

Finding the Balance between Research and Teaching

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Balancing research and teaching can be challenging for any faculty, particularly those who are starting out. Certainly, research is far more prominent in determining academic career advancements. However, teaching is part of the mission of university professors. It can be very rewarding when done well and can spill over to research in valuable ways. At the same time, poor performance in teaching can produce stress and turn into a distraction from research, especially early on in your career.

In this chapter, we offer some suggestions for effectively balancing research and teaching and, we hope, for avoiding several common pitfalls. We start with a few tips for positive first teaching experiences. We then describe some ways for creating spillovers between research and teaching.

Creating an Effective Start at Teaching

Setting up your teaching schedule. Think about teaching even when first looking for a job. There are several aspects of a job offer that are worth considering and trying to negotiate:

- a. Ideally, classes you teach focus on topics that relate to your research. This will make teaching both easier and more fun. Furthermore, your excellent students could naturally transition into research assistants, advisees, and even co-authors.
- b. Teaching several sections of the same class each year, and a stable teaching assignment, will reduce your time investment in teaching and allow you to reap the benefits of any time spent in developing a new class. Universities often cannot offer an official commitment for a stable teaching assignment, but conversations with both junior and senior faculty should give you an indication of what can be negotiated, and which classes are likely to repeat.
- c. Keep in mind that larger classes, as well as required classes, are often more challenging to teach, particularly for younger faculty. One proxy for how difficult a class is to teach are prior teaching evaluations, some of which are available online.
- d. Some universities offer teaching relief for incoming faculty. Be sure to negotiate that aspect of the offer. Resident junior faculty may help guide you on what might be feasible.

Your first semester of teaching. If your teaching assignment is expected to remain stable, investing time and energy in developing your classes is a fruitful strategy for avoid stress later. Accept the fact that your first semester of teaching might be less productive research-wise.

In your first year as an instructor, be sure to use all the resources available to you to make the teaching preparation as efficient as possible:

- a. Do not be afraid to ask colleagues that taught your or similar classes before to share their teaching materials with you. Even colleagues at other universities might be happy to help a junior faculty.

- b. When available, past recordings of a successful instructor teaching your courses can provide valuable guidance. Watching recordings at your own pace, with the ability to fast-forward and rewind, is more efficient than sitting in on someone else's classes. We stress, however, that ultimately, you should find your own voice in teaching. Individual attributes—comfort with humor, flair, handwriting legibility, and so on—make some teaching techniques difficult, if not impossible, to emulate. Anyone can be an excellent instructor; you will need to find what works for you.
- c. Try to identify teaching assistants that helped on the same class before. They can share information on how to structure and organize behind-the-scenes work effectively.
- d. Some schools/universities have teaching experts/consultants on staff that can observe your class instruction and provide you with confidential feedback. If such resources exist, use them as soon and as extensively as possible. Working with an external class observer is a lower-stress proposition than having a senior colleague attend your class. As we already noted, effective teaching techniques often depend on individual characteristics. A teaching expert may understand and respond to such personality-driven nuances and be able to tailor advice to your particular style.

After every class. No matter how tired you are, debrief with yourself on the materials you covered and on how the class went. Take careful notes: by the time you teach the material again, you may forget many details of your experience. Do not be disheartened by less than stellar teaching evaluations, those are common for young faculty, particularly in demanding teaching environments. However, take to heart constructive suggestions they raise. Think of timing: did some class segment take more or less time than you had anticipated? Also, think of comments raised by students, during class or through questionnaires and teaching evaluations: could some be resolved with a clearer syllabus, different explanations, more or different examples?

Teaching a class again. While modifying your lecture plans is often necessary, both for responding to past experiences, and for introducing new insights and research discoveries, resist the temptation to completely redo your materials. Quality teaching is important and valuable, but you should weigh marginal costs and benefits. Set a time window before and after each class during which you dedicate yourself to teaching. At all other times, focus on your research.

Dealing with challenging audiences. Some personal attributes—for example, being female—and some audiences—MBA students, large required undergraduate classes, etc.—may result in an audience that tries to challenge material in a way that feels uncomfortable. A few antagonistic students can induce stressful dynamics in the classroom that disrupt the class flow and distract everybody from learning. We guarantee that time, experience, and a few gray hairs will make such experiences less frequent and easier to handle. However, here are some tips for dealing with these scenarios early on:

- a. Answer every question in a decisive and focused fashion. Your only job in the classroom is to create a learning experience for the students, so resist the temptation to have a personal confrontation, or to look defensive or agitated, even when faced with very frustrating behaviors. Remember that most students prefer a low-stress environment, so they will tend to appreciate a calm and on-point answer to a hostile question. Learning how to diffuse tension will be valuable, even for your own research presentations.

- b. Make sure your syllabus is as clear as possible on all requirements. Whenever a plea for special treatment comes up, you can then refer to the syllabus and assert that you aim at being fair to all students and therefore cannot make exceptions.
- c. Dress the part. An abundance of studies suggests that professional dress affects the perceptions of professors' quality. Invest in one or two good suits (for professional school teaching) or casual business outfits (for undergraduate teaching). Students will treat you differently if you do not look like one of them. This does not mean that your outfits should be boring. If you have a flair for fashion, dress memorably, but choose professional styles.

Positive Spillovers between Research and Teaching

While the predominant goal of teaching is the education of future generations of economists or practitioners, done right, teaching can help your research in many ways.

Students as a resource. Successful students in your classes can be an excellent resource for your research in two distinct ways.

- a. Teaching provides an excellent way to identify good students whom you can later hire as research assistants or potentially even co-author with. You will have the opportunity to observe them closely over several months. Since they are taking your class, they will likely be interested in topics you are thinking of. Collaboration with young co-authors can be very rewarding. Unlike senior co-authors, who tend to have lots on their plates, young co-authors tend to dedicate a lot of time and energy to joint projects with faculty. Collaborating with young scholars can also be a very rewarding mentoring opportunity.
- b. If your research is more applied, connections with students may open the door to new data sources. MBA students often work at companies that could relate to your work. Similarly, many successful undergraduate students find jobs in the private sector and have the potential of being a resource for you at later point in time. Relationships with students can be life-long and grateful students may be willing to put substantial effort in helping you.

A new perspective on material. Teaching provides a bird's eye view of topics and allows you to make new connections between concepts and results.

- a. Developing useful examples, either empirical or technical, will not only be useful for conveying material, but may also provide you with ideas for your own research.
- b. If you are working on a paper related to class material, discussing it with students, either inside or outside the classroom, can be beneficial. Students at every level tend to appreciate such interactions. Such conversations could yield new insights and applications for your research.
- c. You can use teaching to jump-start a project. For instance, if you work on a new data set that can be shared with students, consider tying problem sets or in-class examples to some basic analyses of your data. Similarly, you can think of class experiments related to the material you are teaching that may inform your own work.
- d. Carefully typed-up notes—either by you or by a student, attending or hired for the task—can be useful in the future. These notes can help if you ever write a book, a chapter, or a survey on the material you cover. Similarly, if examples you develop end up feeding into

one of your projects, going back to your notes can prove handy. Last, revising and finessing typed-up notes is much easier than revisiting hand-written notes.

Making the most of class chores. Providing students with hands-on experience with the material you teach can do magic for their understanding of the material. There are several ways you can make student tasks advantageous for you as well.

- a. If you are working on a paper, try to convert it to a question on a problem set. That may force you to extract the main driving forces in your paper and lead you to identify more clearly the minimal setting required for illustrating some of your main results.
- b. With more mature students—advanced undergraduates or graduate students in elective classes—you can ask students to give short presentations of papers you want to learn yourself. Naturally, you want to limit the scope of these presentations or add extra class time for them, so students do not miss out on material taught by you.
- c. With more advanced graduate students, you can ask students to write reports on papers that relate to your work, or papers you are writing reviews on. Motivated students may suggest insights into these papers you did not think about. Such tasks expand students' view of the material. Furthermore, they give them a chance to get some instruction on writing constructive reports for journals' review processes.