**Feeling Overloaded? You're Not Alone**

By Douglas Reimondo Robertson, Northern Kentucky University

*NEA Higher Education Advocate*

February 2008

*Hundreds of thousands of faculty feel chronically overloaded and out of control of their work life. What can you do about it?*

Why are so many of us feeling so overloaded all the time? One big reason is that 21st century higher education is generating tasks faster than the academy’s work force is expanding. Somebody’s got to do this new work, and that somebody is often faculty.

Another reason why so many of us feel chronically overloaded is the faculty tradition of autonomy and self-governance—we like to be in control of our fate, to be involved, to have a say. Can you say “committees”? We have a billion of them, of our own making.

Still another reason for widespread overload, yet again of our own doing, is that many of us measure ourselves and others by our busyness. When we ask colleagues how they’re doing, if they don’t rattle off a long list of professional activities until they are red-faced and gasping for air, then many of us wonder why they aren’t pulling their weight. “Slackers!” “Put them on a committee!” “They’ll never make full professor behaving like that.” Chronic overload has become an indicator for us of productivity and professional accomplishment.

Overload-as-pernicious-norm leads us to the final reason why the problem is so widespread: Vested interests in the larger systems of which we are a part benefit from us thinking that working until we feel fried is something to which we should aspire.

How many of us would feel guilty if we finished the semester without metaphorically staggering across the finish line of our teaching triathlon? Plenty!

<http://www.nea.org/home/34622.htm>

**Overload Epidemic!?!**

*Hundreds of thousands of faculty feel chronically overloaded and unable to control their work life. What can you do about being overloaded in your work life?*

Let’s get personal here. We are talking about you—just you—not the larger systems of which you are a part, although goodness knows the workplace needs our attention as well. But for now, let’s laser focus on what YOU, and only YOU, can do.

The first thing to do is to realize that you have MUCH more control than you actually exercise over how you use your time (the 168 hours per week). If that Trickster—the Crazy Yeah-But (cousin to Bugs who hamstrung Elmer Fudd all those years)—has you bamboozled into thinking there is nothing you can change about how you use your time, that you are a helpless, hopeless, victim of circumstance (“Yeah but I HAVE to do this.” “Yeah but I HAVE to do that.” “Yeah but I have no choice.”), then you may as well stop reading this article right now. You don’t have time to read it anyway. You’re too busy.

The second thing is to keep to yourself and your most trusted colleagues any thoughts about your efforts to live a balanced work life. Remember: Balance has become professionally abnormal and suspect. We’re talking guerrilla health here.

A third thing is to consider six principles from my book, *Making Time, Making Change*, about avoiding chronic overload in college teaching. If the ideas are helpful, great; if not, keep looking. Your life may depend on it. Really. No joke.

**Principle 1: Be able to be efficient in all things.**

This first principle is the obvious efficiency dictum. With more and more things coming at us, we need to develop ways to take less time to do the same things with similar quality. My book (and your colleagues) have lots of concrete practices for doing this. However, if I were to pick one thing to highlight for the limited space of this article, it would be the clever use of course management systems (CMS’s). Essentially, without sacrificing educational quality—and in many cases increasing it—CMS’s allow us to use robots for much of the time-consuming, tedious, but necessary parts of teaching such as, course record keeping, scoring quizzes, distributing course materials, making resources available, conducting simple instruction, communicating evolving course policy, forming student groups, and so forth.

**Principle 2: Express your values in how you use your time.**

Avoiding overload involves values clarification, which is expressed in the development of a time budget for making tough choices related to how we spend our time. My book has a short series of questions the answers to which produce a time budget that allows you, when faced with two demands on your time, both of which are important, to say “no” to one and “yes” to the other, without guilt, knowing that your decision is in alignment with your deepest values related to living a healthy, productive, sustainable life.

In workshops, when faculty work through these questions and discover how much time they really have for each of their key responsibilities—teaching, research, service, and professional development—most are flabbergasted at how little time they really have for each task—say, teaching a course—and how far out of alignment their expectations are for what they think they should accomplish. Essentially, semester after semester, year after year, they realize through this reflection, they’ve set themselves up to feel as if they have failed.

This principle is by far the most powerful, most difficult to follow, and not surprisingly, least likely for us to spend time on. It involves reflecting on our deepest values. It takes time to make time. Feeling overloaded, we shortchange reflection that will heal our condition. Who has time? We do. We have the power to make the time, and we must choose to use our power.

**Principle 3: Don’t hoard responsibility, share it.**

This principle involves searching for ways in which other agents in our environments can do what we do with the same or better result. For example, in our teaching, we need to look for sources of NIC’s (Non-Teacher Instructional Content) and NIF’s (Non-Teacher Instructional Feedback). Sources of both include: (a) students (for example, short term dyadic or small group exchanges in class, enduring work groups that may involve face-to-face meetings outside of class, or electronically mediated agorae such as CMS discussion boards and Web 2.0 social networking sites), (b) electronic and print mastery learning programs (many texts come with these CMS building blocks now), (c) outside experts with whom students can interact electronically or personally, and (d) electronically-accessed research databases.

In our teaching, this principle advises us to look for solutions: that help students (particularly traditional age students) to develop and mature while also making time for us. Notwithstanding our good intentions, making things easy may not always serve students’ development well. Giving students responsibility and consequences does serve them well and is part of our responsibility as educators.

**Principle 4: For every aspect of your life, find a time and place befitting it.**

This principle recommends that we find dependable matches for what we are trying to do and the environment in which we are trying to do it. My biggest concern here is for faculty work that is vulnerable to interruption—such as thinking, reading, writing, grading, or preparing for a course. Often, faculty have difficulty being able to block access to themselves completely. But we need to find dependable ways, metaphorically, to close the door and not answer it no matter how insistent the pounding.

**Principle 5: Be short with many so that you may be long with a few.**

Being present for students and colleagues—giving them our pure attention—is perhaps our biggest gift and, certainly, one of our most effective professional resources. However, we often waste it. We simply cannot be present effectively for our students and colleagues when we are frazzled and distracted. Face-to-face communication is a precious resource that we must use intentionally for fear that we squander it on whatever is in our face at the moment.

We need to use asynchronous communication tools— voice-mail and e-mail are two examples—that buffer us from interruption, while preserving the information communicated, thereby allowing us to respond at a time, pace, and intensity of our choosing.

**Principle 6: Stick to your knitting: refer, defer, delegate when possible.**

This principle instructs us to use the professional practices of referral and delegation when appropriate. When we see teaching as facilitating learning rather than disseminating knowledge, college teaching becomes a helping profession akin to, but different from, other helping professions such as counseling, social work, and ministry.

College teaching is perhaps the only helping profession that does not teach its professionals important practices such as boundary management and referral practices. We need to have phone numbers and e-mail addresses handy for the counseling center (when students have emotional problems), writing center (when students can’t write well), math center (when students have a math block), technology help desk (when students can’t log on to Blackboard), and so forth. We do not need to do it all.

I have been brief here, but you can find many specific ideas for applying these six principles in *Making Time, Making Change*.

<http://www.nea.org/home/34620.htm>