The experience I had in attempting to teach my wife to chip a golf ball illustrates a fundamental problem we encounter when we are teaching in more comfortable role as content experts: We take for granted fundamental knowledge or basic steps that the learner has not mastered. Someone who has recently mastered a skill or a body of knowledge, by contrast, remembers more clearly the challenges he faced, and is less likely to skip or skim over basic steps in the learning process.

Huston's book notes three interesting ways in which content novices have an advantage in helping their students learn:

- Novices have a more realistic assessment of the time it will take a learner to complete a task. Experts often assign more work than the learner can complete in the time allotted. Huston cites one study that demonstrated that the estimations made by experts about the time a new learner needed to complete a task were not only much less reliable than the estimations of a novice—they were actually "worse than those of someone who has never performed the task at all."

- "People with little experience," Huston writes, "are also better than experts at predicting how many steps another person will need to complete a task on her first attempt. They can better envision the steps that a beginner will take, what kinds of mistakes she'll make, and which steps she might have to repeat."

- Finally, she explains, "A content novice is also more likely than a content expert to relate difficult concepts to everyday, common knowledge—to something the student already knows—simply because the instructor doesn't have a vault of specialized knowledge on the topic from which to draw."

Huston's arguments about the advantages of teaching as a content novice ultimately reach to a more profound level, though. As she points out, "the underlying assumption for many of us is that good teaching involves finding an effective way to structure and communicate complex information." We see our jobs, in other words, as covering the material.

When you teach as a content novice, you become much more aware of the limitations of thinking about teaching as "covering" content. You come to realize—as I always like to tell faculty members who feel like slaves to content coverage—that just because you are covering it doesn't mean they are learning it. Teaching as a content novice, you are more likely to set realistic expectations for learners, to notice when they are breaking down and experiencing problems, and to pause and make adjustments in response—instead of marching dutifully from one end of the syllabus to the other.

So as long as we continue to face the reality of teaching outside our specialties, we may be able to learn from the experience (and from Therese Huston) not only how to master this special teaching situation but how to think more clearly about what we are doing in all of our classrooms, and why we are doing it. ∎

James M. Lang is an associate professor of English at Assumption College. To read excerpts from an interview he conducted with Therese Huston, visit his Web site at jamesmlang.com.