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Slacking on: Lean practices in Applied Education

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Abstract

Applied educators experience both increased rewards and increased burden as a result of the inherent impact, complexities, and risks of executing applied and community-based learning projects. A “lean” approach to career management is recommended in order to ameliorate risk, optimize student and community outcomes, and sustain effective engagement over time.

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This work matters

Applied education matters. All education matters, of course, but applied education is especially important both because its lessons were deemed worthy of application in the first place, and because the act of application itself yields *mat(t)erial* impact.

While the term “applied learning” may traditionally have referred to specific professional fields of study (e.g. nursing, business, engineering), the applied descriptor has evolved to encompass any learning experience, in any discipline, that is designed to be implemented outside of the standard classroom setting in order to better prepare students to meet the broader needs of society (Schwartzman & Henry, 2009). For faculty, the implicit relevance of applied education generates a sense of both purpose and burden, necessitating skillful career management. It is assumed that the reader of this journal is aware of the considerable benefits of applied learning for students, faculty, and communities. Within this context, it is also sensible to conduct a clear-eyed review of the unique burdens of applied education, not to discourage engagement, but rather to motivate faculty to explore practices that support effective, sustained engagement over time.

If the work matters...

If the work matters, we work harder. The felt-sense of meaning inherent to applied education drives us to choose to work harder, and related pragmatics often leave us little choice at all. Logistically, applied learning projects often absorb excess time and energy, because when learning is applied, it is applied to our fast-changing world, requiring more flexibility and adaptability. Furthermore, faculty in applied disciplines may be credentialing students for certified or licensed professions, meaning that we expend resources answering (often at great length and in exquisite detail) to external accrediting bodies. Those of us in “gatekeeper” roles are honored with the complicated task of teaching and evaluating attributes far beyond the basic knowledge and skills of the discipline. We assess and remediate - occasionally even dismiss based on - deficits in traits like interpersonal skills and professional values. This is delicate work that demands enormous personal and professional faculty resources (SAMHSA, 2014). Finally, for any community-based applied learning project, faculty must be mindful of risks relating to institutional reputation, potential harm, and liability (Joyce & Ikeda, 2002).

Furthermore, these complications that are specific to *applied* projects are set against a backdrop of increasing workload demands across all of academia. For a successful career, faculty must navigate conflicting pressures from several directions. Universities place increasing weight on research performance indicators (Cadez, et al., 2017), while the scholarly community is raising serious concerns about a dysfunctional publication arena (Bauerlein et al, 2010; Rawat & Meena, 2014; Spellman, 2015; Waters, 2020). Student satisfaction data can make or break a career, despite significant vulnerability to bias (Basow & Martin, 2012). The educational system as a whole is attempting to respond

to a wider range of stakeholders, many of whom expect objective evidence of accountability, (Bentley & Kyvik, 2012; Sfakianaki & Kakouris, 2019; Schwartzman & Henry, 2009), which leads to increased administrivia at all levels.

Ultimately, many faculty in applied education - while reaping great rewards in terms of student outcomes, community betterment, and professional fulfillment - are operating at, or above, capacity (Kerrigan, 2015). Something has to give. Some things are already giving. Many feel the strain on health, hobbies, and personal relationships (Burghardt & Tolliver, 2010; Waters & Frank, 2016a).

If the work matters, then so do you

Ironically, the very reasons we work too hard are precisely the reasons that it is frankly unacceptable for us to do so. Burghardt and Tolliver (2010), educators in the applied field of human services, remind us that “If the work is sacred, then so are you,” (p. 163). While the word “sacred” may carry too much (or too little) meaning for some readers, the underlying message is applicable for all applied educators. There is a continuum of risk in applied education, but across disciplines it is imperative that we are careful, sharp, and energetic in order to reduce risks and respond nimbly when the unexpected arises, as it inevitably does (Joyce & Ikeda, 2002). It is *because* our work matters, that we work too hard. And it is because our work matters that we mustn’t work too hard. We have an ethical obligation to maintain barriers, balance, and bandwidth. Doing so requires “slack-time,” or intervals of time that are not pre-assigned to any specific task (Mullainathan, 2014).

When work stops working

If you have plenty of time to meet all your obligations, then this article is not for you. But, you might as well read it anyway, since you have plenty of time. For the rest of us, scarcity of resources (e.g. time, energy, funding, passion, empathy, creativity, civility) is threatening our ability to perform our best (Burghardt & Tolliver, 2010; Kerrigan, 2015; Mullainathan, 2014). Our sense of purpose, embedded in a culture of overwork, can compel us to schedule every moment and then some, morally in dread of wasting a single second (Cohen, 2018; Mullainathan, 2014). But one of the hallmarks of applied education is that things often don’t go according to plan. Unexpected diversions offer rich learning opportunities, but only if we have the slack-time to capitalize on them. Otherwise, they yield dejection, disenchantment, risk, and harm.

Without some slack built into our schedules, we eventually find ourselves caught in the “fire-fighting trap” (Mullainathan, 2014), moving from one urgent problem to another, with no time to address non-urgent, but important tasks. Our efficiency degrades over time, which creates more fires to put out. Important life-tasks are short-shifted as well; without adequate sleep, exercise, nutrition, affection, and play, our energetic bandwidth also degrades, leading to a further reduction in capacity. We pass the point of diminishing returns, and frenetically hold the pace until we

reach a point of lost productivity and outright harm (Cohen, 2018; Drucker, 2006; Mullinathan, 2014). The entire system - the workplace and ourselves within it - glugs up and our students and communities suffer.

Yet we wear our over-busyness like a badge of honor. Josh Cohen (2018), a psychologist, notes that "It's culturally acceptable to complain aloud about how busy and tired we are, as though in doing so we reassure the world that we fully acknowledge our moral and social obligation to work and contribute" (p. xxxiii). In many academic environments it is not just culturally "acceptable", but rather culturally imperative to be too busy, all the time, out loud.

Do first things first...

There is a robust literature from the business and non-profit management sector designed to improve performance by reducing over-busyness. The recommended approaches will be referred to in this paper under the term "lean practices." Peter F. Drucker (2006; 2008), a prolific writer and management consultant, used the word "lean" to signify deliberate, mission-based decision making. By now, most of us are probably pretty familiar with time management strategies that help us "fit it all in" (Jonat, 2014). In contrast, the lean approach encourages us to stop fitting it all in - to "do first things first and do second things not at all" (Drucker, 2006, p. 24).

Cultivating lean practices

The lean approach teaches us to *eliminate most tasks* from our to-do list, or at least do some things poorly, on purpose. This difference makes lean practices distinct, requiring the deliberate suppression of functioning (on carefully selected tasks) in order to create the necessary slack to treat top priorities with the respect they deserve. The Lean Six Sigma approach to organizational improvement (Frank, 2012; George et al., 2004; Price et al., 2011) provides a guide, the "Hierarchy of Value", for helping make the relevant decisions intelligently:

Lean Hierarchy of Value:

Keep:	Value-added activities
Minimize:	Non-value added, but necessary activities
Eliminate:	Non-value added activities that are not necessary

The lean approach is accessible to anyone, regardless of management training or experience (Frank, 2012), but it's entirely possible that the average educator, having achieved the honors and accomplishments required to secure an academic career, will find the lean approach counterintuitive. *Purposefully poorer performance* simply might not be in the current skillset. Thus, a practical analysis of the logical processes entailed is offered for each category of the rubric:

Eliminating tasks: every moment matters

Elimination of tasks from the to-do list is what makes the lean approach unique and uniquely effective. The basic instruction is to just stop doing any task that is neither value-added nor necessary. In practice, the determination of value and necessity is challenging. To develop an effective lean approach, we must not ask ourselves two seemingly sensible questions:

First, we should not ask if a task has value. Of course the task has value... but the list of tasks with some value for our students is literally infinite. We eliminate nothing with this mindset. Instead, ask: is this task more valuable than other things that we could be spending the time and energy on? Is this one of the core tasks around which a career should orbit? (Drucker, & Hesselbein, 2008; George et al., 2004).

Second, we should *not* ask if a task is quick. There is no amount of time too small to put to good use (Waters & Frank, 2016b). Every task, no matter how brief, is worth evaluating. In fact, in the early stages of cultivating a lean mindset, we may occasionally spend more time scrutinizing the value of a task than it would have taken to just do the task. But through the process, we build a capacity for discernment that will ultimately improve performance. In the long run, a series of saved minutes will yield hours of meaningful time we can pour into core tasks.

Minimizing tasks: purposefully poorer performance

Once we've identified a task that is not valuable enough to be a top priority, we can hopefully just stop doing it. Unfortunately, low-value tasks are sometimes required. If a task is required in order for you to keep your job at the institution, or for the institution to stay in business, then it is considered "necessary" no matter how off-mission or low-value it might be (Frank, 2012). Fortunately, many of these tasks fall into the domain of administrative duties, which tend to be amenable to lean thinking (Sfakianaki & Kakouris, 2019). Within the lean framework, necessary-but-low-value tasks are to be *minimized*. Minimization means that we deliberately suppress functioning to a good-enough standard. "Good enough" is not based on our sense of perfectionism or scholarly identity. It is just the minimal level necessary to meet requirements. Defining "good enough" requires professional discretion, but will usually involve a consideration of basic safety, ethical, and institutional requirements. It's tempting to layer ego-aspirations on top of minimal requirements, leading to overperformance with little payoff. Unfortunately, overperformance on a low-value task means underperformance on the overall mission (Drucker, 2006; George et al., 2004; Price et al., 2011).

The ancient Roman Stoic philosophers recognized the definitive preciousness of time, as well as the human frailties that lead us to waste it frivolously. They identified particularly insidious time-wasters, including the pursuit of fame and fortune (Irving, 2008). The average educator may feel confident in having clearly resisted the lures of fame and fortune, given that there is very little of either to be found in academia. However, when the Stoics talked about

"fame" they didn't just refer to celebrity, but also the basic recognition and regard of peers and colleagues. How many tasks serve the primary purpose (beyond what is required to maintain employment) of impressing colleagues or even just satisfying the inner critic? We like to think that all the things we do are vitally important (they aren't), especially when they serve to bolster our own egos. Marcus Aurelius, second century Stoic philosopher and Roman emperor (one of the few who is remembered for having great integrity [Birley, 1993]), cautioned that "Vanity is the greatest seducer of reason: When you are most convinced that your work is important, that is when you are most under its spell," (Aurelius, 1992). The deep compulsion to impress others is natural, but not always benign (Irving, 2008). Resources wasted on tasks that bolster status or ego, but yield little value for students or communities, are essentially stolen from the greater mission (Waters & Frank, 2016b). And, "one cannot buy, rent or hire more time... No matter how high the demand, the supply will not go up," (Drucker, 2006, p. 26). For the applied educator, who needs slack-time in order to optimize student and community outcomes, the only option is to reduce demand by deliberately eliminating and minimizing tasks.

When minimizing one task, it is useful to also identify a specific high-value task we want to promote with the conserved time, and mentally project the anticipated positive outcomes for students and community. It is also useful to identify cases where inadequate bandwidth is *already* forcing poorer performance on high-value tasks. The lean approach allows us to choose which tasks to suppress, allowing us to achieve excellence where it really matters. Finally, faculty in leadership positions should explore options at the institutional level for eliminating these minimized tasks in the future; some are truly indispensable, but others are only "necessary" because of misguided or outdated policies and practices.

High-value tasks: slacking on

Over time, as we eliminate and minimize low-value tasks, we find ourselves with extra resources to invest in substantive advancements for our students and communities. The higher proportion of our work-time we can devote to these tasks, the greater our sense of professional purpose, which in turn increases energetic bandwidth (Burghardt & Tolliver, 2010). We can capitalize on this virtuous cycle in several ways:

Scheduled slack-time. We may be inclined to immediately assign any spare moment to a new task, assuming that unscheduled time is unused time (Mullainathan, 2014). However, the applied educator in particular may find that unscheduled time assigns itself to responding optimally to unplanned diversions. In the event that nothing comes along to fill our time, we find that our new lean mindset naturally inclines us to make good, valuable use of any idle moments, though this may be hard to believe if you are currently exhausted by overwork (Cohen, 2018).

Continuous improvement. As our lean mindset matures, we can examine each and every task with the assumption that there might be a faster, easier way of accomplishing the

same outcomes with *equal or greater success* (Frank, 2012; George et al., 2004; Price et al., 2011). An inspiring example was described by a group of eight early-career faculty who formed a learning community with the goal of minimizing their teaching tasks in order to protect time for research (Hershberger et al., 2009). After a year of collaborative effort they found that they were indeed spending less time on teaching and more time on research, but they also found that each had *actually improved* their teaching practices in the process. Spending more time on something doesn't always lead to better performance, and vice versa (Pink, 2002).

Fundamental to the philosophy of applied learning is the belief that active student engagement leads to improved outcomes (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011). The shifting of activity to the student automatically shifts activity from faculty... our task is to figure out how to avoid overfilling the resulting space with unnecessary, low-value minutia. At first, it can feel like "cheating" to look for faster, easier strategies. However, over time, the improvements in mission-based focus should enhance overall productivity. "What matters is what you accomplish" (Pink, 2002, Chapter 6, para. 12) not the amount of time you poured into it.

Transition periods. Implementing lean practices may require short-term investments to yield long-term gains. Sometimes a transition period is necessary, during which performance is sacrificed even on *high-value tasks* in order to achieve better overall outcomes. A simple example would be a multifaceted community-based project that yields excellent outcomes for students, but isn't specifically required by any accrediting body. These types of projects are enormously worthwhile, but can absorb enormous faculty resources (Kerrigan, 2015). A lean analysis would likely reveal several ways that the project can be revised, streamlined, templated, and automated to *eventually reduce strain* (Price et al., 2011), but making these changes can be labor-intensive. The instinct might be to forgo project improvement because it is too time-consuming, or to shortchange bandwidth by eschewing sleep, hobbies, exercise, etc. Both these options would result in decreased efficiency over time (Mullainathan, 2014). The lean approach offers a third option: to instate a time-limited transition period where one knowingly *pauses* high-value tasks in order to improve processes (Frank, 2012). For example, the community-based project in question could simply be skipped for a year with the resulting slack time allocated for project improvement. Poorer student outcomes during that one year would ultimately be overbalanced by long-term gains. Sometimes even *required* tasks can be paused for a transition period, as in the example presented by Waters and Frank (2016a), when an academic department secured permission from administration to suspend collection of mandated program assessment data in order to improve the assessment plan, measures, and processes. The result of collecting no data for a few years was the ability to collect better data, and devote more time to using it wisely, *for the foreseeable future*.

Slack-time or slacking off?

Of course some caution is needed to avoid inadvertently eliminating necessary or high-value tasks, and it is recommended that we initially practice on low-risk tasks that are not directly tied to ethical or institutional requirements. However, the actual implementation of lean practices generally isn't as perilous as it initially feels, for the simple reason that the universe will provide natural feedback if we make a wrong choice (Drucker, 2006). If we eliminate a task that is necessary or valuable, then by definition, there will be consequences to let us know. Furthermore, any mistakes are more easily absorbed and ameliorated precisely because lean practices free up some slack time for addressing problems.

More hazardous than implementing lean practices is *communicating* about lean practices. Post-work philosopher Josh Cohen (2018) cautions that, "resentment and envy are aroused by the thought that someone may not feel bound by the imperative to keep going at all costs" (p. xvi). Our colleagues can easily mistake our quest for slack-time as evidence that we are "slacking off."

Careful communication about lean practices can avert misunderstandings, and help maintain our focus (Jonat, 2014). The distinctive *action* of the lean approach is the minimization and elimination of tasks, but one must never talk about these acts in isolation. Proposals to minimize or eliminate must always be embedded in an explicit *articulation* of the primary objective, which is to re-allocate conserved resources towards high-value tasks that will yield better outcomes for students and communities. Dropping a task looks lazy. Re-aligning resources to better meet the mission looks like leadership.

Irving (2008) offers some relevant advice gleaned from Stoic philosophy: we should choose our associates very carefully. Some colleagues will be absolutely entrenched in the pervading socio-cultural-political belief that overworking is a *moral* nonnegotiable (Cohen, 2018). For them, signs of deteriorating bandwidth (e.g. energy depletion, health concerns, incivility) are perceived as gold stars of superior work ethic. They may not be receptive to lean-language at all. Others may respect the lean approach only to the extent that it is wielded for the direct, immediate, observable purpose of maximal efficiency on the job (Cohen, 2018). These associates may appreciate proposals that explicitly specify exactly how any conserved resources will be allocated. Finally, over time, we also hope to identify some colleagues who can trust in the value of cultivating true slack-time - for responding to crises, optimizing high-value endeavors, and nurturing energetic bandwidth - *even when the positive impact is indirect or delayed*.

Sometimes it makes the most sense to just operate quietly within our own spheres of influence (Drucker, 2006; Jonat, 2014), especially in the initial stages of cultivating lean skills and particularly if we work in a "time-stupid" (Pink, 2002) organization that is hostile to any hint that overworking isn't working as well as we want it to. Over time, we can take advantage of our lean-enhanced performance to support more public endeavors.

Applied learning of lean practices

As applied educators know, the best way to deepen our understanding of a topic is through application and practice (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011). The lean literature offers several practical suggestions for getting started.

Mission matters

Understanding one's mission is essential to discerning value (Drucker & Hesselbein, 2008; Price et al., 2011). "Mission drift" (expending resources on non-mission specific objectives) can lead us to over-value too wide of a range of tasks, until overall performance suffers (Price et al., 2011). Our students are humans, and there are literally limitless ways to enrich the human experience. But we can't do them all; we can't even do more than a bare few of them well. Drucker (2006) suggests that an effective mission statement should be meaningful, but concise enough to look good on a t-shirt. In contrast, academicians aren't generally known for our concision and faculty often operate under multiple mission statements (university, discipline, profession). We may have to use some intelligent discretion to determine what our mission actually is. The recommendation is to distill the most core concepts out of institutional mission statements and then add in our (presumed) preference for not losing our jobs. However, defining our mission helps us determine task value only to the extent that we combine it with the lean Hierarchy of Value. For example, is advising an extracurricular student group enriching for the students? Certainly! Is it consistent with the mission statement? Probably. Is it a *core requirement*, necessary for meeting the mission and more valuable than other tasks? Maybe. Emotionally it probably feels like a high-value task, logically it might make sense to strategically minimize. *These distinctions must be made by discerning professionals in context.*

You matter

You "matter" in at least two ways. First, in the physical sense of the word, you have mass and energy that can be applied to effect change. It's easy to adopt a stance of helplessness, feeling like outside influences dictate every task on your list (Drucker, 2008; Jonat, 2014). But there is always *something* you can change... some tiny task you can minimize or eliminate. Find one task, and apply the lean principles. Do that again. Accumulated slack-time will make it easier to repeat the process over time.

Second, in the emotional sense of the word, your human experience matters. Whatever positive impact you aspire to as an applied educator, you are a part of the universe(s) that you hope to improve. Your life, health, relationships, energy, and wellbeing are worthy of nurturing in their own right. Phrases like "purposely poorer performance" and "good-enough" may inadvertently give the impression of apathy or laziness, so remind yourself frequently of your higher aspirations... don't forget that you make lean decisions *in service of higher overall quality in all you do*. By cultivating slack-time and bandwidth, the use of lean practices can help you improve your career performance and your life

experience within it (Burghardt & Tolliver, 2010; Pink, 2002).

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