

BOOK REVIEWS

James M. Lang. *On Course: A Week-by-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching.* Boston: Harvard University Press, 2008. Pp. 316. Cloth, \$26.95; ISBN 978-0-674-02805-7.

The first semester and indeed the first year of teaching at the college level presents instructors with a number of challenges. James M. Lang's *On Course: A Week-by-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching* addresses many of the common issues that instructors confront during their first semester. Lang's work is a useful survival guide for what can be a difficult experience. Although he advises new instructors to organize for an entire semester of teaching that integrates learning objectives into the syllabus and uses them as a road map for the semester, his approach offers a fair amount of flexibility. He covers important topics such as how best to construct a syllabus, effective teaching methods, technology, dealing with students, assignments, time management, how to re-energize a class towards the end of the semester, and adjusting to a new department and institution. His observations about the importance of classroom time and how to utilize the rhythms of the semester to one's benefit are particularly insightful. Lang encourages new instructors to experiment in the classroom and find techniques that fit their teaching style. But he rightly warns about the dangers to first-semester instructors of becoming overly ambitious in the classroom, too often outspoken in faculty meetings, or too committed to service.

Lang's work draws heavily from the scholarship of teaching and learning. Those unfamiliar with specific issues covered in its literature will find the lists of resources he gives at the end of each chapter especially useful. While he incorporates the scholarship of teaching and learning into his book, Lang's writing is largely free of theory and pedagogical jargon. Moreover, teaching is not an abstract topic for him. His love of teaching is clear in his writing. Furthermore, he illustrates his points with a number of anecdotes from his own classroom experiences as well as those of his colleagues. Finally, he approaches teaching with two qualities that both make his writing more engaging and are essential for maintaining one's sanity as a teacher: humility and a sense of humor.

New instructors of history should note two limitations to Lang's work. First, he writes for a broad audience and his discussions are not discipline specific. More importantly, while Lang mentions that teachers need to grow and improve over time, he does not offer any substantive suggestions on how to think of the first semester and the first year as the foundation for a career of teaching. Nor does he adequately discuss how to evaluate one's first semester in a fashion that will help one build for the future. Certainly new instructors are often so overwhelmed with course preparation, grading, and other responsibilities that it is often difficult to see beyond the semester break. Still, more extensive coverage of this issue would have been useful for those beginning tenure-track positions. Despite these limitations, Lang's contribution is considerable. Overall, his suggestions are well-thought out and supported by research. New

instructors of history will find his work an excellent tool to prepare for their first semester of teaching.

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Jules R. Benjamin. *A Student's Guide to History*. Tenth ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007. Pp. 288. Paper, \$23.13; ISBN-13: 978-0-312-44674-1.

Jules Benjamin articulately provides a history student with a new best friend. *A Student's Guide to History* is a nonthreatening, interesting, and useful guide for students to become successful scholars of history. His "cut to the chase" writing style organizes topics in a concise and logical manner, giving examples to elaborate on the topics presented. The chapters are appropriately designed to follow a history course from the beginning of a semester to test taking, formal research, and research paper composition.

A Student's Guide to History's major theme is scholarship and is conveyed throughout five chapters. It identifies history in broad terms, discussing historians' rationalizations and interpretations of history, including a thorough examination of primary and secondary resources. It is a "how to" guide for success in a history course, discussing appropriate note-taking devices, location of main themes in reading assignments, and a comprehensive approach to preparing for different styles of exams. Benjamin emphasizes the significance of writing in a history course and outlines two distinct accomplishments for learning writing skills: "... it demonstrates that your thinking about a subject is logical [and] ... it enables you to convey to your readers in a convincing way exactly what you want them to understand." Utilizing the skills of writing, chapters four and five collaboratively prepare the student to compose a research paper. The chapters concentrate on thesis, themes, collecting resources, interpretation of primary and secondary resources, and plagiarism. Clear writing is the main objective for student success in generating a scholarly research paper. Throughout the text, Benjamin includes references Appendix A and B to assist students with research. Both list useful "indexes, references, collections, periodicals and hundreds of print and electronic resources ... including local and family history."

Benjamin expands the tenth edition to include new material throughout the text. But the most important contribution is his ability to comply with the digital age that "reflects the changing needs of history students." The most useful addition to *A Student's Guide to History* is the in-depth discussions on web-based research and helpful web references for student investigation of a topic. The coverage includes online historical dictionaries, newspapers, public documents, and resources in United States and world history. The exclusive online list is categorized in Appendix A and B. These resources are referenced and explained throughout the text to offer students more insight and clarification of online research.