# Active Waiting

## By Robert Boice

**Robert Boice introduces a concept called "active waiting" in this article taken from Chapter 2, Wait (Rule 2), in First-Order Principles for College Teachers: Ten Basic Ways to Improve the Teaching Process. He emphasizes reflection and preliminary preparation so that it gives teachers more time to think up unique ways to go over the material.**

### What is Active Waiting?

What makes active waiting different from the passive kind? It means getting ready, often implicitly and preliminarily, while waiting. So at first, active waiting seems more difficult and time consuming.

Just as important, active waiting requires patience. It means waiting and reflecting and preparing ideas and other material for teaching without impulsive rushing. It means taking the time to test lecture and discussion materials to see which of them will engage students as active learners who comprehend-before settling on classroom content. And active waiting even extends to actual teaching: It includes the patience of presenting materials slowly and clearly enough to promote ready comprehension in almost all students.

Said another way, active waiting requires the patience of not trying to prepare or present everything you know. Active waiting, because it promotes early and informal starts, brings the kind of reflectiveness essential to good decision-making and economical presentation.

### Active Waiting Aims for Long-Term Rewards

Active waiting requires the kind of patience that tolerates short-term discomforts (such as temptations to do something else more immediately rewarding than preparing for teaching) in order to gain longer-term rewards (e.g., students who learn more). Active waiting means subduing the part of yourself that admonishes you to put off thoughts of teaching improvements until you are completely caught up on other things. Active waiting, surprisingly, means being able to do two or more things at once (e.g., preparing for teaching during the little openings that occur even during busy days, while nonetheless making enough progress on other things). Oddest of all, active waiting also means suspending disbelief. You might, for instance, believe that efficiencies could work for other people by not for you ("I've always been kind of disorganized and happily behind schedule; I could never stand this").

### Active Waiting, Then, Is a Matter of Pausing Reflectively and Preparing Preliminarily

It means starting preparations well before formal sessions of working on teaching (e.g., by merely inducing us to think and notice during lulls in other activities). It helps teachers

spend more of their preparation time on finding imagination and motivation through the playful, unrushed organization of materials.

### Active Waiting is Economical

Because this patient reflection helps simplify material by way of repeated exposures and reexaminations, lectures can be presented with fewer main points and more explanations of each. And when the preparations are patient, simple, and reflective, so are the presentations. Teachers who learn to pause and notice during preparations show the same kinds of timing and listening in class.

As a result of these economics, the pace is less taxing for teacher and students. The enjoyment of teaching grows from both sides. The students learn and retain more.

### Active Waiting is Educational

Active waiting also facilitates learning for the teacher. It teaches you what kinds of active waiting work best for you; for example, calming and slowing in class while taking time to consider links between points you've made; pausing until students solve problems. It coaches you to examine what goals (if any) you are setting for student learning, while preparing reflectively and patiently. It encourages playfulness and discovery during work at teaching. And, active waiting helps moderate the perfectionism that pressures many of us to suppose that we should make no mistakes, that we must know everything, that we ought to be in constant control.

Active waiting works because it softens its opposites, perfectionism and impatience. Patience-not impatience-fosters playfulness, tentativeness, and tolerance.

"Make haste slowly" -Boileau

### Other Benefits of Active Waiting

Active waiting has many other benefits, some of them hard to imagine until experienced. It brings serenity because it is neither tense nor pressing. It provides a growing mindfulness of having something important and worthwhile to say before saying it. It promotes a more causal but focuses attitude toward preparing and presenting; teaching that once had to be written out is now more easily and enjoyably done from conceptual outlines and diagrams that often fill but a page per class. With active waiting, and decisions about the final structure of the content are put off, classes are more spontaneous and more likely to involve students as active participants. And, not least, with active waiting there is more opportunity for discovery in teaching.

Discovery proves to be so much fun that it generates enthusiasm and hooks people on teaching, even on campuses where teaching is not overtly rewarded. One more advantage of active waiting is worth mentioning: Teachers who practice it get reliably higher ratings by their students (Boice, 1995a).

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**Location**

https://eee.uci.edu/news/articles/0404waiting.php

# Stress Management

## Boice's Principles of Productivity

### For the new faculty member

A short, easy-to-read summary of extensive research by psychologist Robert Boice, focusing on habits that trip new faculty up, and on more effective habits that they can learn.

The rest of this discussion is based on the book First-Order Principles for College Teachers (Boice, 1996).

The best way to reduce stress in teaching and as a faculty member is to become proficient at the skills that make teaching easier and more enjoyable. Here are ten habits to cultivate (click on each link to jump to a description of the habit).

1. Prosocial behavior to moderate incivility
2. Active waiting
3. Beginning before feeling ready
4. Working in brief, regular sessions
5. Stopping on time
6. Moderating attachment to content and reaction to criticism
7. Moderating negative thinking and strong emotions
8. Letting others do some of the work
9. Welcoming learning and change
10. Building resilience by limiting wasted effort

The common features of all these skills are patience, moderation, time management, and optimism.

## Prosocial behavior to moderate incivility

One of the most frustrating, draining aspects of college teaching is student incivility. One important reason why incivility occurs is because faculty (sometimes intentionally, more often

unintentionally) communicate reserve, coldness, disrespect, or uninterest toward students. See the website section on Ethics in Teaching for ideas about teacher misbehavior that can result in student retaliation.

"Prosocial" behavior is encouraging and respectful. Some skills that can be practiced include:

- Eye contact
- Smiling
- Learning names
- Moving easily around the classroom
- Leaning forward while talking
- Paying attention to students who are talking
- Spending a little time before and after class to talk and deal with questions
- Slowing down or pausing in lectures so students can keep up
- Not taking all student misbehavior personally, but using it as a learning tactic (eg, many students are yawning or shuffling – take a 30-second brain break)
- Normal good teaching practices such as being prepared, organized, and on time

Teachers who use such behaviors experience less classroom disruption because students are less likely to "act out" against teachers they perceive as interested in their learning and in them.

## Active Waiting

This skill may be explained first by describing what it is *not*: It is not waiting for inspiration to strike. It is not taking up time with busy-work while ignoring deeper issues. It is not remaining inactive until the last minute and then rushing to finish. It is not waiting until the situation is perfect for working, and then working. Passivity coupled with impatience is the antithesis of active waiting.

Some examples will best explain what active waiting is:

- Before jumping into a piece of work (any work, whether teaching, writing, or even a household task), take a few minutes to think about it and plan for it.
- Take time to consider alternatives, and answer the question, "*Why* am I doing this?"
- While working, even while lecturing, pause and consider what you are doing. While teaching, ask the students to take a moment to consider what is going on.
- Breathe.
- When a task is complete, take some time to think about what happened during the task.

Active waiting need not take up large amounts of time; most of these reflections and pauses require from 1 to 5 minutes. The difficult part in developing this habit is being intentional about it, and giving up the adrenaline rush that results from racing around.

Teachers who practice active waiting are more relaxed in the classroom, present less material but observe greater learning, and have time to engage in the prosocial behaviors described above.

## Beginning before feeling ready

Beginning early does not contradict the previous advice to "wait." In fact, beginning early is absolutely necessary to make active waiting effective.

When it's time to prepare for teaching, or time to do some other work, simply start on it. Do not put off starting until you feel like doing the work, until the environment is right, until you have a huge amount of time, until you know exactly what you are going to do. Reflect for a few minutes, taking some notes or sketching out thoughts, then begin to work. As you practice this habit, you will find it easier and easier to begin working.

Developing this habit means that you can take advantage of small bits of time that are available throughout the day. If you have a 15-minute break between meetings, you can prepare a few notes for a lecture in a relaxed way. You can locate a paper to use for class. You can carefully read an abstract and decide how to use it in class. You can solve a problem you want to use in class.

"Beginning" turns reflection into action.

## Working in brief, regular sessions

Boice observes that many academics work in binge-style: we do very little on a project until near its due date, and then we work for hours, even around the clock. There are two major problems with this working style. One, it's exhausting and demoralizing. Two, we forget our good ideas and enthusiasm between binges. One result of bingeing in class preparation is the tendency to add more and more content to compensate for the lack of time spent incubating quality ideas.

Using frequent but brief periods to work on high-priority activities is highly effective and efficient. This style of working maintains momentum and prevents fatigue and burnout far better than bingeing. The work sessions do not have to be long, but they do have to be frequent and regular, even daily. Schedule working sessions on your calendar and do not let other meetings impinge upon them.

The payoff for developing this habit is that you will go into a classroom with enough high-quality material prepared; you will not go in with too much content. Students respond better to more flexible, relaxed classes than classes in which every moment is crammed with content or activity.

## Stopping on Time

An example will illustrate most clearly: Say you need to leave your office 10 minutes before class starts to get to your class in time to set out your materials and catch your breath. Stop whatever you are doing 15 minutes before class, so that you have enough time to collect your things completely and perhaps get a drink of water. Do not cram in more emails or class preparation between minutes 15 and 10. This will result in you having to snatch up your things and run to class in a hurry – arriving out of breath, flustered, and possibly having forgotten something.

Stopping on time is hard, because being busy is a "rush" for most of us. Overcoming this rush and developing the habit of stopping on time will result in you having more energy and time for what is really important to you.

## Moderating attachment to content and reaction to criticism

Faculty often invite stress by being perfectionistic in their teaching. This tendency often takes the form of spending far too much time in preparing for teaching, usually spending many hours on reviewing content and finding new content. Becoming defensive and upset when students criticize any aspect of the class also adds to the stress. Perfectionism generally arises from a very natural desire to perform well, that turns into fear. Trying too hard for perfection out of fear can lead to rushing, bingeing on work, fatigue, humorlessness and inflexibility, even indifference. Cultivating moderation, balance, patience, and openness to change is a slow but effective fix to the problem of perfectionism and its associated stress.

Try to figure out if you are too attached to performance; are you constantly unhappy and unsure about your work and spending an inordinate amount of time on finding new content? Do you hide your work from your colleagues for fear they will either steal your ideas or undervalue them?

Be proactive in seeking input, rather than waiting for comments. Ask for constructive criticism from colleagues and students. When you do this, ask for suggestions about specific issues that are within your control to change. Find ways to stay calm and open while hearing criticism, such as getting it in writing, scheduling time with a friend afterwards, or having a friend actually deliver the message. Practice looking for the good ideas in criticism while rejecting the inappropriate, since even the harshest critic may have valuable input. Although asking for

criticism feels risky, being proactive means that you can take care of problems before they become unsolvable.

## Moderating negative thinking and strong emotions

Worrying, fretting, and dwelling on things that went wrong or could go wrong are all mental habits that drain energy and enthusiasm. And when a teacher lacks energy and enthusiasm, students react negatively, meaning that even more goes wrong in the classroom. A downward spiral ensues.

Begin to listen to what you say to yourself. If you catch yourself telling yourself that the task at hand is overly unpleasant or difficult, notice this tendency. Interrupt the negative thought with a more positive thought, even a simple thought such as, "Once I get into it, things will be fine." If you find yourself dwelling on things that have gone wrong in the past, working yourself into a state of depression or anger, interrupt these thoughts with rational observations. It's likely that **something** went right recently, or that you have something to look forward to coming up soon. Interrupt irrational negative self-talk with more rational positive self-talk.

Begin to notice your emotions as well. Notice when you feel strong negative emotions such as fear or anger, and when you feel strong positive emotions such as euphoria. Often, strong emotions of either kind are a reaction to stress – euphoria can be the result of an adrenaline rush in response to hurrying and overworking, for example. Bring your emotions under control by practicing the habits described above and by encouraging yourself to feel calmer and happier.

## Let others do some of the work

There is a very simple way to practice this habit: talk to other teachers regularly. Ask students for input. Get ideas and advice from colleagues. Observe other people's classes, with their permission. In the classroom, plan discussions and problem-solving sessions to give yourself a break from presenting. Cultivate relationships with people who can give you good feedback on both teaching and research. Having people to talk to is a powerful positive motivator.

## Welcome learning and change

A problem for many academics is the need to feel completely knowledgeable and in control – never having to say, "I don't know," especially about teaching. This tendency limits our effectiveness because we are afraid to admit that we need to learn new things (with the possible exception of intentionally keeping up with the newest disciplinary information).

Most faculty and graduate students have never been trained to teach. If you are one of them, simply admit it to yourself. Be willing to learn new ideas. The most successful academic practitioners are the always-curious, always-open ones; cultivate the habit of wanting to learn.

### Build resilience by limiting wasted efforts

"The healthiest, most creative, most productive work comes with moderation – not, as tradition would have us believe, with pressure for high rates of work and ever more output. Efficiency practiced efficiently requires patience and tolerance, not greed and intensity." (pg. 100)

Practicing the habits described above, with their emphasis on patience, moderation, and mindfulness, will lead to this habit. In addition, try these actions:

- Monitor yourself for inefficiency, such as allowing too many external distractions (noise, visitors, etc.); overreacting to distraction; working to fatigue; procrastinating; and bingeing.
- Redirect efforts to more efficient ways of working, such as taking intentional pauses, creating outlines in brief sessions, and creating opportunities for interaction.
- Take care of yourself in practical ways such as sleeping adequately, exercising, and eating nutritionally.
- Link your interests inside and outside the classroom. Tell your students what fascinates you about the topic you research and teach.