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Should have been an email? Meeting redesign for applied educators

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Abstract

Due to the logistic and interpersonal demands of applied teaching, applied educators often simultaneously have more to meet about and less time available for meetings. This can contribute to time poverty and overwhelm in a cycle that erodes productivity over time. While meetings are often necessary, they are frequently inefficient, ineffective, and demoralizing. This paper reviews relevant studies on effective meeting redesign, recommends specific strategies for applied academics, and describes an example of implementation in an applied learning setting.

Keywords: Efficiency, meeting redesign, time affluence.

Should have been an email? Meeting redesign for applied educators

Time, and the sense of having enough of it, is essential for professional productivity and personal well-being (Kasser & Sheldon, 2009; Mullainathan, 2014). One promising strategy for increasing time affluence is *meeting redesign*. This paper reviews relevant studies on effective meeting redesign, recommends specific strategies for applied academics, and describes an example of implementation in an applied learning setting.

Time affluence in applied education

Time poverty, or the sense of not having enough time, is associated with overwhelming cognitive load and "existential overload" caused by multitasking, incomplete projects, perceived stress, and disproportionate time spent on unenjoyable tasks (Benson & Barry, 2011; Kasser & Sheldon, 2009). Ultimately, a prolonged state of time poverty is counterproductive, leading to objectively poorer performance in addition to subjective malaise. In contrast, *time affluence*, or the sense of having enough time for essential tasks with some time left over, is associated with productivity, physical health, community engagement, subjective wellbeing, and happiness (Kasser & Sheldon, 2009; Markovitz, 2011; Mullainathan, 2014).

Like many professions, academia in general is struggling with time poverty, and applied educators in particular are uniquely impoverished by the pragmatic, gatekeeping, assessment, and risk management demands of implementing learning experiences outside of the standard classroom setting (Waters, 2020).

In an effort to cultivate time affluence, forward-thinking business leaders are experimenting with shorter workweeks. While some organizations are simply condensing the workweek by cramming the same hours of work into four long days, others are generating true time affluence by shortening the actual number of hours spent on work. In a study of companies that successfully shortened the workweek while maintaining salaries and revenue, Pang (2020) identified three key strategies for increasing time affluence. The first was to use design thinking to *reduce the amount of time spent in meetings*. This approach is especially relevant to applied education and is the focus of the current paper. Due to the unique demands of logistic coordination, authentic assessment, and community interfacing, applied educators simultaneously have less time available for meetings and more to meet about (Waters, 2020). Meeting redesign has the potential to make a substantial impact on our time affluence.

Why meetings matter

For the purposes of this paper, the most important thing about meetings is that they often aren't important enough. People commonly complain about meetings being too numerous, too long, and not useful (Garcia et al., 2003). The hours lost to superfluous meetings is a critical cost in time-impoverished organizations, but perhaps equally problematic is the "bitter aftertaste of time wasted," which contributes to low morale (Garcia et al., 2003, p. 46). Participation problems range from sluggish under-engagement to power-seeking pedantry (Garcia et al., 2003). Either way, meetings so very, very often take much, much longer than planned (Haase & Miedl, 2007). Finally, the often-frustrating process of scheduling and keeping track of meetings results in endless, thankless administrivia.

Poorly run meetings waste time and cause "meeting fatigue" (Shore, 2013), but while corporate managers often have some training in meeting design, academics frequently do not (Fetzer, 2009). In fact, sometimes our more impressive talents – such as expansive erudition, deep musings, and meticulous cogitation – are comically counterproductive within the context of a meeting.

Meeting redesign

The goal of meeting redesign is simply to reduce the amount of time wasted on low value or no-value tasks, so that more time can be spent on high value tasks (Andersson & Au-Yeung, 2015). Even before the Coronavirus pandemic, remote work and flex-time models were increasing in popularity, partly as an effort to increase time affluence. Now more than ever many people recognize the ecological, organizational, and personal benefits of flexible remote and hybrid approaches (Pang, 2020), but these models often result in less available synchronous time. And while the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of new technologies, the *intelligent* application of these tools still needs some work (González & Mark, 2004; Siemens et al., 2020). For example, studies on "Zoom fatigue" suggest that remote meetings are uniquely exhausting (Shoshan & Wehrt, 2021). Anecdotally, remote technologies accentuate inefficient meeting practices; when friends send irreverent pictures of themselves doing yoga during a meeting, it draws attention to the fact that some meetings were *never* worth one's full attention, even before technology allowed people to "participate" with their cameras off. While high-quality meetings are fulfilling and energizing, reducing the amount of time spent in ineffective meetings is more important than ever.

Meeting redesign can improve overall performance in several ways. The most obvious is that time not spent in meetings or on meeting-related administrivia can be applied to more valuable tasks. Additionally, meeting redesign helps to de-fragment the day by reducing the number of interruptions to the flow of meaningful work, thus increasing efficiency and quality (Newport, 2021). Finally, actively signaling to colleagues that you respect their time promotes affinity, collegiality, and energetic bandwidth (Burghardt & Tolliver, 2010; Mullainathan, 2014).

Deciding whether to meet

Only hold a meeting if there is a definite purpose (Haase & Miedl, 2007; Pang, 2020; Shore, 2013). Ideally, the purpose(s) of a meeting will be clearly articulated on a pre-circulated agenda, and the agenda itself should be zealously managed so that only items that require real-time synchronous collaboration are included (Garcia et al., 2003; Pang, 2020). Items that require group decision-making, brainstorming, and problem-solving are great content to include in a meeting. In contrast, due dates, calendar events, awareness raising, and "for your information" (FYI) items do not require synchronous engagement and should be handled through other conduits (Garcia et al., 2003). Some strategies for organizing asynchronous communication are offered later in this paper.

Deciding when to meet

The timing of meetings requires deliberate balance. On one hand, meetings should be held only when needed. On the other hand, an ad hoc approach generates scheduling complications and encourages people to fragment one-another's workflow with "quick" questions (Newport, 2021). If people need to collaborate on decisions regularly, then regularly scheduled meetings are useful, but the team should cancel freely rather than holding a meeting just because it's scheduled. Effective strategies also include scheduling meetings for purposefully shorter intervals to motivate good time management (Pang, 2020), and using natural boundaries, such as choosing a time when several people have to go to class right after the meeting.

Deciding how to meet

Once a meaningful agenda has been set, the key to effective meetings is active structured moderation (Haase & Miedl, 2007). Simple strategies include assigning time limits to agenda items (Haase & Miedl, 2007), and using technology to track progress and maintain focus (Fetzer, 2009; Pang, 2020). A conceptual "parking lot" can serve as a holding tank for any tangential issues that threaten to derail the agenda (Haase & Miedl, 2007), making it easier to both keep track of these items in the future and let go of them in the present.

A more substantive modification is to adapt the "flipped classroom" model to the meeting process, by pre-circulating all background data, drafts, policies, etc. (Pang, 2020). This strategy frees up more synchronous time for collaborative processes, and also gives participants the opportunity to think things through before articulating their thoughts, thus resulting in higher quality contributions. However, it is imperative that the background information is not reviewed at the meeting itself, else time will be doubly-wasted and people won't bother preparing for future meetings. This approach might initially be uncomfortable in that it sets new norms of collegial responsibility, which may require some adjustment.

Deciding with whom to meet

Andersson and Au-Yeung (2015), suggest that sloppy invitation practices are one of the biggest threats to effective meetings. Obviously, excluding essential participants will delay progress. But including people who don't need to be there can also create serious problems (Garcia et al., 2003; Pang, 2020). At best, non-essential participants will be wasting their own time simmering resentfully in a meeting that doesn't apply to them. Even more costly is when they waste the entire team's time by actively participating despite their lack of relevance, thus derailing and complicating the workflow with underinformed contributions (Newport, 2021).

Reducing the number of nonessential participants in a meeting requires assertive management of both agendas and *invitation lists*. For ad hoc meetings, the invitation list must be curated to include only essential participants. For standing group meetings (e.g. department, board, team, etc.), the agenda must be tightly controlled. Nothing is allowed on the agenda that is not directly relevant to *every* member of the group.

Should have been an email?

Many meetings devote substantial time to "FYI" items that need to be shared, but don't require discussion. As indicated above, this is a poor use of synchronous time, but it is still an essential administrative function. FYIs need to be managed intelligently with a clear, organized process.

The sentiment "*that meeting should've been an email*" is common enough to have achieved meme status, but email is probably not the best conduit for conveying FYIs. Most organizations are already suffering from e-mail overload (Newport, 2021) and tech-driven "constant, constant multi-tasking craziness" (González & Mark, 2004, p. 24). Meeting re-design should fix inefficacy, not outsource it. A simple alternative is to gather FYIs into a single source that can be distributed on the same schedule that meetings are typically held. This avoids constant minor disruptions to workflow, and allows individuals to efficiently batch-process FYIs after outfitting themselves with the proper tools, such as calendar, task-lists, project boards, and the gritty mindset necessary to tackle the dull minutiae of administrivia.

Applied example of meeting redesign

My interest in meeting redesign developed out of desperation. I was a faculty member on a team with an applied learning mission, which I loved. But our team was overwhelmed by the challenges that often accompany applied education. In particular, we were exhausted by long, frequent meetings that were inherently demoralizing because they diverted so much time away from productive work. So, I decided to experiment with meeting redesign. By the end of one academic year, total meeting time was reduced by a couple hours per person per month. The key strategies included the following:

- The final agenda would be distributed one week before the meeting date. In addition to the standard list of topics, we included:

  A separate section of FYI items that were gathered for convenient batch-processing, but absolutely not reviewed during synchronous meeting time.

  Another section of Flipped Content, which was any background information relevant to discussion items on the agenda (e.g. data, policies, drafts, proposals). Just like in a Flipped Classroom, team members were expected to review this content prior to the meeting. During synchronous meeting time, discussion would commence with the assumption that all Flipped Content had been already been reviewed by each member. This took some getting used to, but worked really well after just a few awkward meetings. Ultimately, discussion was elevated by the fact that team members had spent some time seriously considering issues in advance.

- When submitting an agenda item, members were asked to estimate a time-limit. If the time-limit was reached during the meeting, then we would typically assign an individual or small group to workshop the issue before the next meeting.

- A "follow-up" section was added to the agenda where we would delineate any action items, who was responsible, and a deadline for completion. This section was especially useful for tangential topics that threatened to divert the team from the agenda.

Andersson & Au-Yeung (2015) suggest that a standardized agenda solves many problems and in fact our agenda template ultimately served as the core organizing structure for our meetings. This template, in condensed form, is shared as an example that could be adjusted to different contexts.

Table 1: Sample agenda template.

Sample Agenda Template		
Discussion Items	**People Responsible**	**Estimated Time**
(Includes synchronous discussion items only)		
Follow Up	**People Responsible**	**Follow-Up Date**
(List all action items identified during meeting)		
FYI Items (List items that do not require synchronous collaboration; do **not** review during meeting)		
Flipped Content (Information that that participants must review before meeting; do **not** review during meeting)		

Lessons learned the hard way

Meeting redesign takes time and effort. It is not recommended for organizations that are already time-affluent. At best, redesigning a meeting that is already good enough will yield diminishing returns. At worst, group members may be frustrated by unnecessary efforts to micromanage a process that is already working (Andersson & Au-Yeung, 2015).

Manage initial costs proactively. In the first few months of redesign you may spend more time preparing for the meeting than actually meeting. If possible, find a way to offset these costs rather than just piling them on (Waters & Frank, 2016). For example, if the current meetings are unwieldy and unproductive, is it possible to simply cancel one and devote that time to the redesign process?

While meeting redesign results in more time affluence for the team, the process of organizing these meetings may be labor-intensive for the team leader even after the initial development period. However, the overall cost-benefit balance still may work in the leader's favor. If meeting redesign results in more affluence for the team as whole, do the improvements in productivity and morale ultimately serve the team leader as well? Are the meetings more constructive, engaging, and uplifting in tone (Haase & Miedl, 2007)? Does running effective meetings help the team become productive enough for the leader to delegate a task to off-set the time required to run good meetings? Ultimately, we live and work in systems, and the wellbeing of the team can have an enormous impact on the individual leader (Siemens et al., 2020). By cultivating time affluence for the entire team, meeting redesign can have an enormous impact on applied educators, our students, and the communities we work with.

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