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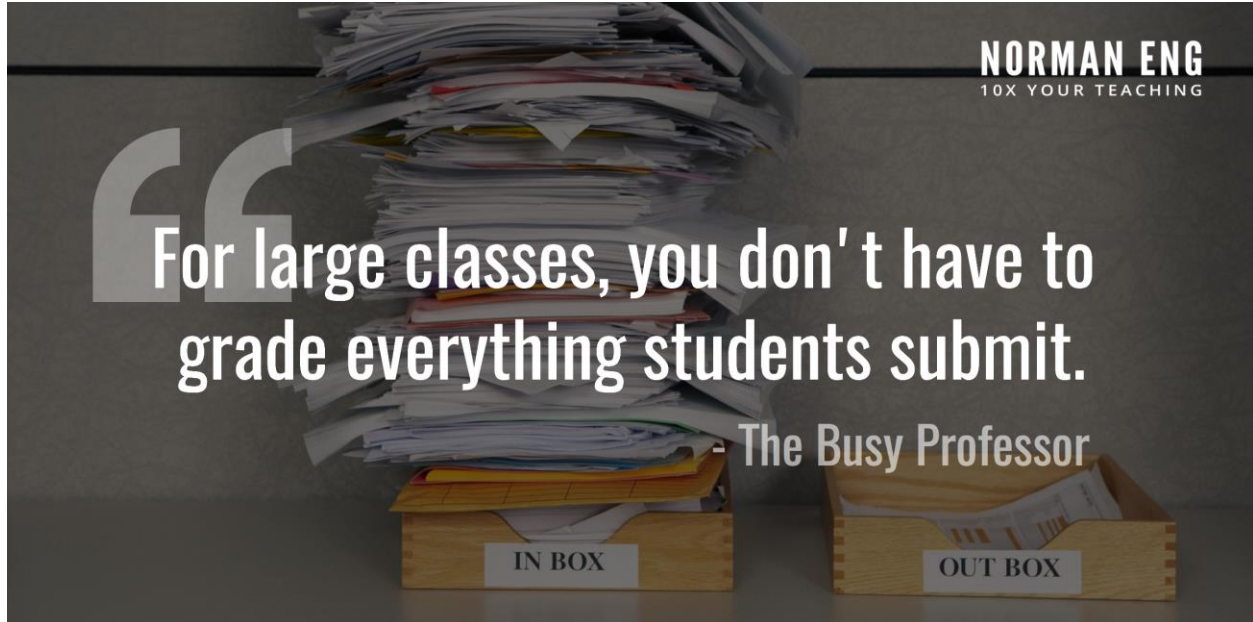
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Feeling Overwhelmed, Professors? Let's Fix That

(Q&A with Dr. Tim Slater)

By Norman Eng, Ed.D.



The average faculty work **61 hours per week**—more than 50 percent over the traditional 40-hour work week, according to a Boise State University study. A lot of that time is spent alone.

When you have to grade papers, plan lectures, teach, research, meet with students and colleagues, perform administrative tasks, do consulting work, and lead teams, the overwhelm can creep up really fast.

So I called **The Busy Professor**.

Dr. Tim Slater is a science education professor at the University of Wyoming, where he holds the University of Wyoming Excellence in Higher Education Endowed Chair of Science Education. After holding hundreds of workshops for thousands of struggling science professors, he realized that **time management** was a learned skill that few professors have ever had the chance to master. As a result, he started his blog, *The Busy Professor*, and is frequently an invited speaker to college and university new faculty orientations to help early career professors keep from getting overwhelmed at their first academic post.

I asked Dr. Slater questions related to grading, preventing overwhelm, and advice for new professors. His answers are straight up, short, concrete, and practical—just the way we want it.

How do you prevent overload and frustration?

Professors have a tremendous number of questions coming at them from all sides at all hours:

students have questions about coursework; mentoring professors have questions about scholarly productivity; grant agencies have questions about budgets; committee members have questions about policy changes, and administrators have questions about whatever it is that administrators constantly seem to have questions about.

The requests for information is seemingly endless, and that causes tremendous overload. The only time management strategy that works is to set specific times to respond to emails and requests for information and only respond to such emails during this time.

The worst thing professors can do is have their email program on and constantly updating, because most incoming emails are distracting from their number one job priority. I recommend 90 minutes each day to disconnect.

What is the number one advice you have for new teachers?

The number one advice I have is to set several times every week where you are not in your office or available by email. If you need to catch up on the literature, a standing and unmovable weekly date in the library is essential. If you need to write more, a weekly (or daily) and immutable writing session at a coffee shop or a restaurant is critical. For whatever reason, no one really gets any work done sitting at their office desk. The best advice I can offer is to hard schedule time to get out!

What practical suggestion would you give for instructors whose students demand a lot of attention?

The best strategy is to be clear and consistent about when and where you will deal with them. An open-door policy is a death-sentence for professors. As it turns out, students will be surprisingly patient if they know precisely when you are going to get back to them, and that you will be undistracted when with them.

I recommend end-of-the-day as the best time to schedule work with students because the most prolific authors consistently find that writing earlier in the day when you are freshest is most productive.

How do you balance competing opportunities? (e.g., grant-writing, journal articles, speaking gig, teaching)

Every day, people make decisions about how they are going to spend their scarce minutes. Unfortunately, most people don't think about time as currency, and let it slip away unknowingly.

When there are competing demands, I recommend you prioritize things that show up on your CV or end of year performance review. No one gets credits for going to lots of meetings or, even, really, chairing committees. Priority number one is what makes you most marketable should you decide to go out on the job market.

My most senior mentors tell me they wish they'd spent more time writing and less time

traveling, because writing is permanent. Traveling takes time away from writing and from family.

How do you approach grading with large classes?

You can't grade large classes in the same way you grade smaller classes. It isn't that more students means more grading. It's just that grading is more exhausting. It takes away from your ability to enhance your CV and end-of-year performance evaluations. If administrators insist on larger classes, then leveraging the advantages of online, self-grading systems is the best way to go.

Wait, online self-grading systems?

Most textbook companies supporting natural and social science disciplines have an option where students can subscribe to an automatically graded homework system. Some of these even work like smart tutors and give students feedback when they submit an incorrect answer. These systems are available from many textbook publishers, and the cost is passed on to the student. There might be similar computer-based homework auto-graded systems available for history and English courses too.

Anyway, for large classes, you don't have to grade everything students submit. I've had great success with rolling six-sided number-cubes/dice with some dramatic flair on homework submission day to the cheers and jeers of students about whether the homework they just submitted will be graded. The scheme I use is even-numbered rolls are days in which the homework is graded, and odd-numbered rolls are submitted, but ungraded.

Tell me more.

To do this right, we require our students to always turn in homework. On days where the number cube, or die, rolls as "GRADED," we grade the submitted homework typically. On days where the die randomly rolls as "UNGRADED" we simply give students full points if they submitted anything that appears meaningful on a glance. In other words, we randomly cut our allocated grading time in half by giving students full points simply for submitting work that appears "complete." We always post an ideal solution so students can self grade, if they wish.

What if the course involves lots of writing?

In large classes, experienced teachers know to devote significant time to ONE portion of a five-paragraph essay at a time. For example, only meaningfully grade the introduction during the first few weeks of school, and help students get that part right (so the introduction doesn't have to be meaningfully graded later in the term). During the middle of the term only grade the body of the essay and largely ignore the conclusion. Finally, during the last one-third of the semester, focus on the conclusion (and be sure it matches the introduction). This is perhaps the best way to survive.

Love this system of random grading, Tim. So I'm curious about your daily routine. I'm

always interested in being more productive.

Most highly productive professors have a rigorous and inflexible morning schedule, knowing they can't control the natural whirlwind of chaos after lunch. I get up early each morning and meet my writing goal of 1,000 words before I ever check my email. The moment you check your email, you are then adding things to your "to do list" that will interfere with your morning routine.

In other words, if you want to enjoy flexibility in the afternoons and spend evenings with family and friends rather than your laptop, then your mornings need to have a very strict and unchanging routine. For me, I don't accept any morning meeting appointments unless I absolutely cannot avoid it. And, I try hard not have an open door to my office until after lunch. Remember the rule: Anyone who enters your office before lunch without a check for grant money is bringing some unnecessary distraction that interferes with your ability to build a winning CV.

I also have an immovable writing routine based on hours – from 6 to 8AM every day.

Thanks Tim, for helping our tribe of instructors become more efficient and productive.

Readers, have you tried anything similar? If so, how'd it work out? Would love to hear your thoughts.

Read Tim Slater's blog, [The Busy Professor](#). If you teach science, check out his other blog, [SCST.org/blog](#). You can also follow him on Twitter @caperteam.

Originally appeared in <http://normaneng.org/feeling-overwhelmed-professors-lets-fix-that>