



Some Coping Tips for Adjunct Critical Teaching

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It's the third week of the fall semester. I am facing one of my three 'first year' classes, with an enrollment of approximately 175 students each. A particularly enthusiastic student waits patiently for me after class so he can invite me to join him in a weekly casual talk about the philosophy of justice. His intention, he explains, is to develop an intellectual relationship, a mentorship, with his professor. I decline kindly, explaining my work schedule limits student meetings to my office hours.

The student, clearly hurt, spurns "I wish more university professors believed in the Socratic method, engaging students through informal discussions outside these impersonal classes." Exhausted from the emotional work of getting students propelled into September, I follow up with a salty: "Yeah, well Socrates also believed in slavery...."

This exchange left me feeling unbearably frustrated. How dare this student dismiss all the effort I invest in my courses, my syllabus, my lectures. How much harder did I need to work? I fume as I recall each uncredited hour spent answering emails, meeting students who are not even registered in my classes, writing reference letters, job letters, and nevermind that article I have to submit....er...finish...er...begin.

Years later I recall this as one of many watershed moments in my journey as a contracted teacher. The exchange personified [social exclusion](#), or [victimage](#). The young scholar was feeling alienated in these huge lecture halls, but also felt deserving of a scarce resource (professor access), he assumed, because he was demonstrably more interested in the topic.

The truth of the matter is that many of our students are encouraged by others (including former teachers) to get to know their university professors, to stand out from the crowd. Who among us is not met every fall with a horde of eager faces, hands extended, tripping over each other down the theatre aisles like a human tsunami? Many others are looking for a familiar face to recognize them. Meanwhile, you are looking for security too; perhaps the promise of academic degrees leading to job security is a sentiment that has long since worn off. Perhaps regular faculty consistently confuse you with other people, if they notice you at all.

Signing on to a heavy-load teaching contract means you will be negotiating the tension between idealistic notions of teaching, your own insecurities, and immense formal and informal demands on your time in an institution that [was never designed for meaningful student-teacher engagement](#).

I believe it is important that our students understand: our [working conditions are their learning conditions](#). Hence, the institution of academia is the model I draw upon to demonstrate contemporary criminological concepts so that students can immediately relate: material conditions shape social relationships. This framework has provided me a way forward, a way to explain to my students why I cannot work harder, and why it is important that they start talking to each other, perhaps developing a kind of class consciousness: theoretically and literally! If they can see structural inequality in their classroom, it is my hope, then they can choose to see it as they move into applying to understanding criminalization and justice.

For the past decade, an average school year for me has looked a bit like this:

- 7 four-month-long courses a year
- 400 students per 4-month semester (I have taught as many as 650 in a single semester)
- 5 to 10 teaching assistants per year
- 9 to 12 hours of in-class instruction per week
- 10 hours of course preparation per week (20 if marking is involved).
- 3 hours of office hours (firm) for student support per week.

Given the restrictions of this essay, I necessarily make assumptions in this ‘general’ list of tips I hope newer contract or adjunct instructors might find useful. First, I hope your department chair would back you up should you be following your institution's policies on expected office hours/student contact, assessments, deferrals, missed assignments, etc (which I also assume you have read). Second, the advice in this article is aimed at more traditional undergraduate in-class teaching environments with moderate to large enrollments (over 40 students). Third, I wish there was no need to write this article. While there are some [exceptions to the rule](#), teaching is a skill that is rarely part of our graduate training. While most institutions rely on part time and contract instructors to deal with a large portion of undergraduate instruction, few offer suggestions on how one can manage such large teaching obligations.

Finally, I regret that it sounds neo-liberalist in some spots. It is an attempt at providing practical advice until the revolution happens => *Above all, this essay is not intended to help you work more.*

1. BE CONSISTENT AND AS PREPARED AS IS POSSIBLE BEFORE YOU HIT THE CLASSROOM.

A time saver for you is to treat your students consistently regarding the information we typically set out in the syllabus. Most questions that students have for you can be answered with kind humour: “[it's on the syllabus](#)”. They will figure it out. Some will roll their eyes, but the good news is you get paid the same regardless of eye rolling.

Avoid making amendments to your policies/syllabus until the next iteration of the course. Changes introduce confusion into an already insecure audience.

Consider developing a ‘formatting policy’ you can use for all your written submissions in all your classes. I suggest a [1 page guide](#), which can be altered sparingly, as needed. This provides continuity for students you may teach more than once over the course of their degree and - more importantly - save you hours of ‘course prep’ at assignment time.

Consider developing a [marking matrix](#) (generally re-usable for all your courses), which embraces the idea of criteria marking over quantification. Many students assume that they start off with 100% and ‘lose’ marks with mistakes. This problematic positivistic view of student assessment can eat up hours of your life (and your teaching assistants’ lives) as you find yourself being called upon to come up with explanations why 0.5 marks were deducted here and there. I like to include a discussion about Foucault’s Docile Bodies when I explain why I do not mark that way.

2. STOP ANSWERING STUDENT EMAILS

If your work contract does not explicitly specify that you must communicate by e-mail with students, then do not. Our students have grown up texting and emailing when thoughts come to them at any time (maybe you do this too). But, here is the thing: we can simply click “delete”. If it is important, they will ask us about it in class or make an appointment during office hours. They will try to ignore this policy at first, so it is up to you to be strong. I rarely get more than a dozen student e-mails a week once the first few weeks of the semester is behind me. Go ahead! Encourage students to spread rumours and reviews on ‘Rate My Proff’ that you are no help at all through email. Write the review yourself if you have to.

3. OFFICE HOURS BY APPOINTMENT ONLY USING GOOGLE DOCS (OR SOMETHING SIMILAR).

I send students a [link](#) to a schedule by e-mail or make it available on a course website. In the document, they fill in their name in a preferred appointment time, and the document updates in ‘real time’. I have found a 15 minute appointment time tends to answer most concerns that students have, and keeps the line moving.

This will also provides you with a document you can provide to your administration if you ever want to demonstrate how much of your time is committed to meeting with students. Your students also get a sense of how taxed your time is outside the classroom.

4. CONSIDER INVESTING A FEW HOURS WITH GOOGLE CALENDAR (OR SIMILAR TOOL).

When you have completed your syllabus, you will want to fill out:

- Your class schedule with class room location start/end time
- School holidays
- Administrative dues dates (when grades have to be submitted by, for example)
- Assignment due dates
- Exam period
- Office hours
- Meetings

I also set reminders (alarms) to go off 15 minutes before an obligation, to avoid missing a class, a student meeting, etc. It also helps me get a true sense of how little time I really have. It makes it easier to decline time-taxing requests.

4. RECONSIDER HOW YOU ARE USING LECTURE SLIDES...

...or at least restrict yourself to creating image heavy prompts with VERY little text.

Making lecture slides is one of the easiest ways to lose hours of your life, and worse, it may be detracting from your teachings. Students cannot truly listen (deep learning) to you if they are trying to write down the text on the slide. It has also been my experience that many students will not do the readings if you provide text-heavy lecture slides.

To be clear, I am huge fan of using lecture slides, which I make [freely available](#) to my students. They do help me organize my thoughts while I talk in class. However, I generally restrict myself to no more than three phrases/concepts per slides, which makes them easy to update as your course materials change over the semesters.

5. CONSIDER HAVING A LAPTOP FREE ZONE IN YOUR LARGER LECTURE HALLS.

Most of us learn deeply when we [physically write notes down](#) with pen and paper, as compared to taking notes with lap tops. I provide this research to my students, as well as a space where students may sit (typically the first 10 to 20 rows, depending on your class size) free from distracting laptop screens. This may save you time, as you may spend less time ‘re-explaining’ yourself to those distracted by the screens in front of them.

6. AVOID TRYING TO SAVE STUDENTS FROM THEIR ‘YET TO BE’ DEVELOPED TIME MANAGEMENT SKILLS.

In many cases students do not explicitly ask you to solve anything, they just present a problem, like a cat with a dead mouse at your feet. Of course, you can listen to them and be empathetic, because there will be instances you will want to redirect them to student support services, for example. My life in the classroom changed considerably, though, when I began turning it back to them: “I am confident you will find a solution” (they have the syllabus, they can read your policies for most standard ‘time crunch’ dramas).

7. KEEP YOUR WEEKLY READING MATERIALS MINIMAL.

Fifty pages per week is the high end of my required readings for first and second year classes. I will offer a 'suggested readings' list for students to draw from when writing papers, though. Think quality over quantity. You do not want your students hiding from discussions because they did not do the readings.

In negotiating that fine line between hoping to win over the confidence of your new students and feeling insecure about teaching, many new teachers overload students with readings. I am guilty of this. I reasoned I could take readings away as the course progressed. The problem with this strategy, though, was that constantly removing readings communicated to my students that I planned poorly, when the reality was that I just did not have a sense of how many readings we could go through comfortably in a week, yet.

8. LEAVE SOME CLASSES 'OPEN' ON THE SYLLABUS.

I typically leave one or two of my 24 lectures per course unplanned so I have the flexibility to get off topic without making students feel like I have gotten too far off the beaten path. I will also reserve one or two lectures for Q & A classes, where students can come in and talk to me, the teaching assistants, or each other about group work. These are always scheduled during class time in the classroom. Attendance is not mandatory on these days, so some use this 'relief' in their schedule to catch up.

9. ESTABLISH CLEAR COMMUNICATION WITH YOUR TEACHING ASSISTANTS (IF YOU ARE LUCKY ENOUGH TO HAVE THEM).

Assume a mentorship relationship. I start the year by providing my TAs with a one page breakdown of their job (how many hours marking, etc). I ask my teaching assistants to attend core lectures, so that they know what I have told my own students in the classroom. The students get used to talking with them, which is a time saver for you. If the teaching assistants are unionized, read their collective agreement. You may discover that they can and want to assist you in ways far more useful to you than simply [becoming marking drones](#).

10. ATTACK ALIENATION FROM YOUR LABOUR: SEEK OUT PEOPLE WHO CAN SUPPORT YOU.

Go down to your institution's Human Resources Office to find out what benefits, if any, you qualify for. Are you part of a union? Read over your collective agreement very carefully. I was happy to discover travel benefits my own department was not aware of. If there are teaching, time management workshops or health services (mental and physical) made available to you, please use them.

Get to know the people in your department. Regular faculty may not realize your working conditions if you remain invisible. Some tenured professors in my department (and others) have become great supporters (and colleagues) over the years. Furthermore, you may also discover a thing or two about their working conditions that may surprise you.

Network, reach out to newbies if time permits, with other adjuncts in yours and other departments, or those in nearby schools. Many of the things that I have learned over the years has come from the generosity of my peers who shared their experiences.

