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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## **4 Ways Teachers Can Overcome Instructor Exhaustion: Another Question Every Online Instructor Wonders About**

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Anyone who has been teaching for a while knows that stress is normal for our vocation. When stress is prolonged over a long period of time, we experience exhaustion. Online instruction can compound the effects of mental, emotional, and even physical exhaustion because of course design that extends the time for planning, preparing, and implementing a course.

## **Managing Your Online Instruction**

I don't feel like an expert on self-care, but I have learned some healthy habits to keep teaching online not only manageable, but rewarding. Here is what I have learned so far.

### ***1. Plan ahead and give yourself ample time for course design in online instruction.***

The largest and most long-term online project I have tackled is, by far, reinvigorating my institution's distant learners Greek language program. From designing and creating a two-course sequence to implementing and teaching it online, it was a project that lasted a full year.

When I started, I had already taught beginning Greek in a traditional F2F on-campus classroom setting for over 10 years.

Converting my existing F2F class into a new asynchronous course on the Canvas learning management system (LMS) was a challenge. I had a head start since I had already laid out the course content in my traditional F2F class. This spared me the extra stress and work of trying to plan the course from scratch. Instead, I focused on understanding best online instruction pedagogical practices and implementing new technology. I had to create and produce over 80+ instructional videos, learn how to use the video-conferencing technology for Greek tutoring, and design assignments that made use of Canvas' full features which included online quizzes.

The course design took the entire summer. 3 intense months. It would have taken longer if I had not the experience and past resources of having taught the class beforehand. Whatever you do, plan ahead. You need at least a month to plan out a course and another three to create it on your institution's LMS. If you don't give yourself ample time for course design, you will exhaust yourself from creating the course and not have much reserve to teach it.

## ***2. Set aside a no-work day for yourself while implementing the course.***

Pick one day a week and let students know that on that day, you will be offline not answering any correspondence. We all need a Sabbath space in our weekly schedule to pull away from our work and rest. I have found Saturdays to be the best day off. It affords me time to spend with family and friends. Sundays never worked for me. They tend to be days when students scramble to finish their assignments online prior to deadlines on Monday. Know what days work and don't work for your schedule. Pick a Sabbath day and make it sacred. If you let students know ahead of time, they will honor your day off and expect a response to their queries later.

## ***3. Recharge your motivation for teaching.***

What makes online instruction a rewarding experience for you? Some of my colleagues enjoy the research and reading that comes with preparing a class. Others, like myself, need a personal connection with students to stay motivated. Whatever the source of inspiration, turn back to it periodically to recharge your enthusiasm for the course. Take the opportunities to stay inspired as they arise.

When I was attending an annual denominational event during the Winter break, I learned that a number of my online students would be attending the conference. We met at a local Starbucks simply to connect. We talked about all things Greek and New Testament. But I also learned about their stories and ministries. I heard what they loved about the course and why they wanted to learn the biblical languages. What they shared that day renewed my desire and motivation to teach. Mental exhaustion gave way to rekindled inspiration. I was ready to tackle

the rest of semester.

#### ***4. Practice the spiritual disciplines faithfully.***

Here I'm writing to theological educators. We all have our favorite spiritual disciplines: a daily devotional, times of prayer, morning or mid-day offices, or walks for reflection and meditation. I have found walks an important way to reflect on my vocation and pray for students. Whatever your spiritual tradition, observe it faithfully and experience the grace to persevere through even the toughest of semesters.

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