Breaking Success Barriers—Accelerate or Fall Behind?

I hate to be rushed! But I understand that if I can’t find ways to accelerate and finish tasks in less time than it took just a year ago, I will remain stuck at my current level of accomplishment. This is not acceptable; it’s a success barrier that I’m determined to break. I know I can be more successful. But how?

Acceleration is the key. How can this powerful idea be added to the ones presented in the previous two TFS issues? As noted in TFS, August 02, zero-based-thinking is the starting point to breaking success barriers. By using zero-based thinking, you can reduce the clutter in your professional and personal life and focus on the 20 percent of your tasks that produce 80 percent of the goals you desire.

Then, adopt the Four Powerhouses of Change identified in TFS, September 02. They provide the emotional energy necessary to keep moving rapidly toward your goals.

Next, explore two strategies for accelerating your work. The number-one acceleration strategy is to continually learn new ideas, skills and processes, and then, apply these ideas every day and every hour.

Suppose that by paying close attention to the minute details of each of your teaching tasks, you create many ways to continually make small improvements. Just as compound interest grows money at an exponential rate, these small, continual improvements will exponentially accelerate your ability to achieve more in less time. Over time you will produce more with much less effort and time required.

Task reduction is the number-two strategy. Be ruthless. Eliminate unneeded repetition and consolidate like tasks. Accelerate by assessing how you can reduce your class preparation and after-class grading tasks.

Also ask yourself: Am I doing more than is absolutely necessary? Am I assigning more work than is really needed? Those who teach for success address these questions and employ acceleration strategies daily.

A significant success decision — accelerate through turbulent, challenging times or fall back into eddies and risk stagnation.

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Getting students in my developmental writing class to routinely revise their first drafts as part of the writing process is as difficult as getting my teenage daughter to clean her room. She can do it, but it’s a job she would rather not do.

The problem

In fact, most students balk when it comes to taking their first written draft to the next level. One of my students once quipped, “Isn’t it your job as the teacher to mark up my paper in red?” That’s how I came up with the idea of the red pen reversal strategy.

A new strategy

At the beginning of the lesson, present each student with a red pen and explain that it’s their job as writers to review and revise their own writing (I make a big deal about the presentation of the pens, as though they are receiving a sword with which to do battle).

Choose your weapon

Reinforce the concept that writing is a process. Remind the students that the first draft is like the first batch of pancakes; it’s meant to be thrown out. I also take this opportunity to read them a few pages from a chapter, “Shitty First Drafts” in Anne Lamott’s book, Bird By Bird in which she humorously describes how almost all good writing begins with a terrible first draft (The students really enjoy this).

Next, armed with their red pens, the focus of the class immediately changes. The students are more serious about the first drafts before them, and they are more attentive to each word on the page. Depending on the ability of the class, I have students switch papers with a classmate for review with the red pen.

There’s just something about using the red pen that makes the students take more responsibility for their own writing.

At first, they are insecure about their abilities as editors. However, as the semester progresses, they grow more confident and catch more errors. As part of the red pen strategy, I also encourage the students to read their papers aloud, so that they can hear their mistakes.

Along with the red pens, I pass out a writing checklist with very specific points I require the students to include in their writing. Here’s a sample checklist I ask my students to complete after they have marked their first drafts in red.

You’re the Editor Checklist

Answer yes or no to the following:

- The title is inviting to a reader and offers a clue to the paragraph.
- The topic sentence is effective and specific.
- There are enough details in the body.
- The paragraph sticks to one point.
- There are descriptive words.
- Strong verbs are used.
- There is sentence variety.
- Writing techniques such as metaphors, similes and exaggeration have been used to make the writing more interesting.
- The conclusion reminds the reader of the opening sentence, or gives an opinion that relates to the point of the paragraph.
- The paragraph has been edited for spelling, capitalization and punctuation.

Bottom line

Awarding each student a red pen is a simple strategy, but a powerful teaching tool. The red pen helps students focus their attention on improving the first draft, and it lets them know you trust them to do a first-rate job of revising on their own.
It’s Unplanned, It’s Important, But Do They Remember It?

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Each and every class period, you probably intentionally and also unintentionally share valuable information or tips with your students that may not be directly part of the lesson plan. These tips are heard by most students, but unless they are motivated to do so they do not try to retain them. They know this information will not be tested or ever referred to again.

Here’s a solution: offer your students an extra credit assignment to record these tips, categorize them, type them and submit them to you at the close of the term for points. During the first few classes, consciously try to be aware of tips as you say them to the class, and then remind the students who are interested to record them.

Here are some samples of categories and tips from my latest educational psychology class.

**Time management**
- Implement special, highly motivational activities immediately at the beginning of class in order to encourage students to arrive at class on time.

**Communications**
- Never answer a question that a student can figure out or receive the information from a peer.

**Implementing activities**
- Make sure that the first student to do an assignment does it correctly in order to set the standard for the rest of the class.

**Problem solving**
- Input all information as quickly as possible.
- Let the new data percolate in the mind and quite often creative ideas will spontaneously appear.

**Knowledge retention**
- The greatest threat to understanding is information overload. When you try to cover too much, understanding may be diminished.

**Tests**
- If students want to challenge test questions or answers, encourage them. Request that they submit their cases in writing with appropriate text citations.

**Discipline**
- Try to anticipate classroom events in advance and decide how you will deal with them before they happen.

At the end of the term, collect the extra credit “tip” papers. You may find, as I do, that it is enlightening to find out how well students can listen when they are motivated. One student recorded over 80 legitimate tips like those listed above during this past semester.

The next week I compile and type all of those words and phrases on a master list, cut them apart and randomly place four words in envelopes. I then choose different story genres, for example: horror, mystery, romance, science fiction, etc. On the day I give the assignment, my students form groups of three or four.

Each group gets an envelope of words and a story genre; each must then write a page-long story of the genre assigned using the words in the envelope at least once. The students enjoy the chance to write creatively and the stories I receive are always amusing. I then compile them into a class book, which I share with my other students.

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**An Envelope, a Story and Fun**

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I am always looking for fun and creative ways to inspire my freshmen composition students to write. I have come up with a fun in-class activity that incorporates writing, group work and fun! One week in advance I give my students an individual assignment to choose a favorite word or phrase they use and write why they use the word or phrase.
An Effective Worksheet Design for Math Classes

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In an effort to assess my students’ level of understanding, I have developed “How Well Do You Know It” worksheets for many of the topics covered in my math classes. These worksheets benefit both students and instructor. They help students realize the level of understanding required for successful completion of the course.

Also, they become aware of their readiness for an exam. They provide an opportunity for students to develop critical thinking skills and problem-solving skills.

This worksheet design will give you more opportunity to measure your students’ understanding. Higher level questions that may require investigation, brainstorming or other time-consuming, problem-solving strategies can be asked. Due to time constraints on tests, these types of questions are omitted, but the need to ask them is critical to accurately assess your students’ levels of learning.

Bloom’s levels

These worksheets include questions using a modified version of Benjamin Bloom’s levels of learning. In Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom argues that learning occurs at six levels:

- **Knowledge**—Memorize, recognize or recall ideas or facts.
- **Comprehension**—Translate, interpret and extrapolate; explain concepts in your own words; use formulas appropriately.
- **Application**—Apply what you have learned to new problems.
- **Analysis**—Break a subject down into its parts, and identify the relationship between the parts.
- **Synthesis**—Combine parts in new ways; create new patterns that build new entities.
- **Evaluation**—Use what you have learned to make judgments about the validity of arguments or the appropriateness of a course of action.

Class expectations and examples

At the beginning of the semester, I give my students a handout explaining these six levels of learning. In most of my classes, I require an Analysis level understanding to receive an A. Therefore, my worksheets assess the first four levels of learning.

Here is an example of four questions covering the topic of factoring:

- **Knowledge**—Factor $a^3 + b^3$.
- **Comprehension**—Factor completely:
  
  $2x^3 - 5x^2 - 3x$.
- **Application**—Find all $k$ such that:
  
  $x^2 + kx - 8$ is factorable.
- **Analysis**—$ux^2 + bx + c$ is nonfactorable over the integers if $a$, $b$, and $c$ are all odd.

The Knowledge level question assesses whether they have memorized the necessary formulas, theorems or rules for the topic.

The Comprehension level question is a direct application of a formula or rule. It tests if the student knows the procedure or knows how to use a formula.

The Application level question is usually a word problem that requires the use of the formulas or rules from the first two questions.

The Analysis level question is more theoretical and requires a complete understanding of the formula or procedures.

I ask my students to try to solve the first two problems on their own. Usually, students collaborate to solve the Application and Analysis level questions. This gives them the opportunity to share their ideas in approaching the problem, to brainstorm and to justify their solutions.

**Important outcomes**

In our students’ futures, they will encounter problems they have never faced before; memorization and basic understanding of facts will be of little use. The information they learn will only be useful if they understand it well enough to know when to use it and how to apply it to a new situation. Therefore, courses should focus on teaching and assessing higher levels of learning.

We should expect students to demonstrate that they remember and understand what they have read or heard. But more importantly, they should demonstrate that they are able to analyze a new situation and apply their new knowledge.
“Be even-tempered in success and failure; for it is evenness of temper which is meant by yoga [spiritual enlightenment].” —The Bhagavad Gita

This publication, Teaching for Success is not just about teaching, the goal of TFS is success in general and successful teaching in particular. In this spirit, take a few moments to entertain the ramifications of NOT being so concerned with success.

A delicate balance?

Let’s say you go into a class well-prepared and still fail at meeting your goals or the needs of your students (or both!). Discouraged and dismayed, but with a vision of success firmly in mind, you become determined to hunker down—only to fail again. Now what? More concentrated effort, more frustration and more failure.

A vicious cycle has begun that needs to be stopped. But how? The answer can be found in the passage above. Simply, ease up. We need to succeed, an idea validated by the work of Abraham Maslow decades ago. So we try hard to have fun, teach well, live a good life and be the best we can be.

But it’s sometimes in the trying that we fail, not in the execution of the activity. On the one hand, we cannot fail when we do not try. On the other, we cannot act when we do not try. A balance between these two states must be set. To become a peak performer, seek this delicate balance between trying too hard and not trying enough. Seasoned athletes and naturally-gifted artists and performers seem to have achieved this balance. How can you achieve it?

A thought experiment

As an experiment, think of a past term’s course in which you succeeded. Did you help a wide majority of your students learn? Did you fulfill your goals and the school’s expectations for the course? Were you on top of your game?

Compare this favorable experience to a recent course in which you judge you did a poor job. Perhaps, you didn’t reach as many students as you would have liked, or you had to sacrifice some of your goals or your institution’s objectives for one reason or another?

Consider the favorable experience, identify what went right and why. Highlight those things that you can observe, measure or attribute to your talents as a teacher to improve future courses.

In the case of the negative experience, list what went wrong and what you can change in the future. What could you have done to make the course run smoother and produce better outcomes?

You can also use these evaluative questions when a particular class session goes very well or not so well.

By continuously reflecting and evaluating successes and failures, you become a high-performance instructor.

Evenness of temper

However, reflection should not to be confused with obsession. If you belittle yourself or set unrealistically high goals, you can only fail in the end.

This is the crux of the passage, “Be even-tempered in success and failure; for it is evenness of temper which is meant by yoga” [spiritual enlightenment].

Take success and failure in stride. Because you do well in one class meeting does not mean you will automatically do well in the next session. The same is true for failure.

Student applications

I teach and guide my students so that they can learn from their mistakes and failures. If they always succeed, they would have no real need for me, the text, the course, or a degree.

Therefore, I coach them. I urge them not to rest on their laurels. For one success does not ensure future success, and it’s only by constantly raising the bar that they can develop their full potential.

We must measure our successes and failures in a balanced, healthy way. We must learn from both in order to ensure more success in the future.

And as you increase the chances for success, you will not have to worry about success; it will come to you and your students as surely as autumn follows summer.
TFS’s WebWorld: Infomine, the Scholarly Resource Gold Mine

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How long have you spent in one session searching for reliable, useful academic sites? I hate to admit that I have spent as many as five hours doing just that.

For one subject area, like grammar, it can take me as many as 30 or more total hours. It’s tiring, tedious, and sometimes mind-numbing work—there must be a better way. And there is: find somebody else who has already done the work for you.

If you can find a site that combs through the Internet and digs out the gold for you, it can save you an untold amount of time. But the trick is to find a site that pinpoints what you consider to be valuable sources.

If you consider university level research and educational tools valuable, I’ve found just the site for you: INFOMINE, Scholarly Internet Resource Collections <http://infomine.ucr.edu/>.

A treasure chest for researchers

Created and maintained by university librarians, INFOMINE is self-described as a “virtual library of Internet Resources relevant to faculty, students and research staff at the university level.”

This means, highly qualified professionals have searched (and continue to search) the Internet for information that is credible and useful to an academic audience and have organized it into a searchable database. I can’t think of a better way to save time than to start with INFOMINE when searching for academic information on the Internet.

How is it organized?

INFOMINE boasts more than 23,000 academic resources, which are divided into twelve different databases for easy searching.

Among the databases are academic subject areas (like the sciences and business) electronic journals, government information, university-level instructional resources and Internet enabling tools. You will find these database areas prominently displayed on the first page of the site.

How does it work?

You can search one, two, or all databases at the same time, depending upon how narrow or broad you want your search to be. You can also browse the databases by subject, author, keyword or title.

Two characteristics that make this database stand out are its complete, but brief, descriptions of each link listed and the many search options available. All it takes is one glance at the “Search Tips” section to see how exhaustive the searching options are.

I recommend taking time to study the “Search Tips” section before using the database. This will help you find what you are looking for a lot faster.

To illustrate the kinds of information you will find through this site, I typed in “writing teacher” to see what I could find. On the first page of hits, there were two sites that interested me right away: “Writing Teachers’ Resources for Professional Literacy” and “Writing and Teaching Guides.”

Both of these resources are affiliated with colleges and could be very useful to a writing teacher.

Highlights

In addition to the databases, there are several other sections that are notable. You can find these sections at the bottom of the website. The first is the “General Reference Section.” This section includes information that you would find in the reference section of a library. For example, you can access almanacs, biographies, maps, zip codes and many other types of information.

Summaries

Another section worth taking a look at is the “Articles” section. It’s a database of article summaries and, in some cases, full-text storage of more than 20,000 articles.

Although your college library should have a more-than-adequate periodicals database (like Proquest or Ebscohost), you may be able to find some articles here that are not indexed in those databases.

Search engine secrets

Another section that is useful is “Other Search Tools.” Here INFOMINE gives away its secret. The staff has organized the search engines, and other resources it uses most frequently, to find the sites they collect for their database.

So if you can’t find what you are looking for through its database, go to this section to find websites like the experts do.
Most of the material I cover in my classes comes from courses of study, readings or television. But if that’s all I tell students, I appear to be a mere observer of the world, an intellectual voyeur, who watches the world go by but does not participate. I would be like the baseball aficionado who quotes thousands of statistics but has never played or even attended a ballgame.

An active participant

We have to let students know that we are, or have been, active participants in our discipline. Photography is an intimate way to connect yourself to your topic. Stories about graduate studies or research, or visits to towns, parks, museums, etc. can put you at the scene of your topic. Here are a few ways I engage my biology and environmental students by putting myself into the topic:

- Rainforests: “I’ve hiked in rain forests of Puerto Rico and Brazil, but I find the rain forests of Olympic National Park in Washington State the most interesting because….”
- Chesapeake Bay: “Here are photographs I took on trips to Smith Island in the Chesapeake Bay.” I narrate photos of people, boats, marshes, gulls, sunsets.
- Landfills: “Here are photographs taken last year with ENVS 102 students at the Day’s Cove sanitary landfill.” I show photos of students, trash, bulldozers, gulls.
- Deciduous Forests: “Here’s a list of birds I’ve seen in the deciduous forestlandson our campus.” We then visit the forest and identify plants, insects and birds.

Show and tell

You can enrich the classroom experience by showing that you know. Think of experiences or topics that you can include to show that you are an active participant in your discipline. If you don’t have any show and tells, spend the next year collecting materials. Take a camera when you go on trips or visits to museums.

Digital photographs can be easily added to e-mail or shown on a website.

Here are a few suggestions for showing that you know:

- Show a rock or fossil you collected.
- Put up a poster from a museum, concert or event you attended.
- Use a map to show relevant places you’ve visited.
- Buy photographs of famous people, museums, artworks or cities you’ve seen.
- Include relevant (but not boring) stories of your experiences with the topic.

Use your imagination. Don’t let your students confuse you with a musty encyclopedia, a lifeless android or a static computer. Show that you know!

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Why Not Begin Class at the Door?

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I prefer to position myself at the principal entrance to the auditorium for my large survey courses. It’s so meaningful to make eye contact and greet students by name as they pass by to enter class. I’ve observed how it tends to relax students and give them a sense of more meaningful connection.

Also, this practice permits me a professional and comfortable way to introduce myself to new students.

I can engage them in a casual moment of conversation prior to a class, rather than make a possible intimidating reference to them during regular instruction.
Many evening class students arrive for a six- or seven-o’clock class after completing a full work day at their jobs. There is little time for them to rest or relax after their daytime responsibilities and before sitting down in a classroom for two or three hours.

Keeping these students motivated and awake for a long period of time is a daunting challenge for evening class instructors. Even an enthusiastic and creative teacher can plan a stimulating lesson and still face a number of students who cannot overcome fatigue and who struggle to keep their heads up, eyes open and minds alert.

Action plan

There are many strategies you can employ to help your students stay energized and focused in class. One technique that has been highly successful for me in a three-hour class period is to use cooperative teamwork for a limited period during each class. Here’s how it works.

Form groups

Divide your class randomly into groups of four or five students each. Encourage mixing males and females in each group. Each week assign one or two groups an interesting and easily teachable concept for them to present during the following week’s class.

Give these groups between 15 and 30 minutes before the end of class to plan a three- to five-minute lesson on the assigned topic for presentation during the next class period.

The rest of the class members who are not presenting may use the planning period to catch up on their notes, speak to the teacher, or be dismissed early to go to the library, bookstore or home.

Instructor’s role

During the planning period, it is important for you to meet with each planning group, review guidelines and help kick start the planning process. Here are some guidelines:

- If the assignment is PASS/FAIL, then most students will cooperate. I have never had a student refuse to participate.
- The lesson should be brief, three to five minutes.
- The goals of the lesson should be limited to one or two.
- Encourage appropriate, good humor.
- Ask the planning group this question: “If you were in the audience hearing this presentation, would you find it interesting, valuable and fun?”
- Each member of the group should have some role to play. Try to make each student accountable.
- The student lesson should be presented at a time when students need a jolt of energy.
- After all groups have presented, form new groups so that students interact with new classmates.
- Anonymous feedback forms should be used. Remind your students about the rules for constructive feedback.

Everyone benefits

In a two- or three-hour evening class, you need to be creative and flexible in order to maintain student interest and alertness. Students appreciate and enjoy teacher efforts to add variety and fun in the classroom.

Involving students actively in cooperative teamwork stimulates their minds and energizes the whole class environment. Why not give it a try?

Editors Notebook—The Worst Thing

What is the worst thing that can sabotage your teaching success? Is it making an error of judgement or failing to know something your students all know?

No, the worst thing that can happen is not related to failure or mistakes; it’s doing an excellent job teaching something that need not be taught at all. You and your students waste time and energy, and the outcomes move neither of you closer to where you want to go.