Activity: Balancing Teaching and Research

Activity Type: Small group discussion

Goals: To help discussion leaders quantify the drains on their time, and make plans to deal with them

Abstract:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-class prep</td>
<td>5 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urgent vs Important figure</td>
<td>20 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mini-lecture on Balance</td>
<td>10 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group offers improvement</td>
<td>15 min</td>
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Time needed: 45 minutes

Materials needed: copies of Urgent/Important Graph

Before class:
1. Make copies of handouts

During class:
Hi everyone! While much of our TA training is associated with learning and practicing new teaching skills, as a graduate student you are also required to continue doing your research during this period since most of you have 50% appointments. So we have designed an activity for development of skills and strategies that will help you be more productive and relaxed while balancing teaching with your other responsibilities.

Please get into groups of three and I’m going to pass out this empty figure. For our purposes, “urgent” is an activity which has a looming deadline that is externally imposed. “Important” is an activity that when completed will move you towards your life or work goals.

You will be listing some life tasks, and you need to determine whether each of your tasks is urgent or not, and important or not. And you should scale them within the quadrants, too, so their location within the quadrant indicates how urgent and important they are.

1. Think of five tasks you are likely to have for your TAship in any “normal” week. Place them on the figure.
2. Add five tasks you are likely to have for your research during a “normal” week.
3. Add five tasks you are likely to have as part of your home/family/personal life during a “normal week.

Okay? Turn to other people in your group, and compare your definitions of “urgent” and “important.” Is there anything you disagree about?

(Draw a quadrant on the board, label I through IV and label axes).
Time management gurus like to discuss these four quadrants as follows.

- Quadrant I, important and urgent, is the “crisis” quadrant. Here are pressing problems, emergencies, and deadline-driven projects not finished earlier. Having many activities in this quadrant is exhausting and indicates an inability to deal with issues before the deadline looms.

- Quadrant II is the “planning” quadrant. This should hold tasks of planning and preparation, and be the source of activities that are being done ahead of their deadline. Having tasks in II keeps you productive and confident rather than stressed.

- Quadrant III is the “deception” quadrant. It is here that the needs of others press strongly against you, and try to convince you that their deadline should be important to you as well. Some of these tasks are necessary for you to do immediately (requests from your advisor), while others are not as truly urgent as the presenter would have you believe (emails from your students).

- Lastly, Quadrant IV is the “escape” quadrant. This consists of pointless meetings, watching YouTube videos, or rearranging glassware in the lab. You usually do them instead of a Quadrant II task because they are easier. Unfortunately, these activities end up making you more stressed by pushing tasks that should have been in Quadrant II (important but not urgent) into Quadrant I (important and urgent).

Now that you’ve heard those descriptions, can anyone give me examples of tasks that are generally found in inappropriate quadrants? Perhaps student emails, or designing a class web page, or writing your journal club presentation the night before it is due? (take suggestions, add them to board)

When you look at all you have to do this term, develop ways to meet these goals:

1. Stop doing tasks that fall into Quadrant IV.
2. Tasks that are currently in Quadrant I because of procrastination should be scheduled and done earlier and with more deliberation, reducing your stress level.
3. Tasks that are currently in Quadrant III need to be evaluated. If they are truly not important to you, can they be delegated? If they are necessary for you to do (someone has to clean the bathroom), can they be scheduled so that they don’t reach the “urgent” state?

We have a bit of practical advice about teaching, particularly. We recommend:

- Make your lecture time count. Take notes in lecture on printed powerpoints, just like most students do. When something said was clearly confusing to the students, make a notation to help you remember, and use this as the framework of a discussion activity. Does something strike you as a good exam question? Make a note as well so you can more easily pick up that train of thought later. Don’t sit next to other TAs if it will distract you. Avoid using electronics as they will distract you.
- Set up a schedule for a generic “week while teaching.” Write in when you go to lecture and when you teach. When will you plan your activity for teaching? It needs to be
done near your discussion so you can include the lecture material that occurs up to the day before. When will you do any necessary grading? This should be done and posted by your next discussion, but is not linked to any particular day. Mark out days to spend time on these activities.

- Choose one time of day to deal with student emails. Tell students “I answer my teaching emails once each morning,” and then you don’t feel like you need to respond as soon as they come in.
- Practice letting go of activity perfection. It takes as much time to make a good activity awesome as it did to make the activity go from non-existent to good. Stop with “good enough” and make notes after class on how you will make it even better if you teach it again.

What three concrete steps can you take to make the shift from I to II, and from III to II?

You may also want to read this advice to new faculty:
Activity Handout: Balancing Teaching and Research

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<tr>
<th>More Important</th>
<th>Less Important</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More Urgent</td>
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