Stop giving me busy work!

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"When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else."

TONI MORRISON
Kimmel - Celebrity Mean Tweets

Jimmy Kimmel is not funny. Neither is David Letterman.
Mean Tweet #1

Stop giving me busy work!

Stop giving me busy work!! You know the instructor is going to be lame if their instructions for an assignment are longer than the assignment itself. I didn't appreciate the "pickiness" of expectations on discussion posts, word requirements of posts, etc. It was never an issue to meet them, but why place that kind of restriction in the first place for students who know better? Stop treating us like we're in kindergarten and need to be led by the nose.
What makes discussions a drag?
Unclear purpose

Why are you using discussions? Are you sure that’s the right tool - or just the most convenient one?

Boring prompts

Are you asking students to share things they know and care about? APPLY content and not just regurgitate it?

Lack of meaningful response

From peers or from instructors. From peers - variations of "that’s interesting", from instructors, silence or impersonal notes

Focus on quantity over quality

Measuring word counts or # of replies doesn’t get at whether the student achieved any particular objective.
Lesson 1

Do not mistake busy for productive. Do not mistake "active" for engaged or learning.
Tips/Tools

Stop giving me busy work!

Use journals, ePortfolios, blogs, quizzes in lieu of discussions, if appropriate.

Allow students to select from an array of choices - or to create their own.

Give a "free pass" or other option to let folks "breathe."

Remove at least one assignment from your syllabus after you think it is done.
How to make discussions less of a drag - for everyone
Share clear purpose

Be transparent about WHY you are using discussion versus any other type of engagement. Explain expectations.

Develop relevant exercises

Do not ask folks to post reading summaries alone. Make the "discussion" more dialogue-friendly, where people can more easily make original contributions.

Provide meaningful, timely feedback

Don’t reply to (or grade) every post. Pick out exemplars, offer private and public appreciation.

Focus on quality over quantity

Reduce the number of discussions; use smaller groups instead of larger ones; ask them ahead of time about format/timelines.
Mean Tweet #2

Are you there?

I sent the below email yesterday and have not had a response. I have received no out of office messages to indicate I wouldn't be getting a response. As someone who works in Student Services in higher education, I know people can be busy but that shouldn't mean a student does not get the help they need. I am not trying to be rude, but I do feel like a full work day should be sufficient time for someone to respond.
Do I have

to be online
24/7 to be
present?
Gender Bias
Students of all genders tend to be harder on women and gender queer faculty regarding response time.

Instructor as sole authority
Reinforces power dynamics where instructors is "knower" and student is passive recipient.

Lack of role models for civility
"Squeaky wheels" are trained to keep engaging in that behavior when we don't show examples of how else to work with others to find answers.

(Un)reasonable expectations
In a 24/7 world, we seek immediate answers...are not comfortable sitting with unknown / ambiguous. We would benefit from decreasing our attachment to immediacy of answers.
Lesson 2

Don't confuse reactive with responsive. Resist the temptation to be seduced by urgency and efficiency.
Tips/Tools

Are you there?

Let students know you hear them - share expected response times, highlight great questions/comments in announcements / feedback, explain when you'll be online.

Try to connect more than correct. Assume demands are coming from a place of insecurity or fear.

Share responsibility for care/feeding with the rest of the class (bonus points for those who respond to Q&A - reference syllabus)
How to be available but not codependent
Recognize, respond, redress bias

Develop department standard for responses; reduce reliance on student evals for promotion/tenure; name inconsistencies where they occur.

Empower students

Students often have the answers they seek. Some questions can be answered by peers, or directing students back to a source. Re-center students as authorities.

Role model civility

"Thank you for your feedback" vs. "Per my last email" or "See the syllabus". Coach students on how to raise concerns without setting off alarms.

Set reasonable expectations

When we respond 24/7, we're feeding into the belief that we should be working all the time. Rest, so that others can rest, too.
Mean Tweet #3

What's the point?

This class was a perfect example of poor online learning – lots of reading, very few opportunities to work with classmates and instructor, and mostly forgettable. I think lectures or a commentary on the subject would help. I honestly felt like I was part of an expensive book club this semester. I was just given readings to do...and then had to write a reaction to it. The feedback did not come until later and after other assignments were due.
What makes online course content a drag?
"Lectures" are stale
Try brief recordings instead of even more text. Loads of tech tools available to help students hear from you.

Facilitation not defined or shared
Give work back to students - assign them to lead content / conversations for a week. It often changes how they participate after they assume responsibility for facilitating.

Responses are absent or late
Students are less motivated to be there if they don’t also see you there. Quick responses to a group are as effective as multiple responses to individuals

Heavy focus on readings + points
When focus could be on ideas, application, and feedback. De-center readings, re-center students.
Lesson 3

Don't confuse transactional learning with transformational learning.
Tips/Tools

What's the point?

Be transparent about purpose / goals of anything you ask of students (readings, assignments, or discussions).

Respond with video / audio - to individuals and to the entire group. The less "professional," the better. (NOTE: Pay attention to cultural differences here.)

Explain why as much as how. Tap past students to co-sign benefits of work.
How to be ENGAGING AND PRESENT
Create quick videos

Let students see/hear you (with closed captioning) in real-time. Your tone (encouraging, compassionate) is easier to read if more than text.

Co-create learning

Ask students to lead/facilitate. Ex - VoiceThread lecture that students annotate and add on to; Pages that students/groups can create/edit.

Notice / respond

Tone matters. Be less about surveillance and policing, more about connecting and wondering.

Focus on learning and application

Ask former students to share impact/purpose; Share your own learning/how you’ve changed/developed as a result of student feedback.
LESSONS LEARNED

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Don't confuse reactive with responsive.

Don't confuse transactional with transformational.
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For future study:

- First Nations Pedagogy Online - [https://firstnationspedagogy.ca/practices.html](https://firstnationspedagogy.ca/practices.html)
- Hybrid Pedagogy - [https://hybridpedagogy.org/digitalpedagogy/](https://hybridpedagogy.org/digitalpedagogy/)