

In the Classroom 114

Increase Classroom Efficiency: Eliminate, Simplify, Automate, Delegate

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thanks ever so much for taking time to listen to this podcast. I really do appreciate it. I recognize you can be doing other things, perhaps you are, but you're still hanging out with me. It certainly means a lot. Do you want to get more time in your life as well as increase your classroom efficiency and effectiveness? Then this is the episode for you. Today, I am going to talk about a set of strategies that will help you get more time. This is not time so you can simply do more things, but it's allowing you to do the right things. That's what I want to talk about today. Face it.

We have a lot going on as we carry out our work as educators and instructional technologists. I'm actually doing librarian duties, so I have that in there. There's always more to do, but time is a constraining factor. It's also a constant factor. Each of us has 168 hours each week in order to move our programs forward. Some individuals are more successful than others because they can manage this time. They're doing what I consider very smart things. I like to say to people that I am a lazy person. I will work extremely hard to figure out the most efficient way to work through a task.

Bill Gates, he said once that, "I choose a lazy person to do a hard job because a lazy person will find an easy way to do it." I think there's a lot of truth in that. I believe this is a mindset that we can adopt. Tim Ferriss in his book *The 4-Hour Workweek*, he pointed me in the right direction. Michael Hyatt in his book *Free to Focus: A Total Productivity System to Achieve More by Doing Less* helped me to further hone this philosophy on how you can work a lot smarter. In the show notes, I will include these books plus other books that have helped me increase my productivity.

Importantly, it's a matter of focusing on the right things with the right strategies. You should work to create efficiencies to acquire more time in your day so you can do more productive thing, or if you want, pursue leisurely pursuits. It's a matter of eliminating times up. We're not able to do everything well in order to get to this. I think that you need to apply Pareto's 80/20 principle as well as Parkinson's law. These are a couple additional that I want to add on, but in terms of Pareto's principle, 20% of the task brings in 80% of the results, or 80% of the questions you get from students really only focus on 20% of the topics.

You're going to see the same questions come in over and over and over again. If you can eliminate these questions that will get you more time back, and ways to eliminate those questions are maybe to create a frequently asked questions list that addresses them upfront, or you modify your course to be more clear, so you would

go to-- Maybe they're tripping up on the same instruction. This is this idea of pinch points that I've talked about before. You would go in and modify your course to address that pinch point, and therefore, try to reduce the questions which then gives you more time.

There's also a principle called Parkinson's law, which highlights the fact that projects will fill the time allotted. If you have six months to do a project, you will take six months to do the project. What if you reduce that to three months, odds are that you'll probably get the project done in three months. If that's the case, can you reduce it to one month possibly, or can you reduce it to getting it done this week? Rather than kick the can down the road, it's taking care of these things in a timely manner and plan your projects more effectively, but the four strategies that I want to talk about that will help increase your classroom efficiency and get more time in your life are eliminate, simplify, automate, delegate.

Remember, never automate something that can be eliminated and never delegate something that can be automated or streamlined. Otherwise, you waste someone else's time instead of your own, which now wastes your harder and cash, which is something that Tim Ferriss would say. As I mentioned, Tim Ferris pointed me in the direction of this philosophy. With his philosophy, the things that you've got to try doing is eliminate, simplify, automate, delegate in that order. There's no sense handing off a task to someone else if it can be eliminated. There's no sense of automating it if you can eliminate it. Those things are key to this.

Let's look at each one of these strategies and see how you can put it into practice. The first one is eliminate. This is the first place to start. Basically, decide what you simply want to stop doing. There's a lot of things that we do out of habit or because this is how it's always been done. That doesn't mean that it's still necessary. If we can eliminate it, that gets you more time. Look at your task list. All of us have a to-do list and we need to make some hard decisions on what we will continue to do or what we need to stop doing. Well, how do we decide which ones to do?

I think the first place to start in that is start with your goals. I'm talking big goals. What do you want to achieve in life? Do you want to be a full professor? Do you want to write a book? Do you want to be a publishing monster? Those are big goals. Everything that you do needs to be focused on those goals. Where do you want to be in 10 years? What do you want to achieve? If tasks are not aligned with your goals, then consider eliminating them. One of the first areas to start in that is just learning to say no. When eliminating tasks, Michael Hyatt recommends getting better at saying no to requests.

It's better to say no and hurt their feelings right at that moment or to take on a task, do poorly, and really affect some bridges. We can only accomplish so much during our 168 hours in the week. Sometimes, you just simply have to say no. If you don't, you spread yourself too thin and simply not deliver your best work. Remember, saying yes to one thing is saying no to something else, so be prudent in what you are saying yes to. I forget who said it, but basically, it came out this way, if it's not a hell yes, it's a no. Sorry, I don't know what that quote is, but if it's not a hell yes, it's a no.

The other thing to do is look for time wasters. If you can eliminate those, you're going to get more time in your schedule. Find those things that suck away your time. I have to admit, currently, I am hooked on YouTube. As a result, my reading has taken a significant hit, so I need to harness my YouTube watching and get back on track, which means I need to start blocking YouTube. I started using a program called Freedom. With that program, I was able to block social media, and at last, I have stopped using it. Therefore, I'm going down this time sucks. That's one way to do it.

Also, look for other time wasters, time consumers, empowerment failures. One example is to limit your email. Great place to start is not use reply all. Only reply back to the person and ask others not to use reply all. We get a lot of junk email that we don't need to be looking at. The other thing is you don't have to have your email running all the time. In fact, one of the things that I do is I shut down my email and open it up only a couple of times a day, rather than keeping it running, schedule some times in your day when you're going to open up your email and process the email that way.

You can block off time in your calendar to just do that. If you have your email running, you're going to constantly be looking at it. You're going to constantly be distracted. That's going to take away from the productivity that you have at other tasks. You're going to get out of the flow. You're not going to be as productive, basically. Use that time between checking emails to just knock down your to-do lists. The things that you will get you to your goals. The things that are going to make a difference in your life later on. Email is somebody else's to-do list. Try to stay away from it as much as possible.

The other thing is turn off alerts. We don't need to be looking at alerts all the time. Now, you're thinking, it's like, "I get email all the time." A lot of it is just garbage and you will be more productive if you look at your email only a couple of times a day than if you're going to look at it throughout the whole day, which leads me to batch processing. Working on email one time, that is batch processing and not throughout the day. Eliminate the need to work through a single workflow from start to finish. Grading is an example. By focusing on just that one essay question, in grade, everybody in your class on that one essay question is more productive than completing a test from start to finish.

You're going to be able to work through the questions much quicker because you're focused on just one answer. You have the answer in your head and you can go through many tests much quicker just looking at that, and then move on to the next question and walk right through it. A lot of learning management systems can help with this. Those are some things that you want to think about when you're eliminating. Do you have to do the task in the first place? If no, cut it right out and just move on. Don't even lose sleep. Otherwise, use some strategies, get rid of those time wasters, batch things to work through that process.

The next major strategy is called simplify. After you figured out what tasks to eliminate, look at the rest of your tasks to see where you can simplify them. You should ideally take time to document your task. This is going to prove to be useful when you go to automate or delegate a task that you'll have the steps written out. It

also will save you time for those tasks that you do infrequent. If you have, what's the startup procedures for your class, what's the closedown procedures for your class, you only do them once a term and having a checklist on all the things that you need to do will help you get through that task quicker.

Other ways that you can simplify a task that if you do a lot of hand grading, perhaps that you switch to rubrics or specs grading. This way, you're just focusing on essential feedback, but you use the rubric to work through it very quickly. This will definitely speed up your grading if you follow this process. You want to know more about using rubrics or specs grading, go to episodes 31 and 103. I put them in the show notes. Go check them out. Look for areas where you can simplify the task. That's strategy number two.

The third strategy that I want to bring to your attention is automate. I am a huge fan of automating tasks. I strive to use technology to help me do more in less time. This allows me to do more creative things and rewarding things. I recently became the director of a library, an academic library. Each year, we have to submit this annual report. I also have ad hoc reports. My supervisor may want to ask a question, maybe on the headcount, how many people are processed through the headcount. I have a lot of different questions that I routinely have to answer.

This past year, just coming on taking on the library, a wonderful library, but I found that this data collection was an arduous task. I swore that, next year, it was going to be different. I started putting together some data collection forms using Google forms and collect the information into a spreadsheet. Then I took the spreadsheet and I set up pivot tables that reports out the information I need. These reports are up-to-date every time somebody adds a new entry tool. This is a huge timesaver.

I can go in any time, look at any of these reports, and the information is accurate. I don't have to have my staff go in, suck up their time by going through calendars and emails and counting things and doing all that. We collect that information in real-time. When they had interface with somebody, they log it. I have that information. That is saving time across the whole department, not just me, but everyone else. It's part of our daily workflow. You try to look for ways that you can weave this automation into your daily workflow.

Another way that I automate, it's kind of delegate, but automate is outsourcing. I realize this may be difficult for academic who are used to doing everything themselves, but I simply don't have the time, energy, and desire to do everything I need to do. Therefore, I automate some things. I outsource some. Take a look at your task list. Now, take a look at your salary and your vision for the future. Is the task that you are about to work on appropriate for your salary?

Imagine that you are a professor. Say, you're making \$75,000 a year. This equates to \$35 an hour on a normal work schedule. It'll be less because I know you're working a lot more, but we'll say \$35. Should you be working on 10-dollar tasks? No, you shouldn't. You should be working on 50-dollar task, 100-dollar task, 1,000-dollar task, things that make a difference, but not 10-dollar task when you can get somebody else to do it. For example, when you create a video, you should also be

creating a close caption, or if you're creating a podcast episode, you should be getting a transcript or creating a transcript.

These tasks take time and I do not find them to be pleasant. I have created a lot of transcripts by hand. It is not something that I like to do. It is a time suck. For me, it's absolutely important, but it is not something that I like to do. I would rather spend my time scripting out new podcast episodes than transcribe episodes I just finished. What do I do? I outsource them. I send them off to a company after each podcast episode to be transcribed and then I'll take the transcription and add it back to my site.

In the case where I'm doing a video, if I create a video, I will export the audio file, send it off for transcription, and then I will add the transcription back to YouTube to get a better close caption because that is valuable to individuals who are listening to my podcast, who are watching my videos, who have a need to use a transcription or close caption. It's valuable. It's worth doing, but not worth doing by me. I will throw some money towards it. Not a crazy amount of money, but if I had to calculate how long it takes me to do a transcription at, I'm paying a lot less to a transcription service than if I had to pay myself to do it. It's just a lot less.

Another way of automating is use your learning management system. A learning management system is a great way to automate many of your tasks, even if you're teaching face-to-face. One of the first things I would do if I was teaching a class is automate my quizzes and exams. [chuckles] There is no sense handing those things out of the paper, even in a face-to-face class. Put them online, automate them. Depending on the question types that you use, you could potentially automate the entire test and it would grade it and back feedback everything to your students, or it reduces the amount of work that you have to do.

Another area where you could put the elements to use is by creating a frequently asked questions page, which I mentioned earlier. Every time you get a question, you can put it on this page for the student who asked the question, but also the rest of the students. I use a discussion board to do this. I encourage my students to go to the discussion board, post a question and I will post an answer. This cuts down on my email. It cuts down on me answering the same question multiple times. That is part of my automation process.

Back in episode 37, ITC 37, I talked about one of my favorite automation tools. It is called TextExpander. Basically, you type a short code called a snippet and it's replaced with your text equivalent. In one grading period, I saved nine hours by using TextExpander over typing in those things by hand. I now use it for all kinds of things, from signature blocks to creating templates. It is just one of those power tools.

For your email, use search rather than put things into separate folders on your email. I read in an interesting post that recommends do not file your email into folders. According to IBM research study, people are able to locate email messages quicker when the message is not placed in a subfolder. It's just a matter of becoming more efficient at searching. You can also tag and add categories. This helps in locating messages. You should offload email messages that you need to retain into a

separate program like Evernote so you can find them easier and weave them into your projects or relation management system, whatever you have, but there you can find them a different way. Emails should not be your to-do list. You got to find a different way to process your email, but in order to find an email, just use search.

Form. Forms are another automating tool. Rather than have students email you information, create forms so you can collect the information in a consistent manner. I ask for information from students, from faculty, from all kinds of folks and I will get it every which way, but Sunday. By using forms, I can tell them specifically how I want this information to look, and that helps get the stuff I need so I can then process their request easier and quicker. I use forms to collect requests for course copies, template installations, setting up sandboxes. I'm sure in your class, you're asking students to let you know about X, Y, and Z. Create a form, have them fill out the form. That will save you a crazy amount of time.

Collecting research is another way where you can automate. I use tools like IFTTT, If This Then That to automate my research collection. One of the ways that you can do this is you can set up queries through most library databases that will go to an RSS feed that will automatically collect in a spreadsheet. Whatever your search query is, you can set up an RSS feed and then you can take IFTTT to process that and collect that, as I said, in a spreadsheet or in the folders, what have you. You can also use IFTTT to collect social media, like tweets on a particular topic.

You want to keep an eye on a certain topic, you can have it all sent to a spreadsheet saves you all kinds of time instead of having to sift through every day looking at tweets and realizing how much you may have missed. If you are publishing on social media, you can automate the collection of everything that you post and put it into a folder, send it to Evernote, whatever you want.

The last thing I want to talk about in terms of automation is leveraging your calendar. First of all, use your calendar, block off your calendar to have some of that deep work time. This allows you to focus your attention on a single task. It could be that you block it off to answer emails, that you can do project management, that you could do grading, you could do article writing. This is important because it takes about 15 minutes of uninterrupted work to get into the flow and a single distraction will pull you right out of that. By blocking off your calendar to focus on a task such as reviewing your email will increase your chance of task completion.

Calendars are great for emphasizing that no. You can say, "Hold on. I got to look at my calendar. Oh, sorry. I've already got an appointment." Now, this appointment could be for you, but they don't need to know that. You just have your time blocked off. If you have the luxury to block off your calendar for meetings and other personal appointments, you should also do that.

Also, block your calendar to work on projects. One of the strategies that I do is-- My calendar is basically open throughout the week except for the next day, like right now, I'm going to look at my calendar for tomorrow. Since no one has scheduled a meeting with me, I'm going to block off time so I can work on projects that I need to

work on. Then those particular time periods are blocked. Nobody gets on them. It is an appointment already scheduled. That's one way I do it.

You can also share calendars with others. Sharing calendars, you can post things on those calendars others will get it. That's a great way of automating those particular tasks. Also, to make it easier for you, consider color coding your different appointments, meetings in one color, training opportunities in another, those kind of things.

We talked about eliminate, simplify, and now automate. Now, we are going to move to delegate. Delegation is tricky in higher ed because we don't often have a team under us. However, if you're doing committee work, you can spread the tasks around to other individuals who have the capacity and desire to do those tasks. There are some people who love to work with finances, numbers. It is not my favorite task. I'd rather do any other tasks than work with the finances. The key is to making this work, if you find the right person to take on a task, show them how to do it and then get out of the way. Just focus on the outcome, not the process.

You may want to put together some instructions to help them with the process, but when delegating a task, do not micromanage. I have found that higher ed is really bad at this. Folks do a tremendous amount of micromanaging. You can also delegate some of your work to your students. For example, you need to build the quiz for your class. Who is saying that you have to write the questions? You can have your students crowdsource the creation of exam questions. Each week, you can have your students develop two or three questions. For a class of 20, this is 40 to 60 questions that you could then vet to see if you want to use in a quiz or exam. A lot easier than writing them from scratch on your own.

Peer review is also another place where you can put some trust into your students that they can review papers and provide a grade. It doesn't have to be done all by you. All right, there are four strategies that can help you get more time back into your week, but this is not a one-and-done operation. You need to continuously survey your task list for areas that can be eliminated, simplified, automated, or delegated. If you do this, you will get more time where you can work on the things that matter most. I encourage that you check it out. I also want to encourage you to check out my book. Here's a quick plug for my book.