

ADVICE

# Does 'High-Impact' Teaching Cause High-Impact Fatigue?

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**C**olleges that care about teaching often promote the value of "high-impact practices" and "transformative" learning. That could mean a writing-intensive course, a small seminar for freshmen, a service-learning project, or even something as simple as

an informal meal in a faculty member's home.

Such high-impact practices — HIPs, as they're known — have become the kind of metric institutions brag about in their mission statements. So what's the problem?

High-impact practices can be exhausting. They are labor intensive — for students, yes, but especially for faculty members. Designing and managing these efforts can be all-consuming and energy-draining. You may need a manageable case of obsessive-compulsive disorder just to survive the experience. Consider some of the predictable hazards:

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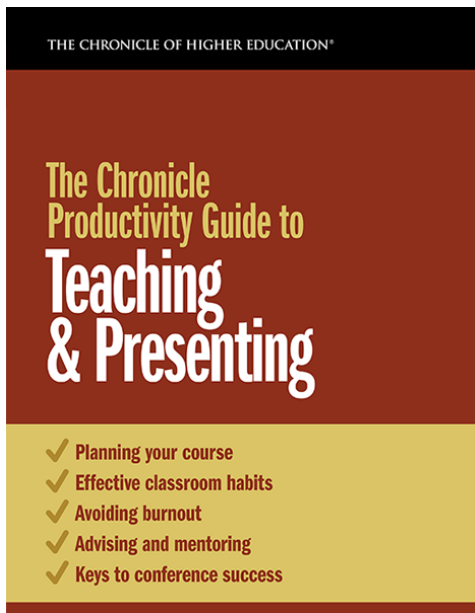
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- Giving students multiple opportunities to revise and even substantially rewrite their work means that instructors risk having to evaluate lots of papers over and over again. That's less of a problem with good papers, of course, but it means a lot of extra work on multiple versions of the problematic ones.
- The detailed feedback you spent hours drafting may go entirely unread by students. For those undergraduates who are focused on getting a grade and moving onto the next assignment, the depth and intensity of your effort becomes an utter waste of time. Faculty members regularly muse, "Why am I working harder on this paper than the student seemed to?"
- Group projects can combust with little warning. The fallout may include chaotic conditions that result when some group members do little or no work yet expect to share in the grade. Many undergraduates adhere to an unwritten code of silence when it comes to outing the loafers. Worse, the disgruntled may storm your office hours as grades are about to be assigned, demanding "justice."
- Those internships you arranged? Undergraduates may be enthused about the work experience at the outset but lose interest over the semester. Unreliable or unfulfilling performance by a student intern at a local company, for example, will generate substantial frustration not only for the student but also for the faculty adviser and the host supervisor — not to mention problematic public relations for the institution.
- First-year seminars require more of a faculty member than just expertise on the subject. You are also providing academic acculturation to the campus.

Remembering what it is like to be a novice and what specific advice may be useful to new students adds a dimension of effort well beyond course content.

If you are using high-impact practices in your courses, the question is: How can you manage them more effectively and avoid burnout? Here are some suggestions:

## The Chronicle Productivity Guide to Teaching & Presenting



### The Chronicle Productivity Guide to Teaching & Presenting

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**Be realistic about the scope at the outset.** To preserve your energy, schedule just one — or at most two — courses that are high impact. A simple cost-benefit analysis may be useful in trying to determine whether the HIP path is worth undertaking in a given course.

**Grade selectively.** Students will thrive without having intensive feedback on every single thing they do in your course.

**Use rubrics.** Spend a little time creating a grading rubric upfront, and you can save yourself a lot of time later on. Distributing the rubric in class will clarify your expectations and improve the caliber of students' work, since they know what you're looking for. Better work is easier to grade.

**When you can, use digital shortcuts.** Create a cheat sheet of common suggestions and notes you make on student work, and then copy and paste those comments into the online feedback you're providing. Stock sentences can be imported for papers that demonstrate similar shortcomings.

A paper that is rife with grammatical errors, incomplete sentences, and inaccurate concepts doesn't necessarily have to be read all the way through to produce a sound judgment about its writing quality.

You can speak faster than you write, so explore opportunities to provide audio feedback, too.

**Tailor how you offer feedback.** Ask students for a candid assessment of whether or not they actually read the comments you write on their essays. In a learning-management system, you may be able to tell whether students opened the feedback. If either process reveals that they are in it only for the grade, then don't belabor formative commentary for students who aren't going to take advantage of close attention to their work. Provide a grade and perhaps a general comment and save your energy for those who are more likely to make efforts to improve on the basis of your feedback.

**Stagger deadlines.** Nothing can gut your enthusiasm for teaching like facing a large stack of papers that must be read and evaluated at the end of the semester. Encourage students to sign up for different submission times. For example, if student presentations and corresponding papers are part of the plan, ask students to submit papers a week after their assigned presentation time. With advance notice of the scheduling and

opportunities to pick the deadlines that will work best with their own schedules, students are far less likely to complain that some people had an unfair advantage by having more time.

**Involve students in grading.** To discourage the loafers, obligate students in group projects to evaluate how much each member contributed. At a minimum, students should rank the relative value added to the group process by each group member. Members of functional groups typically rate one another's efforts at 100 percent. When the average score a student receives from his or her fellow group members is below, say, 90 percent, take that score into consideration in determining the student's final grade on the project.

**Ask students to reflect on the experience.** If high-impact practices produce the transformative effects claimed by the experts, then the positive reports you hear from students might make the long hours you've put in seem worthwhile. A student's favorable comment about a life-changing experience in your classroom can bolster your claims of distinguished teaching performance come promotion time, as well as illustrate the good work being done in your department as a whole. Rereading meaningful comments from students can get you through the inevitable bad days.

**Play the HIP card with your department chair.** Maybe you're busting your butt offering high-impact exercises in all of your courses while some of your colleagues are teaching entirely via the same lectures they've delivered before. If your institution or department has declared HIPs a high priority, use that to your advantage. Present a defensible proposal, then lobby your chair to grant you preferred teaching times and honor your scheduling requests.

**Make a case for additional grading support.** If writing-intensive courses are important to the institution it can be argued that institutional resources, such as funds to pay grading assistants, should be invested with those instructors who can document their need.

**Lobby for the weighting of HIPs in personnel decisions.** If students benefit from these efforts, why shouldn't professors? If you are making extra effort to work with students off campus, for example, ask your community partners to write letters on your behalf that can be used at evaluation time.

By the end of a HIP-filled semester, you may have provided thousands of bits of feedback and devoted hours of time to your students. The experience may well have been deeply rewarding for both you and them. Yet what frustrates many faculty members is that, when these efforts are successful, praise tends to go to the high-impact practice itself. The faculty member, whose teaching style may have been the deciding factor, goes unrecognized and unrewarded.

So if you're a chair or a dean, by all means recognize and reward faculty members who use HIPs for going the extra mile. Sure, professors value the intrinsic rewards of teaching, but it doesn't hurt for the department or the institution to bolster their efforts with whatever rewards can be marshalled. After all, faculty members could have just as reasonably taken a low-impact course of action in their classrooms.

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