

White Board



Become An Effective Teacher & Save Your Valuable Teaching Time and Energy

Center for Effective Undergraduate Teaching (864) 388-8426

Waking up to Tired Teaching

I HAVE BEEN WANTING to do a blog post on tired teaching for some time now. Concerns about burnout are what's motivating me. Teachers can reach a place where teaching does nothing for them or their students. They don't just wake up one morning and find themselves burned out; they've moved there gradually, and it's a journey that often starts with tired teaching.

There's nothing on the subject in my big file of articles and resources. I can't remember having read about it, and I'm not sure how much we even talk about it. We do talk about being tired. Teaching is relentless. It happens every day, several times a week—or potentially 24/7 if it's online. And it's demanding. There's so much more than the actual teaching. There's considerable planning involved before each class. Plus, we need to spend time with students—those who want to talk, those needing help, and those with questions or, sometimes, complaints. There are assignments to grade and feedback to provide—all carrying the expectation of a quick turnaround. With multiple courses to teach, we do get tired, but I think we regularly confuse physical fatigue with the more serious emotional tiredness that comes from a heavy workload of always being there, always giving, and always juggling multiple balls in the air.

Sometimes teaching gets tired because we've done what we're doing a hundred times before. Many of us teach the same courses year after year. If they are those bedrock, foundational courses, the content typically doesn't change all that much. We march through the material along well-worn paths. We know the way; we've seen all the sights before. Every student is a unique individual, but collectively they're all novices who ask the same questions we've heard before, who get stuck in the same places, and who repeatedly make the same poor decisions about learning.

In the beginning, tired teaching comes and

goes. We may feel ourselves falling into a rut, but it's usually temporary and we're soon back on track. But later, the tiredness returns. At some point, a kind of paralyzing inertia can settle over us. We no longer have the energy or motivation to change the syllabus, alter course readings, or update the assignments or activities. Add new content? No way, the course is already too full with essential material. Offer online quizzes? Who has time to figure how that works? Besides, the students will cheat.

That's why and how tired teaching happens. The more important question is: What can we do about it? I think we have to start by recognizing that some form of tired teaching happens to all of us at one time or another during our careers. It's an occupational hazard when you work in environments that prize always being rational and objective. A quiet assumption prevails that it's the intellect that powers teaching. Content carries the day. We deny or diminish the importance of teaching's affective demands. We may be physically tired, but we may also be emotionally drained and running on empty. The two can happen simultaneously, but they aren't the same.

We can start by facing the reality of tired teaching, no longer pretending everything will be OK if we just get to bed earlier. We can follow that acknowledgement with purposeful efforts to take care of our instructional health and well-being. As many of us have learned, it's not enough to know we need to eat well and exercise regularly. Both depend on consistent action and, like poor health, tired teaching is more easily prevented than cured. Let me start a list of ways we can respond to the possibility and reality of tired teaching. Please add to the list by sharing the preventive steps that work for you.

- Purposefully make changes—not always big ones, not always a lot, but always some.

- Regularly infuse teaching with ideas and information (not just techniques) sourced externally.
- Engage in collegial collaboration—positive, constructive talk about teaching and learning with colleagues (occasional complaining permitted).
- Take time for the pause that refreshes: regular reminders to yourself that this is work that matters and that what happens to many students in college changes their lives. You are a central part of students' experiences in higher education.
- Be in the moment—in that time you and students share, be present! Listen, observe, and be alert, alive, and focused on what's occurring in that moment.
- Celebrate successes—even small ones. The question that generated good discussion, those three papers showing significant improvement, that student who finally mastered a specific skill—all are moments to be savored.

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; *Waking up to Tired Teaching*; Faculty Focus; March 1, 2017; [<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/waking-tired-teaching/>] March 1, 2017

Last Day to Withdraw Courses - March 3
Spring Break - March 6-10
Fall & Summer Registration Begins
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Timeless Quotes for Teaching and Learning Inspiration

One of my New Year's resolutions was to reread some of my favorite teaching and learning resources, especially those I haven't looked at in a while. I'm enjoying these revisits and decided to share some random quotes with timeless insights.

"All discussion of reform must begin with the ordinary student, not the genius, not the prospective scientist or professor of abnormal psychology but the citizen of the republic who must earn a living in addition to living a humane life."

– Paige Smith, *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America*, 1990, p. 200



"Good students are those who learn. Whatever their preconceptions, barriers or deficits—whatever their story—they take new information and new experiences, and to the best of their ability, make them tools for transforming themselves and their world. And at last I've learned that a good teacher is someone who can recognize and connect with good students—in all their forms."

– Mark Cohan, "Bad Apple: The Social Production and Subsequent Reeducation of a Bad Teacher," *Change*, November/December, 2009, p. 36

"Our students live in cacophony. Clamour, chatter and din fill their ears, and may even injure them. To many, a moment of silence in unendurable. I cannot ask them to put their heads down on their desk and be quiet, as Mrs. Morgan commanded me to do in Grade 2. But we can educate ourselves to be models of intellectuals who trust and value silence, who practice what we have always known; when no one is speaking, someone is learning. We can create oases of silence where cool springs of insight trickle and flow."

– Ron Marken, in *Silences*, 2008, p. 115

"Most teachers resist showing students the dirty part of real learning and by the dirty part I don't mean the hard work.... I mean the part where we fail nine times in a row before we find a good approach. I mean the parts

where we are confused about our project, defensive in the face of criticism, doubtful of our abilities.... Whatever the venue ... teachers like modeling their knowledge, not their ignorance, and they avoid referring to the muddy paths, fear-filled moments, and just plain failure that are the unavoidable parts of getting the knowledge we possess."

– Marshall Gregory, "From Shakespeare on the Page to Shakespeare on the Stage," *Pedagogy*, 2006, p. 324

"Skills as complex as questioning, listening and response are learned step-by-step; mastery is a climb up a ladder, not a pole vault."

– C. Roland Christensen, *Education for Judgment: The Artistry of Discussion Leadership*, 1991, p. 156

"If members of another profession—say surgeons—were like college teachers, they would perform in isolation without apprenticeships, learning to cut and sew by trial and error. They would know anatomy but be ignorant of biology. They would hold colloquia discussing incision tips and suture innovations. To demonstrate the quality of their work, they would ask surviving patients to fill out bubble-sheet questionnaires with items like: 'Does the surgeon demonstrate a commanding knowledge of his field? Is the surgeon well organized? Did she show respect for patients?' No one would look at survival rates."

– Larry D. Spence, "The Case Against Teaching," *Change*, November/December, 2001, p. 14

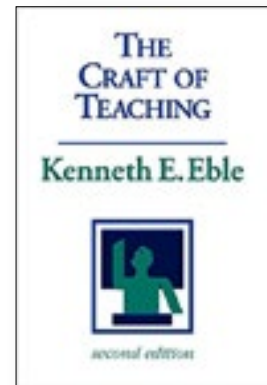
"The teaching life is the life of the explorer, the creator, constructing the classroom for free exploration. It is about engagement. It takes courage. It is about ruthlessly excising what is flawed, what no longer fits, no matter how difficult it was to achieve. It is about recognizing teaching as a medium that can do some things exquisitely but cannot do everything."

– Christa L. Walck, "A Teaching Life," *Journal of Management Education*, November, 1997, p. 481



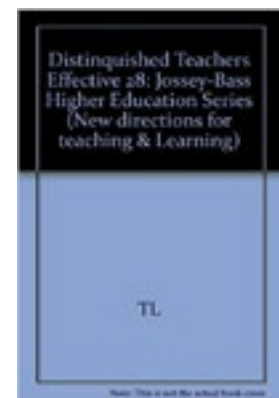
"Research is about as compatible with undergraduate teaching as lions are with lambs. Only by one devouring the other are they likely to lie down comfortably side by side

– Kenneth E. Eble, *The Craft of Teaching*, 2nd ed., 1988, xiii



"Learning is my daily bread. It is wholly selfish, I fear, but I feel more alive in a community of learners than anywhere else. I am a voyeur, a peeping tom. I like to watch other people doing it almost as much as doing it myself. But unexpected (yet dependable) flashes of intuition or dogged discoveries or familiar ideas enlighten and warm me and make my joy complete. Every day."

– Peter G. Beidler in *Distinguished Teachers on Effective Teaching, New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, No. 28, 1986



Maryellen Weimer, PhD; *Timeless Quotes for Teaching and Learning Inspiration*; *Faculty Focus*; February 15, 2017; [<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/timeless-quotes-teaching-learning-inspiration/>] March 1, 2017.