extra time on one assignment, use your token. It's fin.e And then then we don't have to worry about verifying the circumstances that caused the students to need a little more time.

Bonni: [00:21:49] It didn't sound insensitive to me at all, it sounded really realistic because we should not expect that our students should feel like they have to tell us their entire life stories. Some of these things are incredibly private that our students are going through. And even when they're not, I just prefer lowering the risk and the temptation of wanting to spin the story a little bit more grand so it can be justified. You didn't sound insensitive. I thought no that's very realistic. And it's not elevating yourself to be judge and jury in these kinds of instances. It sounded realistic and ultimately empathetic, yet still I think that probably turning things in on time most of the time is important to you as well based on what you said.

Flower: [00:22:35] Absolutely. And I do hear faculty pushback on giving extensions or or those kinds of things, that's not the real world. But our students

aren't necessarily in their professional careers quite yet and they are still learning so how do we scaffold that learning the law allows some opportunities to primarily meet the expectations and yet still understanding that they are still learning. How do we build in those support structures.

Bonni: [00:23:00] Yeah. And to me there are lots of things in the real world that doesn't get in on time. There either no consequences or low consequences it's more just the overall trend in one's life. I'm thinking about credit scores as one example, it's not great if you're late on a credit card payment but being late on one credit card payment doesn't mean you go from 720 down to zero. So get that. Proportional I think is probably a thing and looking at trends and overall success.

Flower: [00:23:34] That's an excellent analogy. I've just found- and again building in ways of allowing a little flexibility as needed. I have never had a student take advantage of that. And it relieves pressure from my life in terms of the amount of time, as you know when a student has to explain what it is that happened or- it just saves me time and again very practically speaking, I feel like we can all use a little wiggle room in our lives and my job is to support my students and their learning. Not to tell them that if they're willing to work, I won't take it.

Bonni: [00:24:02] Before we go on to the recommendations segment, I wonder if you would reflect on just this idea of that I'm good at doing something in my teaching in person and how can I find ways to then draw from those strengths and move them into an online environment?

Flower: [00:24:19] Right. I think this is an area for learning for many faculty especially those who love teaching which I'm guessing that's your audience. We've taught in person for so long and we were good at it and we enjoy it. And what we learned how to do is to translate those practices and bring them into the online classroom.

Flower: [00:24:37] I was talking with a friend and a colleague last month. He's been teaching online for over ten years, one of the people who got me started. And he told me that what he loves about teaching in person is the opportunity to joke around with his students and interact and be himself, let his personality show. And he said "I never thought of bringing my personality into my online class. There I am stiff and formal. I am distant. I am strict I. I don't show my personality." And so it was an aha moment for him. He was teaching for well over ten years again not going to make the argument that he had never seen an example of somebody who's bringing more of a human tone, even in terms

of when we write assignment instructions or announcements. Can we write them in a human voice and in our own voice and not in that sort of distant formal academic language?

Flower: [00:25:30] We do a lot of things well in person. We do interact with our students. We support them. We make eye contact. We smile when we're teaching in person. We can, with thought and effort, we can figure out how to do those things in the online classroom as well.

Bonni: [00:25:45] I enjoy so much to talking about the smiling. I was thinking about somewhere in an online context, they asked people to respond in all GIFs. So for people who may not be familiar, a GIF is the little animated thing that you see, it is either a movie clip or a cartoon or something but it doesn't have any sound in it at all and you see it a lot in social media or people will text it. That's in a lot of the messaging platforms.

Bonni: [00:26:10] But to have a discussion forum that's all just GIFs in response to something, that's kind of meeting people in an environment that possibly if they're taking an online class not in every case but that they might speak in those languages and they might be more comfortable reacting to a video instead of some big long discussion. And it's just a different way to get people to react that is more akin to how they respond in online environments in other contexts. I'm not saying we do this for everything, but the little element of surprise, it did make me smile when I saw people doing it. And you can see that the people watch the video. They're having a response to what they just watched. It's a fun, creative way- but I think more so what I'd love to emphasize too is just to get to connect with people like you, Flower, truly it's such a honor for me but it also just ignites my curiosity and it ignites my imagination for what's possible and how we can do this better with our students. It's so much fun.

Flower: [00:27:09] Well thank you, Bonni. I love that example of her playing with GIFs. New forms of communication are absolutely developing in our online and digital interactions, texting, messaging, social media, we're using emoji, GIFs, Memes. We can communicate very effectively and we can enter into deep engagement with other people online. We just need to bring some of those practices into the classroom which doesn't have to be formal all the time. There are new ways of communicating. We need to think carefully about whether and how we bring some of those things into our online teaching practice.

Bonni: [00:27:46] This is the point in the show where we each get to share our recommendations and mine is in the productivity space and it's an app that I

started using called Scanner Pro. And if Scanner Pro isn't available on whatever OS that you use for your phone, it's more about just having a good scanner pp for your phone. I do have a piece of hardware that allows me to scan if it's a large stack of paper, but if it's something small they're getting so good these days and you just lay out if it's a stack of even five pages, lay them out on a contrasting surface and you essentially take a picture but it automatically recognizes where the edge of that paper is and it sharpens the text. It's amazing. I mean sometimes I find that the scan quality is even higher than the quality of the piece paper that on my desk. And I can flip over to the next page and leave the app running. It's running the entire time and each time it's finding the edges of that paper, it's scanning, it's scanning and then what I like about scanner Pro which it's now replaced the other app that I had been using is that has little workflows built into it.

Bonni: [00:28:54] So for me, when I travel now I can automatically have that receipt go to the place that it needs to go and have any tags associated with it to make it easier when I come back and need to do an expense report. If it's some sort of documentation related to the department then it can make sure and go in the right folder in whatever cloud services I want it to go. So Scanner Pro is just saving me some time. And one of the things I'm looking forward to is just getting to spend a little bit more time in the app because I think there's even things that can do I haven't discovered yet. But it was very easy to get started and that's always important to me as well. I got started right away didn't have confusion. But then they have these workflows, I could try this too. And it's just a great little app. So that's what I have to recommend today. And Flower, I'm going to pass it over to you for your recommendations.

Flower: [00:29:38] Thank you. I would like to share a book that has been very impactful for me in recent months. The title of the book is Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less by Alex Soojung-Kim Pang. And it has been transformative in my thinking. I confess to being something of a workaholic. I know those of us who are passionate about what we do, we find it hard to stop doing the work. And our culture seems to honor long work hours.

Flower: [00:30:09] This book makes a compelling argument for why that isn't effective and how when you're doing creative work, which I would argue all teachers and researchers are engaged in, that you have those insights so much more profoundly when you are deliberate in your ways of carving out time for rest. The book also lays out some extremely practical tips for how to make the most of your rest time and what kinds of activities you should be engaged in. He has a whole chapter on deep play, which I love the concept. Now

implementing this, I think is going to be a little bit of a challenge, but it's started influence my thinking. And his big point is don't just try to let rest happen where it does between the cracks, but instead be intentional to schedule those opportunities to allow your brain to take a break.

Bonni: [00:31:04] Sounds like a wonderful book and one that I definitely would get a lot out of I imagine. And I love the I'm looking at it right now online and I'm seen the cover, at least the version that I'm looking at, has flip flops. I just love it. Very clever. I feel rested already just looking at the flip flops.

Flower: [00:31:22] Exactly. The cover of the van that I've been reading has a deck chair or a lounge chair.

Bonni: [00:31:28] That's even better.

Flower: [00:31:29] It's a good one.

Bonni: [00:31:30] I might have to go see if I can find the cover you are referring to.

Flower: [00:31:34] Yeah well basically the book has given me permission to allow myself to take those breaks.

Bonni: [00:31:40] Oh and love it. Well Flower, thank you so much for coming on Teaching in Higher Ed, for sharing this recommendation, and all this great advice for us to take the principles from Small Teaching but bring them online and I can't wait to read your book. We're recording this before I could get my hands on one. But you have made me even more so- you had me at the title, but now you love me even more so really looking forward to seeing the evidence of you all of your work on this. Thank you so much for the work on the book and your collaboration with James Lang. And thank you for coming on the show today.

Flower: [00:32:12] Thank you Bonni, it's been an honor and a privilege. Thank you so much.

Bonni: [00:32:17] I'm so grateful for my partnership with ACUE that brings me guests that are as phenomenal as Flower Darby. Thank you to ACUE. And thanks to Flower for spending your time today on Teaching in Higher Ed.

Bonni: [00:32:29] Those of you who have been listening for a while know that I ask every once in awhile for you to think about giving a review on whatever service it is that you use to listen to the show on. That just help spread the word about the show. But another way you can help spread the word about the show is just think about a memorable episode and pass it on to some colleagues and let them know that you benefited from it and see if they'd like to take a listen to. We are here on episode number 240. 241 is coming up. Thanks so much for listening and being a part of this community. And I'll see you next time.

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