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Five habits—easy but often neglected practices that improve outcomes.

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Five Habits—Easy but Often Neglected Practices That Improve Outcomes

By Roben Torosyan, Fairfield University, CT - rtorosyan@fairfield.edu

Given the daily grind of teaching, it is easy to forget that little practices can make a big difference when the goals are more learning and better teaching. Here is a reminder of five easy habits to practice mindfully (“mindfulness” comes from the Latin word for having a good memory).

Wait—After asking a question in class, most teachers know they need to wait, but they do not accurately perceive how long they wait. Often, in less than a second, they call on someone, pace nervously, or rephrase the question. With mindful practice, teachers can increase wait time to three to five seconds. When they do, more students speak up, they answer more fully, and they ask better questions.

Kick-start your opening; shout before you walk out—Too many classes fail to start or end with anything memorable. Drama and action can motivate learning in class and after it's over. Kick-start your opening with an especially dramatic example, an unobvious question, the answer to a difficult homework problem, a relevant cartoon, or some intriguing background music. End by having students shout out a one-word takeaway. Or ask the question you'll start with next class.

Do less and do it more deeply—Imagine a list of 12 course learning objectives, things like learning fundamental principles, acquiring team skills, and developing writing skills. Next, imagine that you must rate each as essential, important, or of minor or no importance. What if you did that but were then challenged to select not more than three to five as essential and

important? Most faculty find that difficult to do. All objectives seem essential, despite the fact that when we do more, we often do things less well. A daily plan should include no more than three to five vital takeaways that students will understand, be able to do, or think differently about.

Grade smarter, not just harder—Many faculty spend lots of time grading. They write comments only to discover that students are making the same mistakes in the next assignment. Feedback often makes no impact. Instead, try returning problem-sets marked only right or wrong, and have students find and correct their errors before points are assigned for the work. Mark one page of a draft paper, noting problems that appear elsewhere in the paper. Challenge the student to correct them for the next revision. Offer feedback that is concrete and specific. Instead of calling something “unclear,” guide the student to “expand, explain, and give examples.” Sandwich critical comments with strengths: “This letter showed passion and used primary sources thoughtfully. Now have it add an opposing view. That way its passion and thought show fair-mindedness too.”

Mix it up—It's easy to fall into ruts—to use the same pet activities over and over. I'll have my students “write/pair/share” one too many times. I need to place reminders in my planning materials: “Move from pairs to small groups; move from small groups to large ones; then move back to pairs.” Not only do we need to use a mix of activities, we need to mix presentation modes (visual, aural, kinetic) so that the content comes to students in a variety of different ways. 🍀