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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Crunch Time

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Blog Series: Stories from the Front

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Tags: student assignments | assessing learning | course design

Is anyone else out there taken by surprise, year after year, at how absurdly crazy the weeks feel between AAR and winter break?

I'm not complaining - I just had a wonderful time with 10,000 religion nerds in sunny San Diego (which included a video shoot with my two fellow bloggers)



and I can soon look forward to a few weeks of vacation during which, even if I have work to do, I don't have to show up to the office. Nevertheless, my head is swimming with the barrage of stimuli currently coming my way. Much of the craziness is administrative (two search committees in full swing, various other one-time or ongoing committee meetings) or home-related (kid's strings concert, finding a pet-sitter for Christmas), but most of it is coming from students.

Right now I am teaching two sections of world religions, and this year I tried something new (well, new to me) with grading. I created a point system instead of one based on weighted percentages. The syllabus outlines two types of assignments: those that are required (exams,

papers, participation) and those that are optional (presentations, book reports, office visits, site visits, extra-curricular learning events). If a student achieves perfect scores on every required assignment, she can earn an AB (my institution's way of skirting the A-/B+ issue), but if she wants an A she must do at least one optional assignment. My thinking was that this would highlight the fact that "excellent" is supposed to really mean work that *excels* - it goes above and beyond standard requirements - and would allow students to feel more in control of their grades. It would also give them many chances to make up for a bad paper or exam.

What I didn't expect, though of course I should have, was that most students wouldn't think about doing any optional assignments until well after mid-terms, such that the last weeks of the term have been jam-packed with students doing presentations (which require at least one meeting with me - a process that inevitably entails multiple emails) or office visits (a 20-minute meeting with me to discuss topics of their own choosing). My students' sense of urgency began to rise right around the time my advisees needed to meet about registration for winter term. Never mind that September and October saw entire weeks go by with nary a student visiting during my five regular office hours; humans, as we all know, will put off whatever they can put off until they can't anymore. As one student wrote laughably the night before our last day of class, "I am sorry I waited until the last minute, but this semester has been very busy for me."

Had I planned more efficiently, these weeks of student panic might not seem so over-stimulating, but - being human like my students - I, too, put off what I can until I can't. Unlike some of my colleagues in more popular departments, I'm simply not used to having students lined up outside my door waiting to see me. I also sometimes forget that I'm a bit introverted and need down time. (*What? An introvert in academe?*) It's easy to forget because I like people and I'm not shy, but when I lack even a few moments to regroup between visits I start to feel something like this:



At crunch time, there's usually nothing to do other than keep going, plowing right on through it till it's done. I have a couple of mantras I repeat to myself during these weeks, including "I am a professional," "All life is medicine," and "Summer's coming!" And I often remind myself what a ridiculously cushy job I have.

Are there other introverts or semi-introverts out there who struggle during the people-intensive times of year? What do you do to get yourself and your students through it?

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2014/12/crunch-time/>