

Hacking your way through exhaustion and burnout to ‘live your best teaching experience’

Abstract

Teaching can be a joyous and fulfilling experience, but it is also physically and emotionally draining at the best of times. As teaching workloads have increased with the rise of ‘mass’ higher education in countries like Australia, in conjunction with a publish or perish culture that permeates academe, the rate of exhaustion and burnout is a real phenomenon across the sector. For many the need to upskill and move teaching online during the COVID 19 pandemic was just the final straw. Starting from the premise that you can’t ‘live your best teaching experience’ if you are exhausted, worn down and burnout, this hackathon provides an opportunity for participants to explore and share strategies and techniques to build resilience and re-charge your batteries so that you can ‘live your best teaching experience’.

Introduction

Teaching can be a joyous and fulfilling experience, one where we are inspired by how our students respond and change. Those moments of connection and change often fuel us to undertake different practices. Having the space to create and live our best teaching experience is fundamental to our ability to engage and energise others too. Starting from the premise that you can’t ‘live your best teaching experience’ if you are exhausted, worn down and burnout, this hackathon provides an opportunity for participants to explore and share

strategies and techniques to build resilience and re-charge your batteries so that you can ‘live your best teaching experience’.

Complaints about academic workloads have been a constant refrain for at least the past 20 years. Add to this the increased performance expectations due to the rise of the ‘global research rankings’ market and the use of national student engagement surveys to rank Schools and, by proxy, academics have created an environment where academics are pressured to constantly do more and do ‘better’ with less support. The expanded requirements of the job are a result of the carving out of the ranks of professional / administration staff reducing the amount of administrative support. Compounded by the introduction of various ‘self service’ technology ‘solutions’ (eg travel systems, finance systems) administrative loads have been pushed onto an already over-burdened academic. As we enter 2024, there is ongoing discussion of burnout across academe. For academics who continued to work extended hours over the pandemic while often supervising their children learning from home along with quickly upskilling and reskilling to ensure continuity of classes and conferences despite worldwide disruption, there has been little relief even with the lifting of restrictions and a return to a (new) normal (Cassidy, 2023).

It is important to recognise the ever increasing workloads and expectations imposed on academics over a long period of time, has left many academics in a ‘pot of ever increasing temperature’ akin to a boiling frog. Rekindling your joy in the classroom is about being prepared to recognise the heat and take time to ‘turn it down’. This hackathon workshop will equip you to take control, explore new ways to reduce burnout and in doing so find your joy where you are most likely- in the classroom!

Learning Objectives, Engagement, & Takeaway.

Hackathons were originally the domain of software engineers, however, more recently the model of focussed problem solving by diverse teams have been adopted by a broad range of organisations to facilitate ‘out of the box’ thinking. Hackathons differ from brainstorming. It is not an ‘idea fest’ but a jump start to take action. The unifying principle of any hackathon is being ‘solution focussed’. That is, participants come together to solve problems, and take action on those solutions in a focused and outcome driven way. The focus is not on ‘digging deeper’ about the problem itself, as the problem is well established and agreed (Falk, Nolte, Huppenkothen, Weinzierl, Gama, Spikol, Tollerud, Hong, Knäpper, Hayden, 2022). Our hackathon is designed to do the same. Focusing on solutions and actions, rather than sitting around discussing (and lamenting) problems of academe in 2024, participants will be charged with creating new ideas and developing practices to collectively address issues of workload burden and burnout. Our objective is to create the space and process for participants to develop personal strategies to combat academic overwork, as well as ways and means to influence some of the sources of overwork within their Department/ School and Faculty, while raising collective awareness of broader institutional factors that also play a part. By sharing your own practices and learning from other participants you will leave the hackathon with a plan to support you to make such change.

PDW Overview.

the issue of academic work-life balance (or more accurately work-life imbalance) which has received much attention over the past 30 years (Deem 2003, Griffin 2022, Slaughter and

Leslie 1997). The sources of this imbalance are often identified as the rise of new public management, reduction of public funding of higher education resulting in the need to supplement reduced research revenue through increases in the number of fee-paying students (see Brewster et al 2022). In the literature on work-life (im)balance extrinsic / institutional factors such as these may be countered by intrinsic factors such as strength of professional identity, how people view their work and their overall physical health. The question needs to be asked, if academics have not contributed this situation being driven by a vocation and their own intellectual curiosity which sees them voluntarily committing time beyond the 35-hour week (Le 2023, Lee et al 2022). What organisation would not 'take advantage' of such a 'gift' of free labour. In fact, organisations thrive on its existence and creating organisational citizenship behaviours (OCB) is both expected and rewarded by organisations. It is these OCBs that ensure late night work gets completed and employees 'go the extra mile' when and as needed often without question and give hero status by the organisation through praise and more tangible rewards and recognition (Griffin, Phillip, Gully, Creed, Gribble, Watson , 2021) . Yet when these organisations (and the sector) come to rely on this additional work as the new 'normal' we see an increase in performance / output expectations. Couple this with the growth in student enrolments and fiscal restraint, we can see where we have got to in 2024.

Technology has led to a more insidious factor under the guise of flexible working conditions, activities that were once limited to being completed 'at work' are now able to be completed anywhere, anytime and in an 'always on' manner. Therefore, rather than technology being an agent to promote freedom it has 'chained academics to their desks' which are now located in

less obvious places such as on planes and trains, beside the football field and even in theatre foyers. These tools need to deliver on their promise of less not more work.

While much has been written about overwork, burnout, and stress within academe, and there is some advice on how to address these issues specific to academics (see for example *The No Club: Putting a Stop to Women's Dead-end Work* by Babcock et al, or Berg and Seeber's *The Slow Professor*) little is known about whether these strategies work, or what other strategies may be useful. Therefore, this hackathon is an opportunity for participants to explore, create and share strategies that may be employed to successfully address this increasing scope creep.

The workshop agenda:

The aim of the hackathon is for participants to create the 'space' to engage in ideas, practices, and activities that can be used to address the issue of overwork and burnout. Feelings of isolation are increased overwork occurs and has been noted to lead to less opportunities to connect outside of the workplace. This hackathon will bring together academics as a likeminded community. As change can best be enabled when supported, this hackathon aims to create community support. Through sharing ideas and support, empowered change can occur. Starting with the 'Wall of Woe' activity participants will be able to share their thoughts about the issue (overwork and burnout), to 'clear the air' so to speak so that they can focus attention on coming up with solutions in subsequent activities. Next, adopting the popular model of circles of control, influence and concern (Covey ,1989), each group will work in 'rapid fire' rounds discussing and sharing practices, both undertaken and imagined, related to one of these circles.

- Control practice and activities that they adopt in their own personal lives eg regular scheduled exercise (rotated into by each group to create and share)
- Influence practice and activities that they adopt in response to their immediate ‘workplace’ (School/ Department/ Faculty) eg arranging social events with colleagues
- Concern practice and activities that they adopt in response to the institutional environment of academe eg participating in hackathon event at MOBTS

At the conclusion of each ‘round’ the group moves to another circle, where they review the contributions of the previous group (for rounds 2 and 3) and then add additional practices and activities. At the conclusion of the three rounds, each group will have contributed ideas and practices to each of the three circles.

The hackathon concludes with a gallery walk enabling participants to find three things they could implement now and consider what support or assistance they would need to implement these. This creates a summary of the suggestions captured for each ‘circle’.

Agenda.

Time	Activity	Lead
5 mins	Welcome and introductions.	Facilitators
10 mins	“The Wall of Woe”	Participants
3 minutes	Facilitators explain the Hackathon process	Facilitators
10 minutes	Round 1	Participants
10 minutes	Round 2:	Participants
10 minutes	Round 3	Participants
10 minutes	Gallery walk, Summarise outcomes from the hackathon, discuss next steps and possible opportunities and farewells	All

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