

Principles for Managing Your Teaching Life

Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE)
Duquesne University

“Perhaps a pernicious norm has evolved: anyone not complaining about being overwhelmed is suspect. We act as if we have no choice” (Robertson, 2003, p. 1).

“You don’t need time management; you do need life management” (Robison, 2013, p. 29).

Principles adapted and expanded primarily from Robertson’s *Making time, making change: Avoiding overload in college teaching* (2003).

Introduction

- We are individuals and approach time differently.
- We share some priorities as faculty at Duquesne; at the same time, each person also has unique priorities and responsibilities.
- Faculty value their autonomy.
- We all have 168 hours in a week. Time is a precious, limited resource.
- Paradox: Setting priorities and structuring how we use the majority of our hours allows us time for spontaneity, flexibility, deep conversations, time to breathe and think and be replenished.
- Using time well is not selfish; it is a professional and personal responsibility. What’s the point of feeling constantly overwhelmed and anxious if you can’t focus on what you consider most important?
- Some of the tips below will “click” for you; choose to implement one or two strategies at a time.

1. Become more efficient

- a. Learn ways to produce the same output in less time for repeated tasks.
- b. Develop (and internalize) methods for designing a course, developing a syllabus, creating a lesson plan, writing exams, and giving feedback.
- c. Communicate your expectations and policies clearly to students in your syllabus, so that you don’t have to agonize over every student request (e.g., about tardiness, class preparation and behaviors, missed exams, late work, attendance). Focus these policies on what is best for student learning and for realistic use of your own attention and time.
- d. Don’t take any handwritten assignments. Consider typing or recording verbal feedback for students. Give general comments to the entire group rather than on every student’s paper.
- e. Perfection is not beautiful or necessary. It will get in the way of your success as a faculty member, and in the way of your students’ learning.

2. Express your values in how you choose to use your time

- a. Robison (2013)’s *Peak performing professor* is a practical workbook that guides faculty in articulating their life purpose and aligning their motivation, energy, talents, resources, and people connections with that purpose.
- b. When it comes to using time, we are constantly choosing among many good things.
- c. To use time well, we have to know our deepest priorities and assign an amount of time to them, and then figure out how to make this work (or adjust as needed). It doesn’t work to assume that you have more than 168 hours a week. Or to assume that everything will just get done.

- d. A suggestion: don't announce how many hours you work in order to avoid one-upmanship as well as putting yourself in a position to be judged. These are *your* choices coming out of *your* individual values and abilities.

"Working to the point of being overtly and chronically stressed has become an indicator of a serious and dedicated professional" (Robertson, 2013, p. 29).

3. Build responsibility in students and focus on their learning

- a. You can't do the learning for students. Furthermore, you are not their only source of learning and feedback. Our doing everything fosters passivity in students.
- b. Boice's research shows that successful new faculty avoid the temptation to over-prepare their classes. Challenge your need to be (look like) you're completely in control.
- c. Feedback that we give to students doesn't always have to involve individual feedback or a grade. Give group feedback. Teach students to self-assess and to give peer feedback especially on brief, lower stakes assignments. Done well, this helps them learn better. We want students who know the quality of their own work (think future teachers, nurses, journalists...).
- d. Dweck (2007) emphasizes the importance of students developing a *growth mindset* where they are constantly learning, taking risks, putting in effort, and experiencing small failures and learning from them. She contrasts this with a *fixed mindset* where you protect the identity you project of yourself; you avoid risk and effort because they raise questions about your expertise and identity. Faculty need to model this risk taking and growth mindset for their students.

Whereas for my entire teaching life I had always thought that what I was doing was helping my students to understand the material we were studying... I realized that what I had actually been concerned with was showing the students how smart I was, how knowledgeable I was, and how well prepared I was for class. I had been putting on a performance whose true goal was not to help the students learn, as I had thought, but to perform before them in such a way that they would have a good opinion of me. I realized that my fear of being found wanting, of being shown up as a fraud, must have transmitted itself to them. Insofar as I was afraid of being exposed, they too would be afraid (Tompkins, 1996, p. 119).

- e. Focus on teaching and learning. Avoid administrivia. Articulate the expectation that students will use the course website, their own records, and their peers (and NOT you) for retrieving lost syllabi and assignments, finding out when things are due, monitoring what their grade is to date, determining which assignments they're missing, etc. Ask students to note contact information for two classmates at the beginning of the course.

4. Find a specific time and place for each aspect of your faculty role

- a. For tasks that require uninterrupted focus, find a place where you won't be interrupted, and UNPLUG from contact. Suggestion: library carrel – which you can check out for several hours. And no one will find you!
- b. Determine which tasks need you at your most awake and freshest time of day, and which don't. Plan your day and week accordingly.
- c. During your office hours, keep an open door, and focus attentively on students who come. Resist answering the phone or texts while they are present.
- d. Plan ahead ways to interact regularly with your colleagues about teaching and student learning, and about your research (a Boice finding that correlates with faculty success).

5. Be short with many so that you can be long with a few

- a. Explain to students exactly when and how you are available, and stick to it – develop trust. Let them know when you will read/listen to messages (e.g., 8 am and 5 pm, Monday-Friday), and how long you expect to take to respond to messages (e.g., within 24 hours). In what ways will you be available during your office hours – in person, online chat, phone, email? Be predictable.
- b. Give brief and focused attention to individuals, but have a time limit in mind. Then, you are likelier to have the time to devote to people with whom you want to have longer, deeper interactions, such as mentors and mentees.
- c. Strategically make time to be with people who give you energy (“fill your well”) and limit your time with people who deplete your energy.

6. Focus on your central role. Learn to refer students to others when appropriate

- a. Be attentive to students as whole people.
- b. Own your role as a professor with expertise in guiding student learning.
- c. If you see signs that students might need help, respond by referring them to the folks on campus who can best meet their needs (e.g., medical attention, counseling, help with transition to college, financial aid, development of basic writing skills, accommodations for potential learning disabilities). Ask your colleagues, chair, or CTE for help in figuring out what resources are most pertinent and what steps to take.

7. Energize yourself through wellness and wellbeing (Robison)

- a. Develop a life rhythm of replenishing, e.g., a few minutes each day, a set-aside chunk of time each week, and quarterly 24-hour periods. Plan this ahead – everything fights against it actually happening.
- b. Wellness and wellbeing are highly personal, and they are crucial. They take on different forms at different stages of your life.
- c. Consider coming to the annual May CTE retreat (30 hours) at the Spiritan Center. We go from a mode of *doing* to a mode of *being*.

Resources

- Boice, Robert. (1991). Quick starters: New faculty who succeed. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 48, pp. 111-121.
- Dweck, Carol S. (2007). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Ballantine.
- Marcus, Jon. (March/April 2007). “Helping academics have families and tenure too: Universities discover their self-interest.” *Change Magazine*, pp. 26-32.
- Robertson, D. R. (2003). *Making time, making change: Avoiding overload in college teaching*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press
- Robison, Susan. (2013). *The peak performing professor: A practical guide to productivity and happiness*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Rockquomore, K. A. (September 20, 2010). Surviving the tenure track: The Sunday meeting. *Inside Higher Ed*. <http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/surviving/fall2>
- Rockquomore, K. A. (January 18, 2010). Winning tenure without losing your soul: A semester needs a plan. *Insider Higher Ed*. <http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/winning/winning1>
- Tompkins, J. (1996). *A life in school: What the teacher learned*. New York: Perseus.
- Toor, Rachel. (August 31, 2010). Resolve to stop saying yes. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. <http://chronicle.com/article/Resolve-Stop-Saying-Yes/124200/>
- Walvoord, B., & Anderson, V. J. (2010). *Effective grading: A tool for learning and assessment in college* (2nd. Ed.). San Francisco, Jossey-Bass. Chapter 6: Managing time for teaching, learning, and responding; chapter 7: Making grading more time-efficient.