

## Teaching Tips

### Managing Teaching Loads And Finding Time for Reflection and Renewal

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One of the greatest challenges of teaching is not to let it consume all of our time and energy. We struggle with effectively managing teaching loads and schedules to find time for the many other activities, events, and responsibilities in our lives. This includes time for other academic responsibilities, family, friends, personal endeavors, nourishing the soul, and simply time for reflection, renewal and reinvigoration.

In this column I explore the complexity of teaching and its effects on our time and energy. Further, I examine how we might more effectively manage our schedules and loads to have time for reflection and renewal, which is vital to being able to give more of ourselves to others as well. This exploration begins by revisiting our reasons for teaching in the first place.

#### WHO IS THE SELF THAT TEACHES?

I first saw this question raised by Parker Palmer in his book, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, (1998). I believe this to be the most fundamental question that all who teach should explore. When answered it is truly at the core of why we teach. Palmer states: "The more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our teaching - and living-becomes." (P. 5)

Initially, many of us decided on a career in teaching because we had a passion for it. We also have a need to help people learn. Palmer's major query about teaching is why so many of us lose our enthusiasm as the years go by? Why do we face potential burnout? What are the hidden messages we can discover from revisiting our initial reasons for teaching? I believe there are many. For starters, our passion for something can lead to overwork if we aren't careful. This is an important realization. Many of us love teaching passionately and it may be difficult to draw the line and find true balance. Somehow, it seems we become caught up in the day-to-day rudiments and routines of teaching and lose touch with ourselves and our lives.

#### TEACHING CAN GENERATE STRESS AND POTENTIAL BURNOUT

Teaching is a complex profession. Depending on the type of college or university, teachers may be juggling many responsibilities such as teaching a number of course overloads at non-research 2- and 4-year colleges and universities, or fulfilling teaching and research requirements at research colleges and universities. Even more demanding than the complexity of teaching is the fact that teaching can also generate a high level of stress, fatigue, and lead to burnout. Contributing factors to this stress can include:

- unclear expectations;
- spending many hours in class;
- classes that take more preparation time or having a high number of course preparations in a given semester;
- handling classes with large enrollments, planning productive activities, or dealing with difficult or very needy students;
- dealing with social and learning issues, such as AIDS, learning disabilities and attention-deficit disorder;
- newer curricular and teaching approaches, including the use of technology;
- time involved in student advising and conferences;
- increasing demands from administrative, clerical and committee duties;
- increasing diversification of expertise;
- campus politics and meeting the economic necessities of the institution;
- changes in administrative demands or administrative leadership;
- lack of financial and personnel support;
- time pressures and deadlines;
- continual overload of work; and,
- dealing with inequities and inequalities.

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These factors may be compounded by student attendance, attention, discipline, and lack of motivation. The latter can be especially stressful because uninterested students disrupt a classroom and the work of other students. Moreover, teaching uninterested or unmotivated students can be exhausting and damaging to a teacher's positive sense of self.

### **INCREASED WORK LOADS, LESS STUDENT CONTACT**

Demands on teachers are increasing - more work, more students and less time (Easthope & Easthope, 2000). The increased demands of workloads outside of the classroom, and on time and energy, result in teachers having less time for preparation, teaching and interaction with students. The quality of care for students is one of the first things that overworked teachers decrease, leading to tremendous hidden and long-term impacts on the college climate in addition to effects on the attitudes, self-esteem and motivation of both faculty and students. This can especially be the case when teachers are too pressured to carry out many of the caring activities they perceive as part of their professional identity.

How do teachers cope? Not always well. Some teachers adapt to the changes imposed upon them; many accept what they consider to be chronic and persistent overload as a normal part of their life; some indicate they attempt to do "planning on the run or decision-making on the run;" some adapt to the increased workload by reducing their commitment to professional teaching through reducing their input into the teaching task; others opt to work part-time. One faculty member reported:

"I don't do as good a job now as I did three years ago, four years ago, because there is just not the time. If you have a 25 percent increase in workload something has got to give and basically it's preparation and it's marking. ... There will be less of that time for everything." (Easthope & Easthope, 2000, P.16.)

A no-win situation develops when teachers strive to satisfy all the needs of students and requirements of the administration. The resulting reduction in service to students generates the most stress and guilt.

Teachers see this as a grave loss, both to themselves and to their students. In brief, teachers sacrifice activities important to them (Milem, Berger and Dey, 2000) such as time spent advising and counseling students.

### **INCREASING ISOLATION AND EMOTIONAL STERILITY**

According to Robert Kraft (2000), there is an isolation or aloneness and emotional sterility in faculty life that seems dangerous and perhaps toxic - a paradox since teaching is supposed to be a most rewarding enterprise. Kraft reports on a tenure-track professor who quit her job because she found it to be so dreadfully lonely.

### **TECHNOLOGY PRODUCES STRESS**

Many faculty reported keeping up with technology as stressful (67 percent), almost equally for men and women teachers (Higher Education Research Institute, 2000). Nonetheless, all faculty believed that technology was educationally beneficial. We are all familiar with the challenges of having to learn new technology in addition to planning our teaching, not to mention the time involved both in mastering it and learning how to incorporate it into our instructional programs in the classroom.

### **EFFECTIVE AND POSITIVE WAYS TO MANAGE TEACHING LOADS AND AVOID HARMFUL STRESS**

On top of all of these teaching-related stressors faculty face increased pressures in their personal lives. Whether this be financial, child-related, caring for aging parents, or a host of other issues, work can spill over into one's personal life; and the personal can negatively affect teaching and other academic work.

It is essential that those of us who teach, learn to manage our personal and professional lives or we may experience chronic stress and eventually physical and mental burnout. The suggestions which follow come from the literature as well as from a survey I administered to senior faculty and administrators from two and four-year colleges and universities.

#### **Find Balance**

"Take time for self, be responsible for the decisions you make (those big papers to grade, essay exams, etc., block out time for yourself each week, walk around campus and spend time with colleagues. If you view teaching as a life long task, you are not upset if you are a bit slow, or a bit tired. The goal is to reach students and have something to give each day." (Baron Perlman, University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh)

This colleague also recommended that if at all possible, leave your teaching on campus and

take time to relax at home. Even better, try to find a bit of relaxation at your college or university each day. If you work at home, take time for things you cherish and enjoy. At work, block out free time in your appointment book and keep it sacred. Go for a walk on campus; visit with a colleague for a few minutes.

### **Reward Yourself**

Know what you find rewarding about teaching and try to do a bit of this each day. Recognize when your teaching is going well and feel good about this. Do not move immediately from one task to another, reward yourself with things you consider as incentives.

### **Establish Meaning and Relevance**

"We need to do a better job at connecting our subject matter to some larger purpose and to our student's daily lives. My field (history) is too often presented as a collection of random events and facts to memorize. We shouldn't hesitate to search for meaning or a moral, even though our conclusions must remain tentative." (Patrick Reed, Professor of History, Northern Virginia Community College, Loudoun Campus, Sterling, VA.)

### **Develop Short- and Long-Term Goals**

"Ask the question: Where do I want to be in five years and what must I do to get there? The most important thing is an assessment of balance. This should be evaluated every couple of years to make sure the short-term (5 year) and long-term (20 year) goals will be met or changed as required. Write these goals out and examine how they may shift and change over the next 20 years. (Joan Roy, Head, Department of Psychology, University of Regina, Regina, SK, Canada.)

### **Connect with Colleagues**

Talk about how things are going for you with peers and colleagues. Establish a support system. This can be done face-to-face or via e-mail with colleagues at your institution, and others who work at other institutions across the country. Talking with others helps us clarify and maintain perspective and feel "grounded." Making these connections with colleagues also is an excellent way to relieve or minimize stress.

### **Manage Time**

Do not attempt to accomplish too many tasks in a day. Prioritize and leave a bit of time for yourself. There is always tomorrow, although it may not feel like this is true sometimes. Several colleagues had suggestions for managing time better:

"Try new scheduling methods, use a palm pilot. I've learned to say 'no' to students and administrators when I know what they're asking me to do will reduce my ability to accomplish my goals. Surprise! People actually understand that you're busy and will not mind being put off for a little while. When I first started teaching, I felt a need to be available all the time, but now I realize it is better for students to understand my time is limited so they should plan ahead and use our time together more effectively. This often leaves more time for informal conversation." (Laurence Nolan, Assistant Professor of Psychology, Wagner College, Staten Island, New York.)

"Don't procrastinate and don't let tasks pile up to an overwhelming burden. Keep to your schedule. (Arnold Bradford, Professor of English, Northern Virginia Community College, Loudoun Campus, Sterling, Virginia.)

"Have lecture notes, assignments, projects, etc., already planned, organized and completed before the course begins." (Christopher Blake, Assistant Professor of Spanish, Northern Virginia Community College, Loudoun Campus, Sterling, Virginia.)

### **Try to Pay Attention to Detail**

Although sometimes difficult because of lack of time, try to pay attention to detail. For example, try to proofread exams to catch typographical errors, or ask a colleague to proof when it becomes difficult to see the errors. Have an extra dry marker for the board or pen for the overhead projector, an extra battery for the microphone or extra bulb for the overhead projector. Also remember to review your course syllabi and class schedule of activities on what you will be covering in the week ahead and modify as necessary.

### **Negotiate a Realistic Teaching Schedule**

Try to negotiate a "sane" teaching load and schedule. For a morning person to teach all late afternoon or evening classes is insane. Different sections of the same course are often easier than teaching a different course each hour.

### **Maintain a Positive Attitude**

Teaching is a wonderful way to make a living. Immovable bureaucracies or difficult students are part of work. Do not let them consume you. Try to develop a tolerance for unavoidable stress and cognitively restructure such situations, minimizing your sense of frustration, and looking for potential positive outcomes. Keeping what it is we do in perspective helps maintain a realistic appraisal of how things are going. Try to develop a realistic expectation for the amount and quality of your teaching. Tell yourself "job well done" when you deserve it.

### **Appreciate the Joy of Teaching and Learning**

"Teaching is a constant learning process. Those of us most invested in this adventure would correlate 'the joy of sex' with 'the joy of teaching and learning' - it's always pleasurable, it's always a high (when it works for teachers and learners), and it's always different; and, in another realm of analogy, it truly is a 'religious experience.' We owe it to ourselves and our students to feel the weight, trepidation, and responsibility that young Martin Luther felt before conducting his first mass. Besides making our craft a passionate and holy quest, we must 'count our coups constantly...i.e., never let too much time go by without reflecting on all the good we do and the recognition of it by our students and peers.'" (Beverly Blois, Division Chair, Communications and Humanities Division, Northern Virginia Community College, Loudoun Campus, Sterling, Virginia)

### **SUMMARY**

I end this article where I began - with the inner self. Yes, teaching can be stressful. While mastering stress is a life-long task, it can badly interfere with both the intellectual and emotional attractions of teaching. The important virtue to remember about teaching and managing stress and loads is that we must not get carried away with our passion, seek balance in our lives, and remember to reserve a part of our love we extend to others for ourselves. Find comfort in the awesome role you are playing in many people's lives. The world is a much better place because of the works and gifts of teachers. Without dedicated teachers, there would be no civilized world. Most of us love what we do. Celebrate the high points. If you can't seem to find any high points, then it is probably time to reassess where you need to be.

Remember to stay in touch with your inner self. Be forever mindful of who you are and the reasons you hold teaching in high esteem. Manage the pedagogical stressors positively and keep in the forefront of your thinking those things which are true, beautiful and good about teaching.

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