Avoiding Undergraduate Teaching Burnout, Part 2

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Welcome to the second column of the Academics’ Forum. As introduced in the October 2007 issue of TIP, this column focuses on research and teaching-related issues. The first issue that I am exploring as a two-part series is one of great interest to me at this stage of my career, and I suspect of interest to others who have been teaching 10 or more years: how to avoid teaching burnout. Thus, I asked teaching experts how they avoid teaching burnout and continue to maintain excellence in the classroom. My first column on this topic featured advice from Paul Muchinsky, Joseph M. Bryan Distinguished Professor of Business at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and inaugural recipient of the SIOP Distinguished Teaching Contribution Award.

In this second column, I would like to present the responses of Janet Kottke, professor of Psychology at California State Bernardino, and Peter Bachiochi, associate professor of Psychology at Eastern Connecticut State University. Both Kottke and Bachiochi have been prolific in writing articles and giving presentations regarding the teaching of undergraduate I-O psychology. I asked these two experts to respond to four questions: (a) When teaching an undergraduate class how do you keep the content of the class “fresh” and current? (b) An instructor’s enthusiasm may affect students’ enthusiasm and liking of a class. When teaching an undergraduate class for many years, how do you maintain your enthusiasm in the classroom? (c) Any advice on how to maintain and increase the quality of an undergraduate class? (d) What is your greatest challenge in teaching an undergraduate class for a number of years and how do you address this challenge?

Janet Kottke
California State Bernardino

Keeping Class Content Fresh

Teaching graduate I-O classes helps in that I am up on the current research in most of the relevant areas of I-O when I do teach the undergraduate industrial course. Also, the activities involved in choosing a text also help to keep the content fresh in that I don’t automatically assume I’ll use the same book each time I teach it. As a result of not teaching undergraduate classes every quarter, I need to look for textbooks. In this vein, I also make notes during the quarter
while I’m teaching the course about what I want to do differently next time. Some of these notes are about “course corrections,” but others have to do with doing a different activity and so forth. Preparing the syllabus also energizes me to think about what else I might want to alter in the course. I have used the job analysis activity from ToP in various forms, typically now as a group project, which keeps me on my toes each time I teach the course. Groups and their functioning are different each time I conduct the class and though those differences aren’t always enjoyable, they definitely keep the class fresh for me.

Maintaining Enthusiasm

Arguing from a person by situation interactionist perspective (I’m a recovering behaviorist, no matter how hard I try), I find that setting the stage for the course by simply telling the class we are going to have some fun seems to help from the get go. Students expect to have a good time and are expected to volunteer material from their work, play, popular press, and so on. Moving away from the behavioral sentiment, I’m apparently a naturally enthusiastic person. In some student evaluations, I get comments like “she is perky at 8 a.m. How?”

Maintaining Quality

Vigilance and attention seem to me to be the key issue in maintaining quality of instruction. It is very easy to simply say to myself, “I’ve taught this before, I don’t need to do anything besides check on my PowerPoint slides.” Well, I do need to do more than just check the PPTs. I need to think about whether there is anything in the current headlines, business pages or otherwise, that is relevant, whether there is any new research in the area, and so forth. Am I using the same test questions, same format, and same assignments? If so, can I justify them on the basis of my learning objectives? Have the quality of student assignments or test scores gone down? If so, what about my instruction might be responsible?

Greatest Challenge

In short, staying up to date on all the changes in the field is the greatest challenge. I can keep up with most through my graduate teaching obligations but not all. I find reviewing the business press (e.g., making sure I read the business section of the LA Times, although I occasionally check out Fortune and the Wall Street Journal also) helps to find new spins to address age old areas of I-O such as selection or training.

Peter Bachiochi
Eastern Connecticut State University

Keeping Class Content Fresh

Like many teachers, I live in a somewhat “teaching-centric” universe. Whenever I’m watching a movie or TV show, or reading a newspaper or For-
tune magazine article, I can’t help thinking about how I might be able to use it in a class I teach. TV shows like The Office provide lots of great snippets that can add a humorous touch to a lecture.

Movies like Office Space (which it seems every student has seen), Gladiator, Monsters, Inc., Wall Street, and more also provide nice little breaks from a lecture or discussion to keep the students locked in. Fortune magazine also has articles that hit home for students. A recent article on managing Gen-Y employees was particularly fun. I also try to retool a couple of lectures in each class each semester, just to force myself to keep things fresh.

Maintaining Enthusiasm

One of the real perks of the job is that we get a new group of people to work with every 4–5 months. That always means a few quirky students in any class, and I actively encourage, rather than stifle, those quirky students. The occasional off-the-wall comment keeps me on my toes and, if managed properly, can keep things lively. I also make a promise to all my classes on the first day that I will never lecture for an entire class. By building in activities and discussions, there’s always a little bit of the class that isn’t entirely predictable and that helps with the collective enthusiasm (as well as keeping things fresh). There’s also a little temperament involved; you’ve got to make sure that you hire people with a pretty high enthusiasm level to begin with.

Maintaining Quality

Never underestimate the capabilities of your students. It seems that every time I add a new challenge to a class, the students rise to the challenge. This requires some risk taking, clear expectations, and some of the enthusiasm mentioned earlier.

Greatest Challenge

As the focus of the previous questions indicates, the biggest challenge is keeping it fun for me. If I’m not having fun, the class definitely isn’t going to either. Although my goal isn’t to simply let them have fun, I know that they’re going to contribute more, be more involved, and learn more if they’re enjoying themselves along the way.

Future Topics

A topic for a future column will be finding populations from which to collect data for research purposes. If you have a good idea regarding how to collect data from a population other than the traditional subject pool and are willing to share the idea, please e-mail me. Ideas regarding how to collect data other than one time survey data would be especially welcome. Also, I welcome suggestions for future topics. My e-mail address is roch@albany.edu.