It Works for Me, Online!

Shared Tips for Online and Web-Enhanced Teaching

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Avoiding Teacher Overload By Using Web-based Tools

Not long ago, I dove into the problem of college teachers feeling overloaded and wrote a book with possible solutions, Making Time, Making Change: Avoiding Overload in College Teaching (Robertson, 2003). I continue to be impressed by the potential of web-based tools to serve teachers, students, administrators, and various other stakeholders of higher education, by maintaining or increasing student learning and development while simultaneously freeing up time for teachers. What follows are 17 specific ideas of how to avoid feeling overloaded and still do a good job facilitating student learning and development by enhancing your courses and teaching with web-based tools. The specific suggestions are organized by six general principles for avoiding overload in college teaching (Robertson, 2003, pp. 9-75).

Principle 1. Be able to be efficient in all things: be able to take less time to do the same things with similar quality.

- Be diligent about putting things that you say a lot to students (such as your course policies, no matter how seemingly trivial) on your course web site and refer to the web site rather than making the same explanation or comment over and over to different students.
- Use web-based technological tools in course-related scholarship, such as preparing disciplinary content (e.g., web-based literature data-bases), preparing instructional process (e.g., http://www.merlot.com), selecting texts (e.g., http://www.amazon.com), acquiring presentation graphics (e.g., most graphics may be saved as .jpg files with a mouse right click), developing course-related web links (e.g., keeping the results of web hunting and gathering in electronic files which are organized by courses and course topics and can be harvested efficiently as needed).
- Use web-based tools (e.g., http://www.google.com) to check for plagiarism.
- If you have access to a computer lab (thereby allowing web-based examinations to be proctored), use the quiz tool from course management systems (such as Blackboard and WebCT) to administer and score appropriate examinations.
- Provide online group feedback to individually submitted assignments where possible (e.g., themes that emerged collectively from the participants’ responses, elements of strength, and suggestions for improvement).

Principle 2. Express your values in how you use your time: develop a framework, explicitly based on your values, for making tough choices in how you will use your time.

- Given your conception of a healthy life, figure out how much time you want to give to work in an average week, then how much of that work time to teaching, how much
of that teaching time to each course (online or not), set your expectations for what you do in each course appropriate to your designated amount of time, stick to that designated amount of time, and remember that perfect is not beautiful (also remember to keep your time budget to yourself because for some reason colleagues often one-up, shame, or tease each other about how much time they work).

**Principle 3. Don’t hoard responsibility, share it:** identify ways for other agents in the teaching and learning environment to do what you do with the same or better instructional result.

- Use the communication tools in course management systems to encourage and sometimes require student collaboration with each other.
- Use communication tools to involve “guest” faculty in the instruction online (e.g., when the class is reading a particular book and you know the author or someone else familiar with the book’s content, ask that person if you can add their email address to the course discussion board during the period that the class is studying that material and if they will field questions electronically during that time).
- Where extant, add mastery learning programs or tutorials to your course web site and incorporate them into your course as appropriate.
- Make handouts, syllabi, and other course materials available on the course web site; hand them out once, and if the students miss class or lose the material, make them responsible for downloading it from the course web site.
- Use the grade book in course management systems and make students responsible for determining what work they owe you in lieu of your having to look it up in your grade book repeatedly.

**Principle 4. For every aspect of your teaching, find a time and place befitting it:** be able to block access to yourself completely when necessary.

- When working online with teaching tasks that benefit from your not being interrupted (such as answering student email), make sure that you can do this work in an environment in which you can block access to you completely, which may or may not be your office (online access has now become remarkably portable).

**Principle 5. Be short with many so that you may be long with a few:** use devices that buffer you from interruption, while preserving the information communicated, thereby allowing you to respond at a time, pace, and intensity of your choosing.

- Use asynchronous communication tools (such as voicemail and email) to create periods of direct and indirect access to you without losing the communication.
- Explicitly define and budget time for direct access to you (online, telephone, or face to face) as well as for processing asynchronous communication such as email and voicemail.

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• Create a communication system for direct and indirect access to you; state it clearly, early, and often to students; post it as course policy on the course web site; and stick to it.
• Fit your responses to asynchronous communication to the time that you have allotted for it.

**Principle 6. Stick to your knitting, refer to others when possible:** use the professional practice of referral; that is, be aware of campus and community resources for common student problems and refer students to those resources when appropriate.

• Do not try to be the computer support desk for students; refer students to college computer support or online support personnel directly yourself as well as on your course web site (incidentally, this principle of employing the professional practice of referral, whether teaching online or face to face, applies to other potential student issues such as personal problems, poor writing, information literacy, deficient mathematical skills, and so forth, where institution-wide resource centers may exist such as counseling centers, writing centers, reference and instructional librarian desks, statistics help desk, disabilities resource centers, multicultural resource centers, international education offices, women’s resource centers, developmental education offices, and so on; our course web sites should provide students with our referral lists and contact information).

These 17 specific ideas just scratch the surface of possibility, and of course, they do not work equally well for every reader. Please take what works; leave the rest; make up your own; and share. The trick is to find practices that save teachers time while also encouraging student development and learning. If you would like more ideas about how to avoid feeling overloaded and out of control in your teaching life (not just ideas that have to do with online technologies), please explore *Making Time, Making Change: Avoiding Overload in College Teaching* (Robertson, 2003).

**References**

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