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## Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto, by Kevin M. Gannon

Fenner Stewart

University of Calgary, [fenner.stewart@ucalgary.ca](mailto:fenner.stewart@ucalgary.ca)

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Book Review



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## Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto, by Kevin M. Gannon

### Abstract

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## Book Review: *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto*, by Kevin M. Gannon<sup>1</sup>

Fenner L. Stewart<sup>2</sup>

### Fulfilling the Promise of Higher Education

Kevin Gannon's *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto* ("Radical Hope") is a call for all of us who teach in higher education to realize the full extent of our opportunity to improve the lives of others. He argues that by inspiring our students to develop their practice of learning, we not only help them to succeed in school, but throughout their lives.<sup>3</sup>

What is a practice of learning? Narrowly defined, it is the application of methods to gain knowledge. Not everyone learns the same way, so each individual needs to figure out which methods will work best for them.<sup>4</sup> The following is a classic practice, or habit, of learning that I frequently use. I attempt to achieve a desired outcome. If I fail on my first attempt, I consider what went wrong. I use the insight gained to imagine a different approach that might work. Many times, I will endure successive failed attempts until I finally achieve success. Failing before I succeed not only teaches me what works, but also what does not. In this way, failing usually teaches me as much—if not more—than if I succeed on my first try.

Although this is only one of many examples of learning, a couple of universal principles can be distilled from it. First, to learn takes bravery. One needs to befriend failure because, as Gannon explains, failure is essential to learning.<sup>5</sup> Second, the knowledge gained should not be compartmentalized away from decision making in everyday life. As Gannon asserts, "Knowledge is meant to live in the world, to be transmitted, to help students actively intervene in their own reality."<sup>6</sup> Thus, by helping our students learn how to learn and to hone their practice of learning, we empower them to develop agency over their lives.<sup>7</sup>

The central message of *Radical Hope* is that unless we create both opportunities for our students to develop their practice of learning and a safe space in which to do so, our students are unlikely to develop the agency required to reach their potential.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, we must remove ourselves from the centre of the classroom experience, and instead place our students there.<sup>9</sup> We must also kindle relationships with our students so that they perceive us as their allies.<sup>10</sup> When we do this well, students will have both the opportunity and the confidence to develop their practice of learning. This practice, when cultivated, gives them the best chance to flourish throughout their lives.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (West Virginia University Press, 2020) [*Radical Hope*].

<sup>2</sup> Fenner Stewart is an Associate Professor at the University of Calgary, Faculty of Law ([fenner.stewart@ucalgary.ca](mailto:fenner.stewart@ucalgary.ca)). Special thanks to Vanisha Sukdeo for recommending the book. This book review is dedicated to my mother, Mary Wanda Stewart (1933-2020), who started teaching in a rural one-room schoolhouse in 1951. She was a fierce ally of all students, but especially those disadvantaged by circumstance.

<sup>3</sup> See Gannon, *supra* note 1 at 6-7, 23-24, 26, 94, 139, 151-52.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* at 59.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* at 135-42.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* at 94.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* at 23-26, 94, 139, 151.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* at 23-26, 47, 94, 110, 137-46.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* at 24-25, 44-46.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* at 119, 130-31.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*.

In the book's introduction, Gannon begins by framing a stark picture of university life. He suggests that, for many, "decades of frustration" have transformed the love of teaching into an attitude of "jaded detachment."<sup>12</sup> Gannon notes, "We've all encountered the grumpy, cynical faculty colleague who ceaselessly complains about their students, the institution, and likely many of their colleagues as well."<sup>13</sup> He warns that we must avoid this "trap"<sup>14</sup> by answering "cynicism with purpose," and "despair with hope."<sup>15</sup> Otherwise, we harm ourselves, our students, our colleagues, and our institution.<sup>16</sup>

In the first of ten chapters that follow, Gannon argues that effective teaching is a cornerstone of democracy. Higher education has "a role and a responsibility in creating and sustaining a free, democratic society."<sup>17</sup> As educators in higher education, we are responsible for teaching our students to be "actively engaged"<sup>18</sup> and to adopt "habits like self-examination, critical thinking, and questioning."<sup>19</sup> In doing so, we play an important role in protecting democracy by cultivating a citizenry capable of defending against "the theft of the public sphere."<sup>20</sup>

Chapter two invites us to critically assess what we communicate to our students, looking beyond the words that we speak to focus on what our "teaching practices" communicate to students.<sup>21</sup> Gannon uses the example of a reading list authored exclusively by white males, explaining how this tacitly communicates to non-white or non-male students that "people like them do not participate in the process of creating knowledge" in this field.<sup>22</sup> It could also communicate that we believe that the opinions of non-white or non-male students are not as important as those of white males—a perception that is just as damaging. Either way, such messaging risks student alienation, which undermines learning.

If our students are going to feel safe to learn, they must first "trust" that we understand them, accept them as they are, and are willing to champion their best interests.<sup>23</sup> We must treat all of our students with kindness and compassion.<sup>24</sup> We must learn how each of our students wants to be seen, and see them that way.<sup>25</sup> We must take an interest in what they say, and take pride in their accomplishments.<sup>26</sup> Absentminded messaging, such as in the reading list example, can undermine this trust. Gannon reflects that we must do our utmost to be aware of the potential impacts of what we are "saying" to our students—"in all senses of the term."<sup>27</sup>

Chapter three explains the merit of a "student-centered" pedagogy.<sup>28</sup> Learning does not occur without "self-efficacy"—that is, without the student exercising agency to understand.<sup>29</sup> To inspire our students to develop agency, Gannon argues we must devise opportunities for learning

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid* at 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid* at 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* at 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid* at 18.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid* at 23.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid* at 17.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid* at 31.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid* at 32.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid* at 36.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid* at 30, 37-38.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid* at 66, 135-41.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid* at 141-42.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid* at 35-36.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid* at 43.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid* at 47.

in which they are required to be active participants in the process of identifying, explaining, and constructing ideas.<sup>30</sup>

The failure of the “instructor-centric” pedagogy, which most of us employ in the classroom the majority of the time, is that it lacks opportunities for students to develop a practice of learning.<sup>31</sup> Gannon employs Paulo Freire’s “banking concept” of education to explain this dominant model of pedagogy.<sup>32</sup> Gannon outlines a situation where a lecturer attempts to deposit information into the minds of students. At the end of the semester, students are required to write a final examination which demands they withdraw selected samples of the information the lecturer has supposedly deposited in their brains. To help ensure success, students take notes during each lecture. The drawback is that there is not sufficient time to practice learning, because students are spending their time focused on notetaking. As a result, learning becomes something students attempt without our supervision or our assistance.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, deviation from this dominant model (even if it fails to support student learning) can trigger our students to panic when they contemplate the consequences of doing “things that they don’t associate with what learning should be,” that is, things that replace transcribing lectures so that they have good notes to study from when they are preparing for a final examination.<sup>34</sup> Gannon opines that fear of such change triggers students to “push back” against it,<sup>35</sup> driving them to defend “structures” that are far more likely to subjugate them than they are to serve them.<sup>36</sup> The ultimate irony is that lecturing rarely provides more insight than what the students can gain from studying our assigned readings.

The fact that administrators, faculty, and even students defend this dominant model of pedagogy, to Gannon, represents an “insidious process.”<sup>37</sup> He argues that it is “fundamentally dehumanizing” for them, even if they do not appreciate it as such.<sup>38</sup> These declarations may raise eyebrows, but empirical research is conclusive: Our students are suffering from mental health problems that are “directly related to academic performance and retention.”<sup>39</sup> Statistics Canada reports that Canadians between the ages of fifteen to twenty-four “had the highest rates of mood and anxiety disorders of all age groups,” and that suicides account for 25 per cent of deaths within this population.<sup>40</sup> On Canadian campuses, a recent study found that 64.5 per cent of students reported feeling overwhelmed with anxiety, 59.6 per cent reported feeling hopeless, 44.4 per cent reported suffering debilitating depression, 13 per cent reported suicidal ideation, and 2.1 per cent reported attempting suicide.<sup>41</sup>

These sobering statistics ought to encourage us to take calls for change seriously, though many continue to resist. If pressed to explain why, their defense follows a number of well-

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid* at 43, 47, 49-50.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid* at 41.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid* at 45.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid* at 45-48.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid* at 48.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid* at 48.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid* at 47.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid* at 46.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>39</sup> Shirley Porter, “A Descriptive Study of Post-Secondary Student Mental Health Crises” (2019) 22 *College Q*, online: <[collegequarterly.ca/2019-vol22-num01-winter/descriptive-study-of-post-secondary-student-mental-health-crises.html](http://collegequarterly.ca/2019-vol22-num01-winter/descriptive-study-of-post-secondary-student-mental-health-crises.html)>.

<sup>40</sup> Leanne Findlay, *Depression and suicidal ideation among Canadians aged 15 to 24, 2017* (Statistics Canada, 18 January 2017) online: Statistics Canada <[www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/82-003-x/2017001/article/14697-eng.htm](http://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/82-003-x/2017001/article/14697-eng.htm)>.

<sup>41</sup> See Porter, *supra* note 39.

entrenched notions about higher education. These include that higher education must identify which students have retained the skills and knowledge required to offer a sound measure of job-readiness.<sup>42</sup> The trials employed to do so may not be pleasant for some students, but no test of ability will be pleasant for those who fail. These trials are an unavoidable rite of passage to the professional world.<sup>43</sup> In sum, higher education may be demanding, but its pedagogy works.<sup>44</sup>

The problem, as Gannon concludes, is that it does not work—this narrative is a myth.<sup>45</sup> Numerous empirical studies have established that post-examination declines in student retention are rapid and dramatic.<sup>46</sup> In other words, students are a poor substitute for a memory stick; what they cram into their brains for the exam fades quickly. Gannon argues that during our time with our students, we should stop demanding them to be dutiful scribes and start helping them develop a practice of learning.<sup>47</sup>

Chapter four addresses the need for us to create inclusive learning spaces. When our students are motivated to understand, we can then help them to develop their practice of learning.<sup>48</sup> When they are not motivated, we can do little. Thus, inspiring the desire to learn is essential to teaching.<sup>49</sup>

Students are motivated to learn when they can imagine themselves using what they are learning in the future;<sup>50</sup> the inverse is also true.<sup>51</sup> I mentioned Gannon’s example of the reading list of all-white male authors earlier, and the impacts it may have on non-white or non-male students.<sup>52</sup> Again, some students will be resilient to the potential impacts of such negative messaging, but as Gannon suggests, others will not.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, a significant body of research supports Gannon’s suggestion.<sup>54</sup>

Closely tied to inclusiveness is accessibility, and chapter five addresses this topic. Gannon writes, “[I]f higher education is indeed the social and political good we believe it is, then we should be doing our level best to ensure as many students as possible are able to access the opportunity to pursue it.”<sup>55</sup> Not all of our students will achieve learning success by employing the same process. Accordingly, we need to employ a range of teaching strategies to accommodate as many of these paths as possible.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Gannon, *supra* note 1 at 15, 17, 24

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid* at 15, 17, 33-34.

<sup>44</sup> Gannon outlines this rationale. *Ibid* at 45-46.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid* at 45.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid* (most students retain less than 25 per cent of course content within three years. So much for remembering the first year of law school as an articling student).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid* at 47-48.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid* at 24-25, 43, 47, 49-50.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid* at 61-62.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid* at 61.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid* at 61-62.

<sup>54</sup> See e.g. Catherine Shea Sanger, “Inclusive Pedagogy and Universal Design Approaches for Diverse Learning Environments” in Catherine Sanger & Nancy Webster Gleason, eds, *Diversity and Inclusion in Global Higher Education: Lessons from Across Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) 31; Terrell L Strayhorn, *College Students’ Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students*, 2nd (Routledge, 2018); Joan M Ostrove & Susan M Long, “Social Class and Belonging: Implications for College Adjustment” (2007) 30 *Rev Higher Education* 363; Leslie RM Hausmann, Janet W Schofield, & Rochelle L Woods, “Sense of Belonging as a Predictor of Intentions to Persist Among African American and White First-Year College Students” (2007) 48 *Research in Higher Education* 803; Steven J Spencer, Claude M Steele & Diana M Quinn, “Stereotype Threat and Women’s Math Performance” (1999) 35 *J Experimental Soc Psychology* 4.

<sup>55</sup> Gannon, *supra* note 1 at 73.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid* at 73-79.

Providing multiple paths to learning success should not be thought of as making “accommodations,” which are “somehow deviating from the desired norms for teaching and learning.”<sup>57</sup> Any barriers to learning that can be removed through course design should be.<sup>58</sup> Removing foreseeable barriers to learning as early as possible saves our students from having to ask us to remove them. Helping our students to avoid these awkward moments reinforces the notion that all our students are welcome, safe, and just as likely to succeed as any other student.<sup>59</sup>

Making accessibility the default normalizes learning diversity and avoids student marginalization.<sup>60</sup> To help achieve this end, Gannon recommends we employ “Universal Design for Learning,”<sup>61</sup> which is a framework for helping educators construct learning spaces with the flexibility to accommodate a wide range of learning differences.<sup>62</sup>

Chapters four and five echo a central message from the book: We need to embrace a more complex calculus than “one size fits all” if we are to have a chance to inspire each of our students to learn.<sup>63</sup> Put differently, we must avoid the mistake of assuming that treating students equally is the same as treating them equitably,<sup>64</sup> since “treating all of our students exactly the same exacerbates rather than removes systemic inequities.”<sup>65</sup> Ensuring equitable treatment helps our students feel confident that we are their allies in their learning process and improves learning outcomes.

In chapter six, Gannon argues that students who have “autonomy” over how and what they learn are more motivated.<sup>66</sup> Empowerment invites self-efficacy, which enhances outcomes.<sup>67</sup> Accordingly, we should grant our students some choice over course design so as to give them voice in their learning process.<sup>68</sup> For instance, we can grant students choice over course goals, norms, topics, or forms of evaluation.<sup>69</sup> Allowing students to be “architects of their own learning”<sup>70</sup> creates more power symmetry,<sup>71</sup> and lays the foundation for the co-creation of ideas within learning spaces.<sup>72</sup>

Gannon acknowledges that such sharing of power might be a “frightening proposition” for many of us.<sup>73</sup> Yet, when we give our students greater control over the learning experience, they are more likely to take greater ownership over class success as well.<sup>74</sup> Student participation and self-policing of behavior ought to improve. When they do not, peer pressure will play a more active

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid* at 75.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid* at 74-80.

<sup>62</sup> See also CAST, “About Universal Design for Learning” (2021), online: <[www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl?utm\\_source=udlguidelines&utm\\_medium=web&utm\\_campaign=none&utm\\_content=homepage](http://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl?utm_source=udlguidelines&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=none&utm_content=homepage)>.

<sup>63</sup> Gannon, *supra* note 1 at 30.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid* at 75.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid* at 89, 94.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid* at 89-94.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid* at 88-89. See also Marie Leijon & Björn Lundgren, “Connecting Physical and Virtual Spaces in a HyFlex Pedagogic Model with a Focus on Teacher Interaction” (2019) 8 *J Learning Spaces* 1.

<sup>70</sup> Gannon, *supra* note 1 at 94.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid* at 90.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid* at 94.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid* at 90.

role in norm enforcement.<sup>75</sup> The result ought to be a greater sense of shared responsibility for learning success.<sup>76</sup>

Chapter seven focuses on the syllabus as the constitutional document of any course. Gannon notes that the syllabus makes a “crucial first impression” that shapes how students will approach the course.<sup>77</sup> It offers one of the best opportunities to harness the imaginations of our students so that they can foresee what we mean for them to be “collaborators” throughout the learning process.<sup>78</sup>

Gannon argues that we miss this opportunity when we employ “impersonal boilerplate language.”<sup>79</sup> Such boilerplate often mimics a “policy-and-consequence speech,” which holds students “at a distance rather than inviting them” to be coparticipants in learning.<sup>80</sup> Without communicating compassion, kindness, and welcome in an intimate language (*i.e.*, employing first and second person pronouns), we miss a chance to humanize ourselves and our vision for learning “in the eyes of our students.”<sup>81</sup> The syllabus ought to be an inspirational document that clearly outlines the potential outcomes when students actively participate within the learning space.<sup>82</sup>

Chapter eight outlines a number of examples of how we can serve our students better.<sup>83</sup> Gannon argues that the “tough-love” approach to students is wrongheaded.<sup>84</sup> We should always promote their wellbeing and maintain “allyship,” even when they suffer a lapse of judgement.<sup>85</sup> Gannon concludes that the path of kindness always offers a “better chance of fixing what went awry.”<sup>86</sup> Chapter nine continues with the theme of allying with students by focusing on those in higher education who have “weaponized” their right to free speech to “cast doubt” on the “humanity” of others.<sup>87</sup> Although equity, diversity, and inclusion policies have become a top priority for many Canadian universities,<sup>88</sup> more needs to be done.<sup>89</sup> Gannon concludes that we have a duty to “remain committed to a vision of higher education that sees students as our allies, not our adversaries, and that supports them in efforts to take risks and overcome adversity.”<sup>90</sup>

Chapter ten is the last substantive chapter of the book before a short review of the ground covered. This chapter explores two essential elements of the learning process: taking risks and failing. When our students avoid taking risks, they avoid opportunities to develop their practice of learning. Failure plays an important step in the learning process; thus, learning takes bravery.<sup>91</sup> An ever-present test of student bravery is the danger that being so will lead to a poor grade.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid* at 91-92, 94.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid* at 107.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid* at 98.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid* at 98-99.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid* at 101.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid* at 109-17.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid* at 111-12.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid* at 119.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid* at 125.

<sup>88</sup> See Merli Tamtik & Melissa Guenter, “Policy Analysis of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Strategies in Canadian Universities-How Far Have We Come?” (2019) 43 *Can J Higher Education* 41 at 41-56.

<sup>89</sup> See *e.g.* Ontario Human Rights Commission, “Letter to universities and colleges on racism and other human rights concerns” (18 December 2020), online: <[www.ohrc.on.ca/en/news\\_centre/letter-universities-and-colleges-racism-and-other-human-rights-concerns](http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/news_centre/letter-universities-and-colleges-racism-and-other-human-rights-concerns)>.

<sup>90</sup> Gannon, *supra* note 1 at 131.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid* at 135-42.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid* at 137.



Gannon reflects upon this problem and asserts that we need to find ways to “cultivate the spaces in which risk-taking and the encounters with failure” will prompt student “reflection”<sup>93</sup> and “further their development rather than halt the process”<sup>94</sup> of learning. Gannon accepts that, for some students, “F grades will indeed be part of their academic experience.”<sup>95</sup> To him, his job is not to shield students from such failure but prepare them “to encounter that failure with tools to render it merely an interruption in, not the end of the story of their higher education.”<sup>96</sup>

As this review of *Radical Hope* comes to an end, a question may linger in the minds of some readers. Since Gannon is a professor of American history at a small liberal arts college in the American Midwest, is his vision of teaching a good fit for Canadian law schools?

Gannon’s vision of teaching rests on three principles: employing student-centered teaching, ensuring inclusive and accessible teaching spaces, and allying with students. Surely no one would challenge the assertion that the latter two principles ought to be core values for all who teach in Canadian law schools.

Two issues emerge when examining the merits of employing student-centered teaching in Canadian law schools. First, unlike a small liberal arts college, Canadian law schools normally do not offer a majority of small seminar-style classes. Accordingly, will student-centered teaching work in a class of sixty or more students? Gannon is confident it will.<sup>97</sup> Encouragingly, implementing more student-centred activities takes little additional preparation time and can be surprisingly easy, regardless of class size. For more direction, a good start is to watch Eric Mazur’s “Confessions of a Converted Lecturer” on YouTube,<sup>98</sup> and to read James Lang’s *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*.<sup>99</sup>

Second, does teaching law rather than history change things? Gannon would argue that the substantive content of our courses will not change our primary task of helping our students to learn how to learn, which demands student-centered teaching. The content of our courses, whether we are in the faculty of law or history, is mere fodder for our students to practice learning.

In conclusion, *Radical Hope* recasts the answer to why we teach. When we help our students to cultivate their practice of learning, we are helping them develop the skills to navigate every choice they make throughout their lives.<sup>100</sup> With a little luck, learning how to learn will lead them to success in whatever they attempt—whether it be a happy work life, a happy home life, or both.

To help our students, we must do more than just master the materials we teach. We must work to master our own practice of learning so we can be an inspiration for them. By doing so, we not only become better teachers, but also better students, citizens, parents, children, partners, and friends as our choices lead us to avoid regret, and hopefully to flourish.

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid* at 138-139.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid* at 140-41.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid* at 138.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid* at 138.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid* at 5-6.

<sup>98</sup> Pearson, “Confessions of a Converted Lecturer” (19 November 2015), online (video): *YouTube* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4-4tfYq3m4>>.

<sup>99</sup> James M Lang, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* (Jossey-Bass, 2016).

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid* at 139.