

Teaching with Intention: Personal Sustainability

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The Philosopher and Transcendentalist David Henry Thoreau inspired by former enslaved woman Zilpha White constructed a small cabin in the woods. The premise simple: to live a meaningful life devoid of distractions. Thoreau lived this lifestyle for two years on the edge of Walden Pond near Concord Massachusetts. The result was the book Walden or Life in the Woods. His tome became a manual of guidance on simple and minimalistic living. Of carefully managing the process of work and life in an equilibrium of cyclic repetition. In other words: the avoidance of burnout.

Walden Pond

The careful maintenance of teaching in a Higher Education context requires management of resources, namely time and energy to achieve our desired outcomes. It can be assumed that most Facilitators aim to provide learners with high value experiences. These require a strong sense of resource investment to create and deliver high quality educational outcomes. The issue becomes paramount when mission creep sets in, and the job of preparation becomes a gargantuan scenario of inordinate hours that become less productive for the Facilitator. Too few hours and we risk not investing the requisite time learning a commanding knowledge of our subject matter to deliver it effectively. Too many hours and we may overcomplicate our position or create a sense of futility and burnout.

Minimalist Principle: Avoid burnout.

Application: Set boundaries around how much time you spend preparing, teaching, and marking.

Result: More sustainable workload and better long-term teaching quality.

So, what is the correct answer? The answer is that it's complicated. Semesters, Trimesters, and Study Periods have their own rhythm and season. Workloads often fluctuate depending on when and where learning is occurring. The opening moments of a study period will have its own sense of ordered chaos as we strive to set the pace and tone of the semester. Assessment weeks will have their own sense of urgency and release. The core focus should be to create a workflow that is both manageable and sustainable over longer periods of time. Work weeks may therefore have both longer and shorter days when contextually driven towards the operational requirements of the faculty or school.

Managing our health, energy, and mental health as facilitators should be paramount to our approach in the classroom. We can only function at our best for learners with healthy boundaries. We should be prepared to embrace boredom and rest as both a form of recharge and a form of creative and critical thinking. Moments of breath within our days can lead to improved outcomes as we begin to control the pace of our time. All are equal regarding the amount of time we are allocated. But how we invest it gives us the advantage.

Our aim should be the effectiveness and quality of our teaching and the content we teach. An importance of ensuring the workload and work life we embrace avoids burnout and creates sustainability.

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