Lighten the Teaching & Learning Load to Finish Well

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What simple gestures and accommodations at the end of a semester can lighten the load without compromising teaching and learning?

Educators expect waning energy as a semester and academic year conclude. Students are overwhelmed trying to finish overdue assignments, final projects, and exams. Faculty are at the breaking point with grading, administrative tasks, and work/life balance. While student energy for learning flags, most faculty tap into their very last teaching reserves to end courses in the best possible spirit.

This normal rhythm of attenuating energy is intensifying in the Covid-19 crisis. End of year celebrations like graduation are not there to provide momentum, needed affirmation, and closure. Educators have become a last line of continuity and support for increasingly vulnerable students. We are teachers turned life-coach, counselor, parent, and pastor. All the while, grief and loss are mounting on every side.

Here are four simple ways to lighten the teaching and learning load to finish well:

1. <u>Take a hard look at any remaining assignments left in the semester.</u> Chances are, only one or two assignments are crucial assessment indicators for final grades. In one of my courses, it is a final exam. In another, it is an accumulative writing project. Other

smaller-scale learning assignments that support student engagement and course tracking won't impact an overall course grade to any significant degree. In the last few weeks of teaching, be transparent about which few assignments are crucial to finishing well in order to lighten the teaching and learning load. In one course, I've made other assignments optional or extra credit. In another, I've made select assignments pass/fail. Options and clarity help students make informed decisions about where they should focus their waning energy, and faculty can save significant time doing less low priority grading.

2. <u>Diversify ways an assignment can be submitted.</u> In one of my courses, students are required to write a formal film review. I've offered them the alternative of submitting a slide presentation with audio narration. Or they can choose a creative project connecting a film's themes to the challenges of Covid-19. Different choices allow students to meet assignment objectives with less fatigue and anxiety or less intensive editing help from remote support services. Including opportunities to connect with Covid-19 fosters learning engagement and helpful conversations in their life circles. Students reveal surprisingly diverse and creative communication skills when modes of presentation are flexible. And diverse submissions make the drudgery of grading … almost … fun.

3. <u>Allow students to partner with peers on assignments.</u> In one of my courses, students were writing individual reviews on one of three books to complete the semester. Fifteen papers to write, fifteen papers to read and grade. I adjusted the assignment and asked students reading the same book to submit one review written collaboratively. They divided tasks and wrote with improved shared insight while bolstering their peer-to-peer relationships weakened by less classroom interaction. Overall, shared grades were higher, everyone benefited, and I graded 3 book reviews instead of 15.

4. <u>Most important: reassure, reassure, reassure.</u> Students need a strong ongoing word of encouragement to finish well. Let them know expectations and goals are shifting and simplifying in response to Covid-19. I remind students at every possible moment that their singular task is to stay engaged in course learning to the degree they are able and maintain good communication about their circumstances and needs. In return, it is my responsibility to make sure they have every possible opportunity to finish their courses well. Reassurance means hosting conversations on Zoom or other discussion platforms about specific challenges or griefs impacting students' lives. Reassurance means reminding them that, even in very uncertain times, they have value and gifts and a future. Reassurance means sharing our passion for our area of study and its resourcefulness during a pandemic. Reassure, reassure, reassure. It is less time intensive than grading, and it will help students reach the finish line with wellbeing in mind.

Teaching and learning are life-giving and can be a lifeline. Though our energy is low, and our grief is high, we can do some simple things to ease the load and finish well.

https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/05/lighten-the-teaching-learning-load-to-finish-well/