

Notes on Managing the Demands of Teaching

You want to be a responsible and effective teacher. But you also want to avoid being completely consumed by the demands of pedagogy. This can be very difficult. Different sorts of institutions present different kinds of challenges. Small liberal arts colleges promote an ethos of almost unlimited faculty accessibility. Elite colleges and universities may set dauntingly high standards for lecturing. Large public universities have student bodies diverse in almost every respect, including level of preparation. Research universities may expect you to teach at every level from critical thinking to a graduate seminar in your research specialty.

The general key for dealing with these challenges is to (A) be clear what challenges actually confront you, and (B) deliberately adopt strategies keyed to those particular challenges.

(A) What are your teaching challenges? Get clear in your own mind what exactly you *need* to accomplish pedagogically in order to get tenure.

1. Talk explicitly with your department chair, or a senior colleague about the department's expectations regarding teaching, and also about how teaching is evaluated. Find out what the departmental averages on teaching evaluations are in classes of the sort you are or will be teaching. If your department will be satisfied if your evaluations meet the departmental average, you should be, too. See what the expectations are for office hour time. If everyone else has two hours a week, why should you have four? Or ten?
2. Clarify to yourself what you *want* to accomplish pedagogically, and compare these goals with what you discovered is actually necessary for tenure. Make sure the goals you have set for yourself make sense, given the time you have to devote to teaching, and the resources and support at your disposal. Focus on what can be done well pedagogically given the constraints under which you are working, and set aside fantasies about what might be done given more time, better students, etc.
3. Think hard about pedagogical innovation during your probationary period. If you love informational technology and are good at using it, then by all means, bring on the clickers and the fancy courseware. If you find the challenge of designing a new course from scratch energizing, fun, and not too time-consuming, go for it. But if new technologies or new courses are apt to eat up large amounts of time, or if your students are apt to suffer while you work out the bugs, consider waiting until after tenure to get innovative.

(B) How can you meet your pedagogical challenges? Remember that less is often more. Really. Spending a lot of time on teaching does not ensure better teaching.

Preparing for class

1. Don't write out every lecture word-for-word. Learn to lecture from notes.
2. Re-use lectures (as much as possible) when you repeat a course. Revise only if something really didn't work.

3. If you use PowerPoint, don't spend inordinate amounts of time on graphics and animations. (If that's your idea of fun, OK, but take that time away from your leisure time, not from your research time.)
4. *Don't over-prepare.* Trust your own competence, and your own level of knowledge. No one knows everything; but many people, including you, know a lot about some things. Remember that.

Student Conferences

1. Be organized and responsible about student meetings, but set limits. Set a reasonable number of office hours, at times that are apt to be convenient for students. (Don't go beyond the department average – see above.) Try to limit your conferences with students to your scheduled office hours. Make sure you keep your office hours, so that students know that you really are available. If you need to cancel, announce this and possibly add make-up hours. Do not be casual about making appointments outside your scheduled office hours: you have a right to expect a degree of predictability in your schedule, and you needn't sacrifice that in order to save a student some small inconvenience.
2. Email: this can devour your time. Think of ways to limit the amount of emailing you do with students. Possibilities: (a) make a policy of not responding to questions that students can answer themselves, and announce that this is your policy. To make this work, you must have first made available to students, online, or through a handout, all the pertinent information; (b) set up an online discussion board, and tell students that they can post substantive questions on the board, and also that they should check the board to see if their question has already been asked. (Only do this if you are prepared to check the board regularly.) That way, you avoid having to answer the same question three or four times; (c) set up "virtual office hours" during which you will accept and respond to student questions. You can use a live chat format, or you can make sure you respond to emails received during that time.

Assignments

1. In devising course requirements, consider not only the projected pedagogical value of the assignment, but the demand it will make both on your time *and on your students' time*. If the assignment's value depends on the student's spending a great deal of time on it out of class, then if the student doesn't put in that time, the student doesn't get the benefit – and you still have to grade it.
2. There are many ways to use techniques like peer review, self-testing, and revision to cut down your grading load, while at the same time increasing the students' involvement in the class. [Check resources list and your institutional teaching resource center for information about these and other techniques for increasing student involvement.]

Grading Papers/Teaching Writing

1. Don't write too many comments. This is an area where less is really, really more. Giving extensive comments, particularly on short writing assignments is not only time-consuming for you; it's pretty useless for your students. If the student is not going to be required to revise in light of your comments, he or she is probably not going to read them. If you are not going to require a revised version, limit your comments to summary remarks that explain the basis for the grade. (See the "Responding to Student Writing" on the resources sheet.)
2. Read the whole paper through before writing anything. This is really hard advice to take. But it will save you time in the end, and probably make your comments more helpful to the student.
3. Avoid marking mechanical errors, especially on first drafts. Doing this causes the student to focus on "correcting" his or her paper, instead of doing substantive revision or reorganization, takes up your time, and distracts you from the content of the student's paper. Writing centers and articles about teaching writing have lots of good alternative suggestions for ways to deal with students' problems with mechanics, if you decide you want to deal with them at all.

Course Content

1. Think about ways to incorporate your recent research work into your teaching. This can mean choosing one or more topics for an introductory course that relate to your thesis topic, or making your thesis topic the focus of an advanced undergraduate or graduate course. Or it can mean assigning some articles or a book you need to read for your research in a course that you are teaching. There is absolutely nothing wrong with learning alongside your students – no doubt many of your professors in graduate school did this routinely.
2. If you have to teach a course that is outside your area of specialization, ask friends or colleagues to borrow or to consult their syllabi. No need for you to reinvent the wheel; the aim is to give your students a worthwhile experience.

Worst-case Scenario -- If some serious problem arises – a problematic encounter with particular students, really poor teaching evaluations, or anything else – take the initiative to address it. Some strategies: talk with the department chair or a trusted senior colleague about the problem; visit your institution's "Center for Teaching and Learning;" depending on the nature of the issue, speak to the ombudsperson for interpersonal issues, the sexual harassment officer, the dean for student conduct or student affairs. Make sure you document your efforts to deal with the problem.