# The Workload Dilemma

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by **Betsy Barre**

This is a somewhat odd sentence to write, but I've spent a lot of time thinking about time. When I first transitioned from a traditional faculty position to an administrative position at a teaching center, I had a hard time adjusting to the rhythms of the workload and often wondered where my time went. I started reading about time-use studies and even spent an entire semester painstakingly tracking my time to see what I could learn.

The most important thing I discovered was that I was *really* bad at estimating the amount of time I was spending on various tasks. I overestimated the amount of time I was spending on things I didn't like (committee meetings), underestimated the amount of time I was spending

on tasks I enjoyed (reading the latest research on teaching & learning), and thought I was wasting way more time on non-work related tasks (Facebook) than I actually was.

While my attempt to regain control of my time didn't have a happy ending for me personally (I still work too much!), it did get me thinking about what this might mean for teaching & learning. If I was this bad at estimating how long it would take me to do things, I was certain I wasn't going to be very good at estimating how long it would take my *students* to do things. I also became a lot less confident in the standard answers I would give when faculty would ask me how much reading and writing they should assign. Where did those numbers come from and how did I know they had any relationship to the amount of time we expected students to spend?

So in the summer of 2016 (long ago in a galaxy far, far away), I started to look for empirical research that would help me think more carefully about what we should be asking students to do when they aren't in class. To make a long story short, that effort led to the creation of an award-winning course workload estimator that has been widely shared and used by more than 115,000 individual users over the last 5 years. I've found myself talking a lot about student workload ever since.

Given this history, I've been fascinated by what we've heard from students about workload this semester. Like Jody Greene, I know of no faculty who set out to assign students more work this semester just because they were online. In fact, faculty at Wake Forest had explicit conversations about workload in our Peer-to-Peer Learning Communities this summer. We even created a new and improved estimator to help faculty estimate the time required to complete online

assignments like discussion board posts. Yet students across the country are clearly overwhelmed and feeling as if their academic work has grown exponentially.

So what is happening here? Are faculty underestimating, students overestimating, or something else entirely? In this post, I will share what we've heard from Wake Forest students, my various theories about what is going on, and a few specific ways we might respond. You can also hear me discuss these issues and more on the latest episode of Vanderbilt's Leading Lines podcast with the brilliant Derek Bruff and Karen Costa (embedded below).

## WHAT WAKE STUDENTS ARE TELLING US

Like students across the country, those who responded to our all-campus survey felt overwhelmed by academic work this semester. Although we did not ask any specific questions about workload, many students used the open-ended question to make their feelings known. Apart from expressing a preference for in-person learning, concerns about workload were the most common theme.

> "The workload expectations from professors are tearing students apart … I have yet to meet a returning Wake student who feels as though the workload is not unmanageable."
>
> "I and almost every other student I've talked to have had MORE work this semester than ever and I experienced the routine of … mostly just working and sleeping and that's not an exaggeration."

> "[Workload] increased to be double the amount of work from a previous semester not online. I never stopped working every day of the week and assignments would take me hours on end."

Students hypothesized that instructors were adding more work to make up for lost in-person class time, to keep them busy when they (assumed) they had more time, or to ensure that online courses were rigorous. They also expressed challenges keeping up with numerous, smaller activities due on several days of the week in all of their courses.

> "I feel that professors overcompensated for the fact that we were mostly online and I had significantly more work during the semester … than I have had during other semesters at Wake Forest."

> "All of my teachers assumed that they could pile on work because all of my classes were online, so I felt completely suffocated the whole semester."

> "For one class alone I was expected to watch an hour or more worth of asynchronous lectures … read 2 chapters … read long news or informational articles … sit in class for 75 minutes and have a closed book/ closed note quiz every week … Now imagine this but for 4 more classes."

## WHAT MIGHT BE GOING ON

I can imagine at least six explanations for what our students were experiencing last semester, and the reality is that all six are probably part of the story.

> **Hypothesis 1:** Whether we intend to or not, we might actually be assigning more work than we have in the past.

There are a number of plausible reasons this, the most straightforward of explanations, could be true. As my experience suggests, it's really hard to estimate the amount of time students need to complete specific assignments, and that's particularly true when we're assigning work for the first time (as many of us are in our newly designed courses). I doubt we are increasing work just to make sure our students take our classes seriously, but I wouldn't be surprised if we were doing so to assuage our fears that students at a distance would not remain engaged. I also wonder whether increased workload was an unintended consequence of our intensive preparation for the fall. Faculty across the country spent an unprecedented amount of time collecting teaching and learning ideas this summer and we may just be eager to try them *all*, not thinking about their cumulative impact on student work.

> **Hypothesis 2:** We aren't assigning more work, but we haven't made our expectations clear.

It's also possible faculty bear some responsibility but in an indirect way.  One of the things I've noticed while reading student accounts is that they seem to be spending inordinate amounts of time on the asynchronous activities meant to take the place of in-person activities. If students are asked to post to a discussion board, they often spend hours reading and crafting their responses–far more than the amount of time

they would spend responding to a classmate during an in-person class. Likewise, writing assignments that might take 15 minutes in class (because the instructor tells them to stop!) can spiral into hours as high-achieving students worried about their grades work to achieve perfection. Because these new activities are to be completed "at home" and must be turned in for a grade on specific dates, it's not surprising that students are treating them like the higher-stakes homework they were assigned in the past. In short, students might be doing more than we expect of them because we haven't actually communicated what we expect.

> **Hypothesis 3:** Some students are overestimating their work because they are unhappy to be learning online.

If we think faculty have a hard time estimating the amount of work they are assigning, it's fair to ask whether students might struggle to estimate the time they've spent, as well. There is research to suggest that students are not any better than most of us at accurately reporting how they spend their time. And if my experience is any indication, this may be exacerbated by all the other challenges they are facing. We know that many of our students are not enthused about having to spend so much time learning alone in their dorm rooms, so their experience of work is likely to *feel* different. Like my experience of (some!) committee meetings, they may feel like online assignments are dragging on because they are mindful of what else they could be doing if things were different.

**Hypothesis 4:** Many students could do well with less effort in the past.

The most interesting of all six hypotheses, and the one I've thought the most about, is that our experience this semester has revealed an unfortunate truth about how teaching and learning took place prior to the pandemic. This theory, explained by Jody Greene in the widely-shared Twitter thread below, suggests that students are experiencing more work because of a fundamental difference between online courses and the typical in-person course. While there may be no difference in how much work is *expected* of students in these courses, there is often a difference in how much work is *required*.

Most faculty would agree that students should be spending 30 hours a week on homework in a traditional 15-credit semester, but we also know that the average student taking in-person courses is able to get by on about 15 hours a week. This is not surprising to most faculty, as we know that students aren't always doing the reading or coming to class prepared. Here and there a course might require the full amount of work, but a student can usually count on some of their courses requiring less.

So what makes online courses so different? In an online course, faculty can see, and students are held accountable for, all expected work. In an in-person class, students can sometimes skip the reading and passively participate in class. But in an online course, they may have to annotate the reading, take a quiz, or contribute to a discussion board after

the reading is complete. While this shift would be uncomfortable for students in the case of one course, shifting all of their courses in this direction would, in fact, double their workload and entail a radical reworking of their schedules. Of course, this shift is a *good* thing for student learning, but it's not clear we realized it would be asking our students to completely re-orient yet another aspect of their lives.

> **Hypothesis 5:** The shift to online coursework has increased students' cognitive load.

Perhaps the challenge is not about faculty or student misperceptions at all, but rather the nature of the work itself. Our students are experts at learning in a traditional face-to-face classroom. But they have had to teach themselves new skills to learn online. They have learned how to use new tools, figured out how to complete new types of assignments, and gotten used to a new rhythm of work. We've also encouraged faculty to follow best practices by breaking up a few large assignments into multiple smaller ones. When this happens across five courses, 10 assignments can suddenly convert to 50. While those 50 assignments may take no more time than the original 10, simply keeping track of when they are due is a new job unto itself. In each of these cases, the cognitive load we are placing on students has increased, adding invisible labor to the time they spend completing the work.

> **Hypothesis 6:** A global pandemic has decreased student capacity to work.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it's worth remembering that all of this is happening in the midst of a global pandemic. Before they even show up in our classes, our students are likely struggling with isolation, loneliness, and collective or personal trauma. As noted above, this context can make the work *feel* harder. But it can also make it *actually* harder. As many of us know all too well, these conditions can decrease our motivation and capacity to work, leading us to spend far more time on tasks than we have in the past. In one of the most thoughtful and heartbreaking comments on our survey, one student explained that "classes were consistently easier in content and material, but emotionally more difficult, and more difficult to try hard for."

## WHAT WE CAN DO

As I noted at the outset, my best guess is that all six of these phenomena are part of the overall story. In any of these cases, however, it is clear that our students are not doing well. So what might we, as instructors, do to improve their situation this semester?

The first and most basic step is to make sure you have a good, *accurate* idea of how much work you are assigning your students. Make use of our workload estimator to estimate the time you expect of *every* assignment (including often overlooked ungraded activities that take considerable time). Add it all up and make sure that it is less than 3 hours per week per credit hour. But don't stop there. As our estimator is ultimately an *estimator*, it's not always accurate. So make a regular habit of checking your estimates with students. How

much time are they actually spending? Do they need to adjust how they are working or do you need to adjust your estimates?

If you found yourself adding more work to make sure your students remain engaged, this may be a moment to simply trust that most of your students will do what needs to be done to remain engaged. To be sure, not all students have earned our trust, but being overly trusting may be the most humane response for all of us at this moment.

What if you think you might have assigned more work than you realized because you keep getting *so many* cool ideas? Adopt the strategy I used for my closet when I lived in a Manhattan studio: figure out what you can fit and only add something after you've gotten rid of something else.

To address the challenge of students spending more time than you expect, be explicit. If you've done your homework and created time estimates for every reading assignment or activity, go ahead and include them in the syllabus. Tell them if you expect them to spend no more than 15 minutes on a discussion post or 45 minutes on a 1-page journal entry. This will help those who tend to overshoot the estimates, and if they can't manage to complete the work in that time frame, you can adjust your assignments moving forward.

To decrease your students' cognitive load, try to limit your use of new tools and technologies. Consider limiting the different kinds of activities you assign, as well. Or, at the very least, build in time for them to learn the new tool or practice the new activity before you expect them to complete the assignment. And to reduce the amount of time they have to spend keeping track of assignments and due dates, ask

yourself whether all of your small assignments are actually necessary (or necessary for a grade) and make sure they are assigned and due as part of a predictable weekly schedule.

More controversially, you might also consider *decreasing* the amount of work you assign to your students this semester. While it is true that time-on-task is one of the most important predictors of student learning, that relationship may not matter if students are not equipped to actually spend that time, or spend that time productively. As the director of a teaching center, there are few things I consider more important than student learning. But there *are* things that are more important than student learning.

Finally, if I were only able to give a single piece of advice, it would be this: consider whether *now*, in the midst of a global pandemic, is the time to create radically new expectations for what work is *required* of our students. If you think not, then make sure you are holding students accountable for the same amount of work you did in the past. Look at your previous syllabi and ask yourself: how much of the work you expected did students *have* to complete in your course? How much did you ask them to complete on the honor system? Then look at your current syllabus and make sure the distribution is roughly the same. If they could get by skipping a few readings in the past, consider giving them that option this semester, as well.

I've thought a lot about workload over the past five years, but our collective experience this semester has taught me even more. There will be a time and place for us to discuss what we've learned and what it means for how we structure our

classes moving forward. But in this moment when our students are so clearly struggling, their well-being is my top priority.