

THE 12 Key Rules for Managing Time in Online Teaching

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In my several years of teaching online I have developed a variety of time management tools that have helped me to “stay on top” of my classes, while making my efforts smoother and easier; hundreds of colleagues I’ve discussed this with over the years also have their favorite ways of managing time. As you can imagine, combined these equal MANY approaches (in fact, nearly 300 so far!), but the 12 I present here are what I think are the best of the best. Use one, some, or all of these, and I assure you: you’ll have a much better time teaching online!

GET INTO A SCHEDULE

In order to keep all aspects of an online course going smoothly, maintaining a solid and regular schedule is imperative. Develop regular times during the week for you to “do” papers and tests ... maintain online office hours ... send students informational e-mails and post documents ... hold online class discussions or chats. Also, set deadlines for students and for yourself—and keep them. Not only will this keep you up-to-date with all aspects of your course but students respond much better to

a course that can be counted on for regular “doses” of what makes up that course.

BECOME ULTRA-ORGANIZED

Whether you teach one or 10 or more courses, staying organized is crucial. From the more traditional teacher’s planning book, notepads, and daily planners to the online daily reminders, class rosters, smart-phone alarms, and various other “course management tools,” there is a huge selection of items to help you stay organized. Choose what works best for your personality, style of teaching, and class specifics—but do choose: teaching “by the seat of your pants” will quickly result in more stress for you and a very unrewarding experience for your students—something that can never occur.

ALWAYS HAVE A BACK-UP “TIME STASH”

Obviously, we cannot manufacture more time; but what we can do is to have 1 or more hours we put aside each week to handle the thises and thats of teaching online that eat into the time for which we had scheduled. And if you do not use all or part of this time

stash? Since you cannot roll it into the next week, it's your choice: something relaxing, enlightening, enriching—whatever! Just keep that time stash available every week, because you will definitely find need of it during your course(s).

KNOW THAT THE “UNEXPECTEDS” ALWAYS COME KNOCKING

No matter how careful we are, no matter how much we plan, what I call the unexpecteds will show up: students who need additional assistance, unanticipated paperwork your school needs yesterday, technical glitches, sudden shortage of office supplies—the list goes on. Expect this, and when it happens don't let it frazzle you, don't let it stress you out. Simply borrow from your time stash, meet head-on whatever unexpecteds stopped by ... and move on.

PLAN YOUR ASSIGNMENTS WITH TIME IN MIND

It's important to always take time into consideration when giving assignments, especially those you must edit, score, or be involved in (such as discussion boards, class chats, or virtual office hours). Too often, well-meaning and highly enthusiastic teachers forget this and find themselves rushed, either because school commitments are suddenly bumping into one another or because of a surge of unexpecteds. In the end, the students suffer (from a dash of the teacher to get something finished, and thus perhaps not putting in as much quality or time as should be)—and we never want that to occur.

DON'T LET TIME CONTROL YOU

Schools, of course, have certain times that must be adhered to; we develop syllabi that outline when this is due, when that will be done. Yet we also must keep in mind the importance of being flexible: students will have legitimate reasons for keeping them from getting something

done by set dates; you'll have unexpecteds come around, eating into a time unit you had planned for something else; and you'll find that students might not learn a particular unit as quickly as the time allocated for it. In cases like this—and others—you must allow for the resetting or extending of various deadlines, whether it be for one, a few, or all of your students. This is one of the realities of teaching.

AVOID DEATH BY PAPER

Make it a point to go through your paper and computer dumpsters (pockets, purses, desk drawers, temporary computer files, unneeded school files, for example) on a regular basis and toss out that which you don't need and filing those items that you will need or might use at a later time. Only keep handy those paper items that you use or will need on a rather immediate or on-going basis.

ALWAYS REFRESH YOUR “TEACHING TIME ZONES”

Sitting at a computer, hour upon hour, is draining! And while our work ethic might be, “I've got to get this done before I leave,” this may not be best for you or the students in terms of your best quality efforts. Yet a break from one of these time zones of teaching-related computer involvement will definitely refresh, re-energize, and refocus you. A nap, a walk, a beverage or food break, watching TV or reading a magazine, et cetera—ideally, something not related to teaching—will help make you a more productive and effective instructor.

FOCUS ON WHAT HAS TO BE DONE

We have many unexpecteds that come along related to teaching and that we have no choice but to handle when they occur. Yet there are many others that continually track us down and, like some spoiled little child, want our undivided attention: non-emergency phone calls, idle chatting with

friends or family (that really CAN be done later), people texting or tweeting us, the lure of checking e-mail—the list goes on, and if we give in we'll find ourselves less accomplished than we had planned, more trips to our time stash, and a surge of frustration and stress. Don't let this be you: when it's time to "do school," do school.

DEVELOP "HEALTHY" TIME TRICKS

There are so many of these that we can develop or pick up, with an end result of helping us become better managers of our time. Some examples: for web sites often used for class, develop folders under your Favorites for quick access ... print out students' e-mail addresses so you can quickly locate them if they are not readily available on screen ... create templates for phrases, formulae, assignments, et cetera that you use on a regular basis ... keep copies of class e-mails you send out so you can use all or part for future classes ... scan in or download useful info, articles, and research that you can quickly send to one or more students in need of extra assistance. Any of these can make your available time actually seem to expand!

UNDERSTAND YOUR TIME LIMITATIONS

First, remember that even with planning your time wisely there will be limitations to what you can do. And as much as you'd like to believe that everything will go according your scheduled time plan, things can happen that eat into some of that time; allow for this. Second, some things can't be planned out—a school webinar that just came up, unexpected company, flat tire, an additional teaching load, illness, a family emergency: the list

goes on. However, the more you use your time wisely—by planning it out and organizing it—the better you'll be able to handle unexpected items that eat into your planned-out time.

LET THE INTERNET BECOME YOUR T.A.-TIME AIDE

We use the Internet for online teaching, of course, and I've already mentioned several ways that we can use it to help manage our time. But remember: we ARE committed to online teaching, and that means squeezing out every possibility a computer might offer to help us better manage our time. This use extends to non-teaching-related daily aspects of life that can allow for more teaching time, and certainly a more relaxed and less rushed mindset. These include: use computer reminder sites to help keep up on time with deadlines, teaching and non-teaching items to do, et cetera ... pay bills and make purchases online ... search for sites that might offer additional suggestions for teaching effectiveness, either in general or specific to your subject ... have Favorites folders for TV and radio programs, for movie theaters, for newspapers and magazines, for favorite restaurants—all again to save you time from going here and there to look up or dial up ... save important student, faculty manager, and school e-mails (especially those with good suggestions, new regulations and policies, that offer praise, or that criticize): you can never tell when they might come in handy. Obviously, the list goes on.

Remember: Not managing your time effectively is like letting termites run amuck; pretty soon, your entire structure will come crashing down.