Small but Meaningful Teaching Improvements

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Outline

- Why think “small”?
- Considerations for a small but meaningful mindset
- Examples of thinking small

"Great things are done by a series of small things brought together."

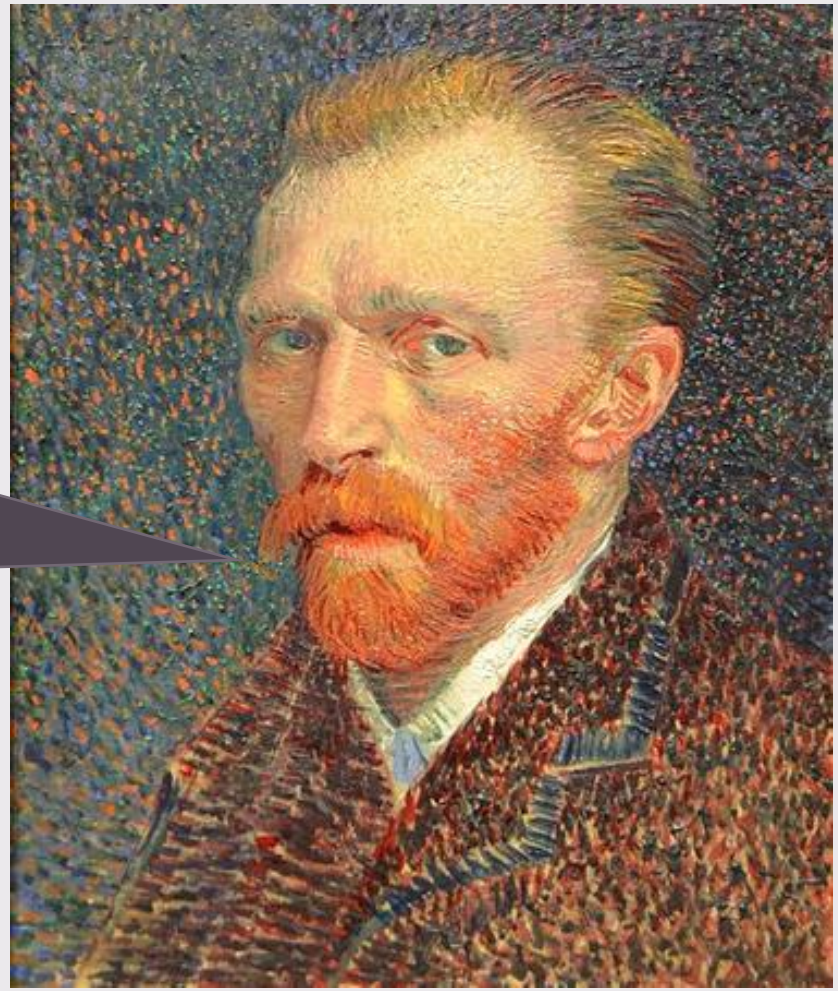


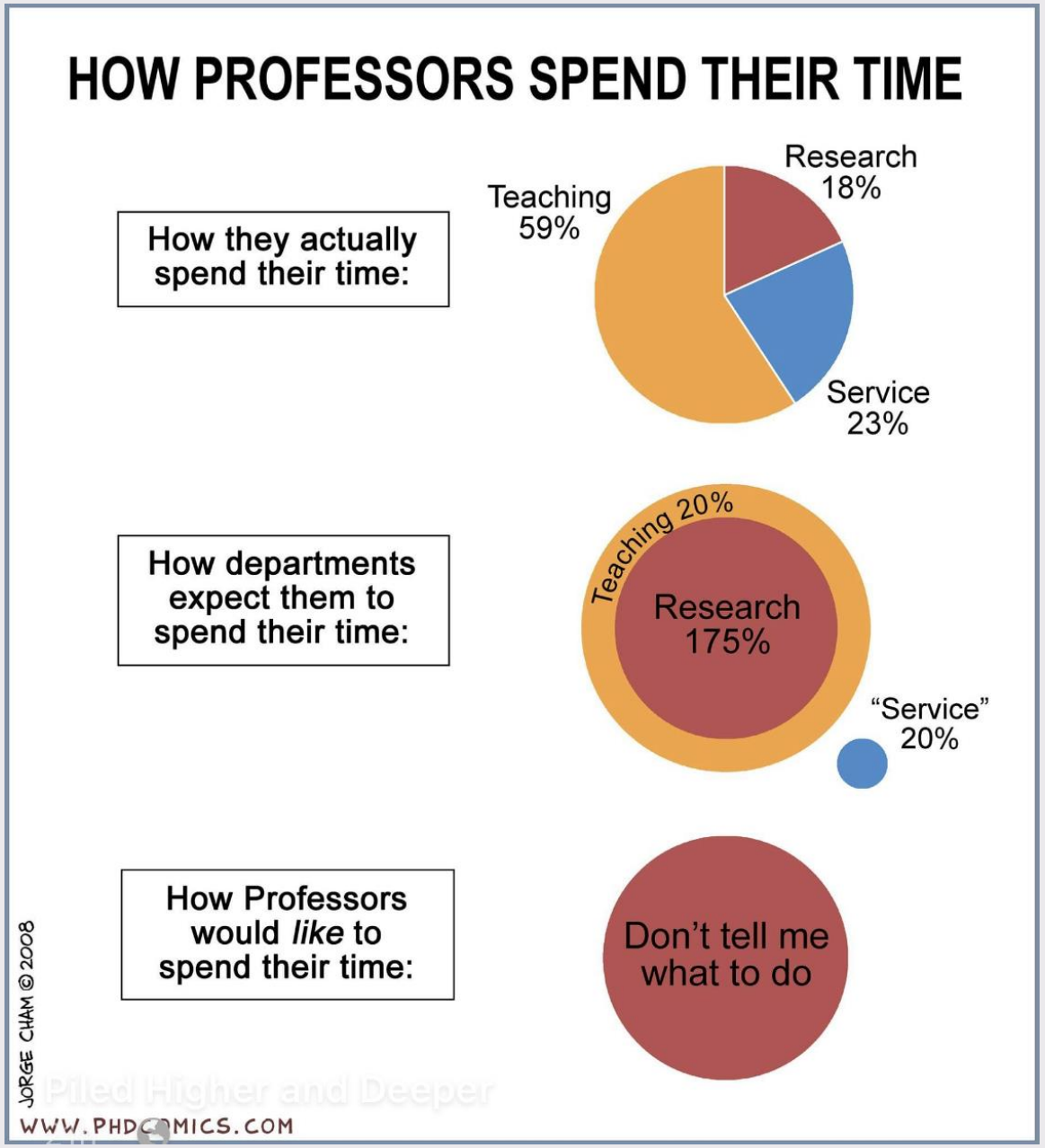
Photo by Adam Fagen **https://www.flickr.com/photos/afagen/45804469662**
Van Gogh self-portrait, Art Institute of Chicago, Grant Park, Chicago, IL

Why "think small”?

- Burnout
  - Too many different demands
  - Values mismatches
- Personal life ☺ / ☹
- Prioritizing other professional expectations (promotion, new position, degree completion)

Overarching goal: Net positive changes (self + others)

Citations on burnout: Coyle, Miller, and Cotto, 2020; Lackritz, 2004; Maslach et al., 2001; Shaufeli et al., 2009



Considerations for a small but meaningful mindset

- Define (or refine) the need or goal
- Consider the **constraints** and **impacts** (positive or negative)
- Implement the **best net positive** impact

Identifying the need or goal

Teacher Self-Reflection

Get more and better student feedback

Teacher Self-Reflection

- Are students meeting the learning objectives? Who isn’t? What might help them?
- What am I spending the most time on as a teacher? Am I spending too much time on something?
- How do I want (or need) to evolve as a teacher?

Get more and better feedback

- Early semester:
  - Ask students about their educational experiences and what they have most **liked/disliked in other classes**
  - What are students **most worried about** in your class?
  - What are **students' goals** for the semester?

- Informal Early Feedback (IEF) + ICES and End-of-semester Feedback
  - Invite **constructive feedback**: "I like…, I wish…, I wonder…"
  - Incorporate **student self-reflection**
  - Use your class as **focus group** where you brainstorm the pros and cons of making different changes to the class

Constraints and impacts

Is making a change worth it?

Don’t reinvent the wheel!

- Google
- Chronicle of Higher Ed teaching blogs
- Social media
- Colleagues
- Departmental syllabi
- CITL, ATLAS
- Teaching organizations in your field

Is it worth it?

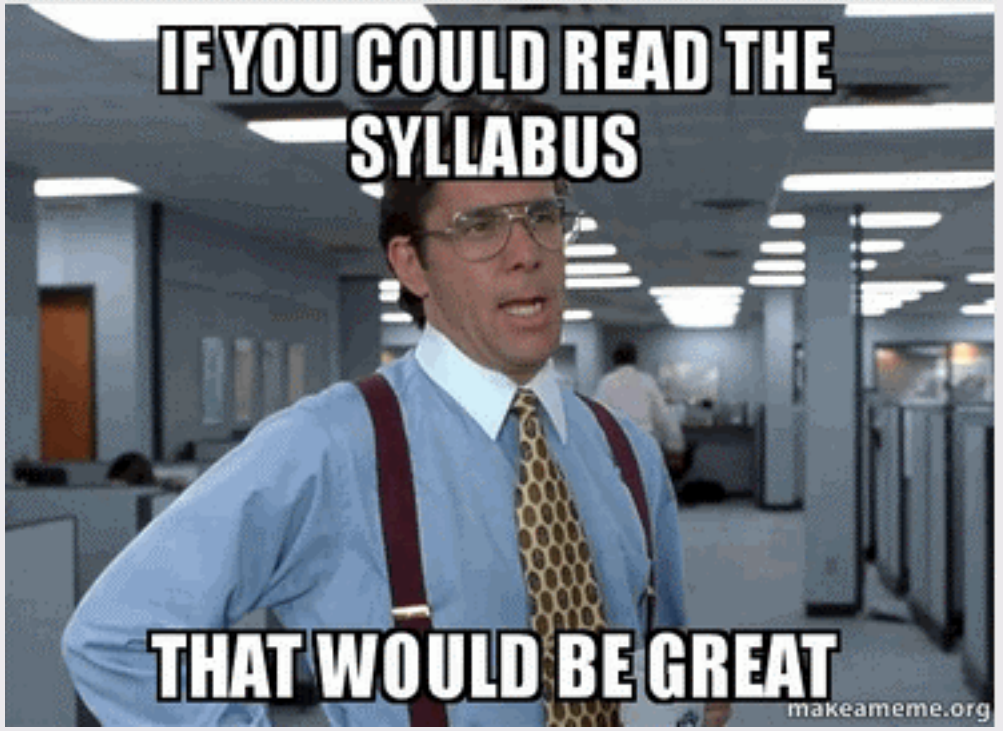
Constraints (yours/others'): time, mental/emotional energy, knowledge, money

Task needs: time, mental/emotional energy, knowledge, money

Impact: How much does it matter?

- Time
  - Information collection & planning
  - Materials creation
  - Instructor training
  - Managing implementation
- Knowledge
  - Who needs training?
  - Who designs and offers the training?
- Impact
  - What's the benefit of doing something?
  - What's the cost of doing nothing?
  - **Can I do this well?

Students don’t understand course policies



I gave students a copy of the syllabus and included clear details about my absence policy, deadlines for assignments, and grading. I even go over key information in the syllabus on the first day of class.

Students still don’t seem to know what’s going on.

Small Procedural (

1. Syllabus Quiz
2. Simplify policies
3. Mini-Info Sessions in We
   how to be successful in
4. Prepare form e-mails fo
5. Provide information in r

lundi	**Leçon 6 Les générations qui bougent** ○ Présentez-vous ! **Course information** ○ Course info question/answer session ○ Register for VHL Central
mardi	**Leçon 6 Les générations qui bougent** ○ Pour commencer : En famille **Course information** ○ How to prepare for class on VHL ○ Student information survey
mercredi	**Leçon 6 Les générations qui bougent** ○ Structures : 6.3 Les verbes irréguliers en -re ○ Court métrage : Préparations **Course information** ○ How to use dictionaries; why to avoid translation tools ○ Avoiding academic integrity infractions in this course
jeudi	**Leçon 6 Les générations qui bougent** ○ Court métrage : Compréhension **Course information** Using VHL as a review tool

Grading and feedback

I spend too much time on feedback. Most of my students do not even read it.

Reading Discussion Ru

Criteria	
Evidence of reading and understanding Entry shows clear evidence of reading and incorporating required materials	
Connections between reading, practice, and theory Entry connects reading materials to practice or to a theoretical question	
Comprehensible, Organized, Professional Entry is comprehensible and presented in a professional (& collegial) manner	
Completion Complete and on time	

Scale	Criteria
4	• At least 4 accurate facts are displayed in the infographic • Selection, color, shape, size, and arrangement of graphics contribute meaning to the overall message • All 4 facts have sources identified on the infographic
3	• At least 3 accurate facts are displayed in the infographic • Selection, color, shape, size, and arrangement are eye catching and contribute meaning to the overall message • 3 facts have sources identified on the infographic
2	• At least 2 accurate facts are displayed in the infographic • Selection, color, shape, size, and arrangement of graphics are present but do not contribute to the meaning • 2 facts have sources identified on the infographic
1	• At least 1 accurate fact is displayed in the infographic • Selection, color, shape, size, and arrangement of graphics are detracting or misleading • 1 fact or 0 facts have a source identified on the infographic

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Course content and materials

I have been teaching the same class for a long time and I feel like I need to update the content and materials to address current pedagogical practices [or] to include up-to-date information.

To make my class [better/inclusive/…], I have to revise the entire course.

~~Overhaul~~ → Update

- Inclusive teaching practices
  - Integrate new and diverse perspectives in smaller chunks
  - Use accessibility review tools in Microsoft Word/PowerPoint
  - Ask: What is going to have the highest net positive impact in this course?
- New pedagogical trends
  - Update single assignments or lessons
- Consider using (or keeping) a textbook
  - Supplement

A few more small but meaningful practices

Prioritize reusability:

- Course website portability
- Organize your materials as if someone else will teach the class

Build community:

- Use your students' names
- Use group/pair work → Change pairs/groups
- Learn personal information about your students & share personal information about yourself
- Have students explain concepts to one another

Bigger Change Example: Moodle → Canvas

Constraints (yours/others'): time, knowledge, money

- Me, TAs, Students

Task needs: time, knowledge, money

- Full LTI vs. Partial LTI vs. Full New Course
- Training + Implementation Issues

Impact: How much does it matter?

- Do something: required but can aim for a net positive or the least net negative
- Do nothing: not an option

A few final tips

- Thinking “small” can lead to meaningful improvements
- Prioritize: Time > Money
  - Avoid underestimating what you need
  - Avoid overestimating what you can do
- You can still think “small” when making more substantive changes

Resources for thinking “small”

- National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity (NCFDD, facultydiversity.org)
  - The art of saying “No”
  - How to Align Your Time with Your Priorities
- Small Changes in Teaching (advice column series) https://www.chronicle.com/article/small-changes-in-teaching-giving-them-a-say/
- Small Teaching Online (Darby, F. & J. Lang, 2019) reading group (CITL) https://calendars.illinois.edu/detail/6781?eventId=33462494 (2 more sessions)
- Small Teaching, 2nd ed. (Lang, J. 2021)
- Syllabus quiz tips from Iowa State: https://www.celt.iastate.edu/instructional-strategies/preparing-to-teach/how-to-create-an-effective-syllabus/sample-syllabus-quiz-questions/
- Iron Chef: The Secret Ingredient of Generative AI in Education. *Through the Faculty Ranks* workshop. UIUC Office of the Provost. Oct. 19, 8:30-10am. Registration here.

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