

Conserving Your Teaching Energy

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What does it actually take to teach a college class nowadays in our age of distraction?

For some faculty, the answer is technology — PowerPoints, laptops, visual aids. But technology is itself a distraction. And what if you are the kind of teacher who likes chalk and blackboards, discussions around a table, and hard-copy texts and handouts. How do you get, and keep, their attention?

Entering the room to the obligatory unsettledness at the beginning of every class period, you wonder: How long would it take them to settle down if you didn't say anything?

Once they are quiet, the question becomes: How to start? The existential silence is profound. It is all on you to achieve liftoff, and get the ball rolling against their natural predispositions — to not pay attention, not be ready, and not be poised to learn. It rests upon your shoulders to effect the transition from their natural state of noisiness and disconnection to class-ready mode. Your pedagogical engine is fueled to the brim with instinct and endorphins. You must think on your feet, mind racing a mile a minute. On the surface you don't want to show hesitation. You must act as if you are in command because fissures in your composure make them uncomfortable.

Your credentials and what you know about your field don't matter much in this moment. Your expertise remains subordinate to your humor, good-naturedness, and equanimity. Students want to feel safe in your classroom. They want reassurance that you care about them and respect their thoughts — that you will listen to what they have to say — before anything comparable to learning a subject will occur.

Their proclivity to hover a hair's breadth away from distraction — their default position — requires your vigilance. From moment to moment, teaching your subject, you make a myriad of improvisational, gut-level decisions that affect how you come across. Which students should you call on (and when, and why) in order to be fair and give everyone a chance to be heard? With whom should you establish eye contact? What are you going to say — or not

say —when students get up to go to the bathroom, sneak in a surreptitious text, or murmur to their neighbors? When you call out such behavior, how will you respond when they insist indignantly that they had no intention of being rude?

The volatile emotional climate of the classroom is always in danger of becoming unmoored at the slightest provocation. In your heart of hearts, you know that when you look down at your notes, or read aloud from the book, somebody out there will seize the moment to text. When someone sneezes, everybody in the class is compelled to say "bless you!" If there is the slightest sound from next door or in the corridor, all heads will turn. If it starts raining, if the window shades make a noise from the wind, if the air conditioner blows too cold and someone complains — the fragile narrative content you've been building will threaten to collapse.

You need to become accustomed to subtle resistance when you call upon someone to speak: "Who me?" or "My hand wasn't raised, I was just scratching my head" or "She already said what I was going to say," or, when they haven't been listening, "Could you repeat the question?" or "I lost my train of thought." You must pretend you do not have peripheral vision and cannot see the students who keep their hands raised while someone else is speaking; they are marking time, waiting their turn.

Because of the latent anxiety that is let loose whenever you take a few minutes to itemize the writing prompts for a forthcoming essay, or discuss what's going to be on the next exam, you feel the imperative to speak slowly, crank up your voice, invest an additional jolt of energy into putting your advice across. You must "sell" your main points, rather than just "make" them.

Their faces will remain blank when they are thinking, and so, you won't have sufficient visual feedback to tell if they *get* what you are saying. Every 10 minutes or so, you will need to summarize what you have been talking about and hit a refresh button in their minds.

They will start packing up backpacks and glancing at phones by the one-hour mark, with 15 minutes remaining in the period. At that point, you will tell everybody to just "chill" and keep focused.

Some 15 or 20 minutes later, you will leave the classroom — your heart pounding, pulse accelerated — and retreat to your office, close the door, and pause to regain your equilibrium and breathe.

And so, to return to my initial question: What does it take to be a college professor in the second decade of the 21st century?

It takes a lot of energy, much of which you must expend monitoring your student's emotions before the learning can begin. Dear colleagues, your responsibilities are as follows:

- Get a good night's sleep, and eat a hearty breakfast.
- I know it is tempting, but don't drink too much coffee, because you will get overhyped before class and risk crashing from that fake caffeine high.
- Pace yourself doing whatever you have to do (meetings, errands, paperwork) before class starts.
- Remain mindful of your finite energy reserves, and mediate your outflow during class time so you don't expend all your strength too early in the period.
- And at the end of your long day on campus, even when you are tired and strung out, the teaching body must be attended to. Make yourself head over to the gym for cardio and weight training, to keep your vital signs in decent working order. Commit to developing the imperative physical stamina required to capture — and hold — your students' attention.

All of that will prepare you for the challenge of nurturing their voracious hunger for well-being — before you can begin teaching them how to learn what you know.

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