# AVOIDING CHRONIC OVERLOAD: Toward a Sane Productivity

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# CHRONIC OVERLOAD

Why such a problem?

# C. Wright Mills's Sociological Imagination

## Individual TROUBLES

*When a few individuals have a problem*

## Social ISSUES

*When lots of individuals have the same problem*

For example, unemployment, health insurance, heart disease … chronic overload.

# A Changing Higher Education Environment
## A FULL PLATE … getting FULLER

- Assessment
- Strategic planning
- Accreditation
- Compliances
- Technology

- General education reform
- Budget reductions
- Good research, teaching, service: **AND** not **OR**

Eisenhauer, as President of Columbia, to his Provost:

"The university should just tell the faculty what to do."

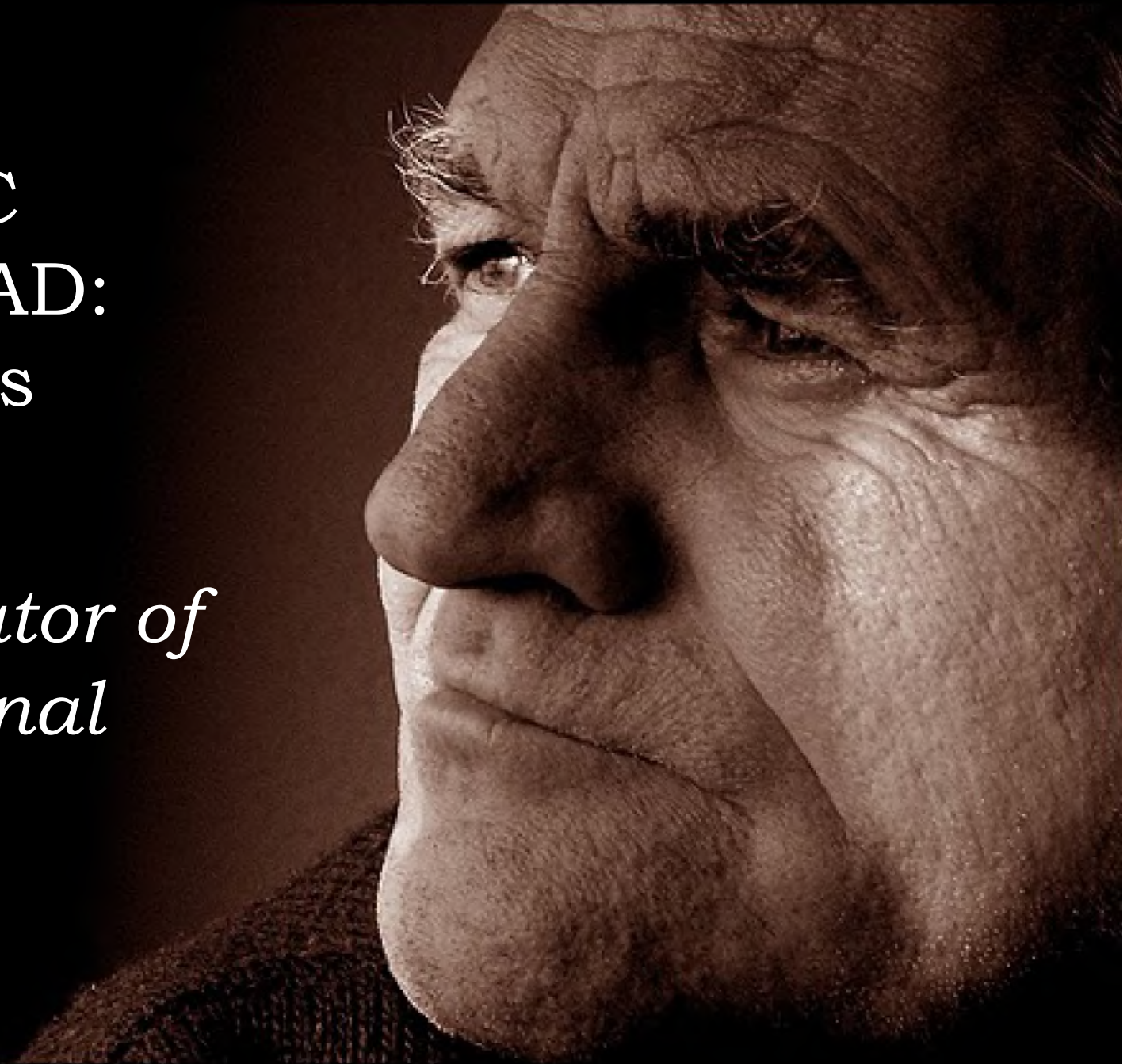Provost: "General, the faculty <u>are</u> the university."

Traditions of faculty autonomy and governance: *we like to do it ourselves*

# CHRONIC OVERLOAD: Pernicious Norm?

*An indicator of professional quality?*

Tending to cause death, serious injury, or great harm; **deadly** or **destructive**

*A state which is expected of us and which does us great harm.*

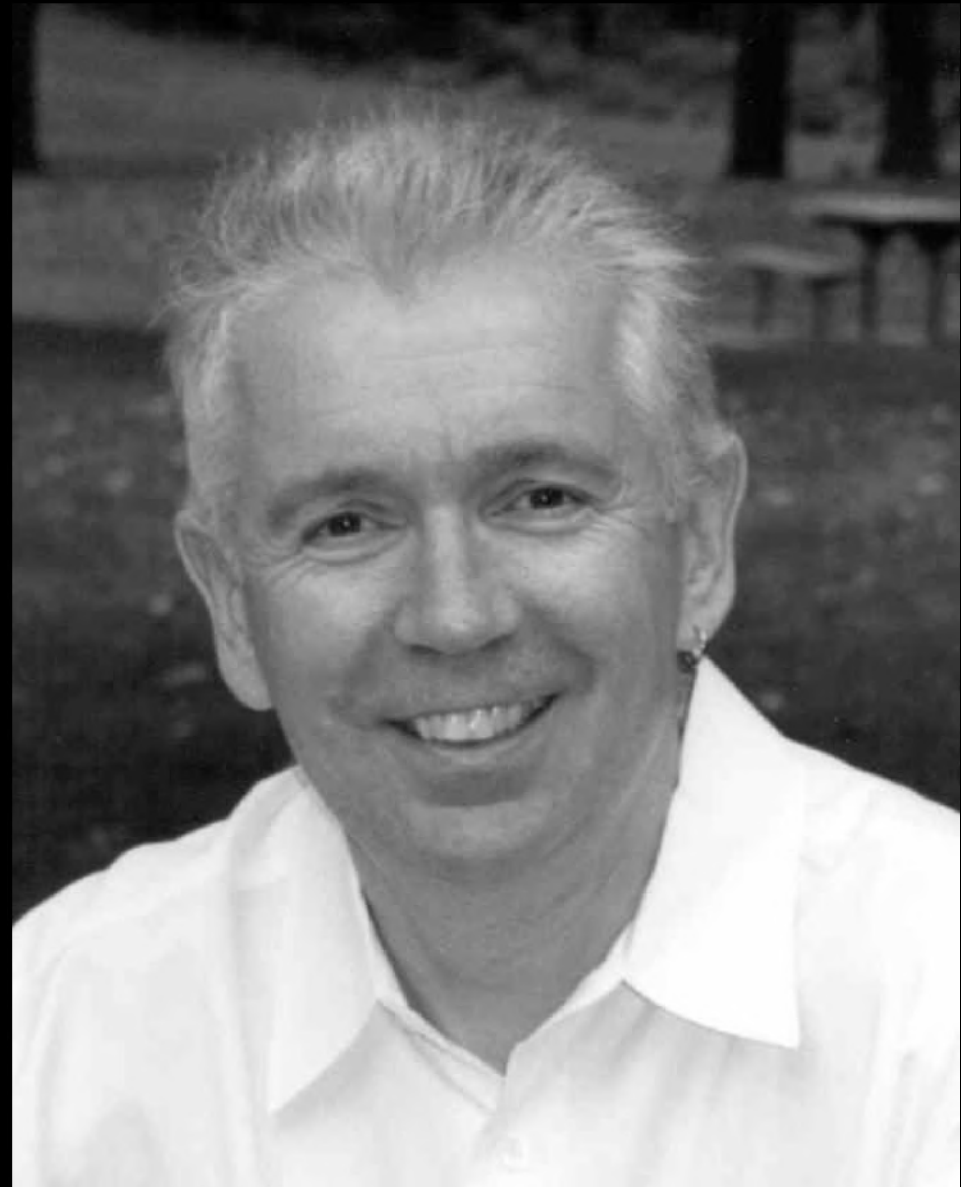The standard, usual, or expected state; **typical**.

# HEGEMONIC ASSUMPTIONS

"Killing me softly with your song..."

"Hegemonic assumptions are those that we think are in our own best interests but that actually have been designed by more powerful others to work against us in the long term."

Stephen Brookfield

"Hegemonic assumptions about teaching are eagerly embraced by teachers. They seem to represent what's good and true and therefore to be in their [teachers'] own best interests. Yet these assumptions actually have the effect of serving the interests of groups that have little concern for teachers' mental or physical health." Stephen Brookfield

Freud was asked what a person needs to live a healthy life, to which he replied,

Sane > L. *sanus*, healthy

Good work:
Healthy work:
Sane work

Our interest:
***HEALTHY PRODUCTIVITY***

"To love and to work."

If our perspective on time is not working for us, **we need to change it**.

You will never find time for anything. If you want time you must make it.

Charles Buxton

# INTENTIONALITY

# VALUES

*We need to shift our perspective from **SUBJECT** (acting from) ...to **OBJECT** (acting on).*

Six principles from a vintage synthesis of systems theory and research can help us to do this.
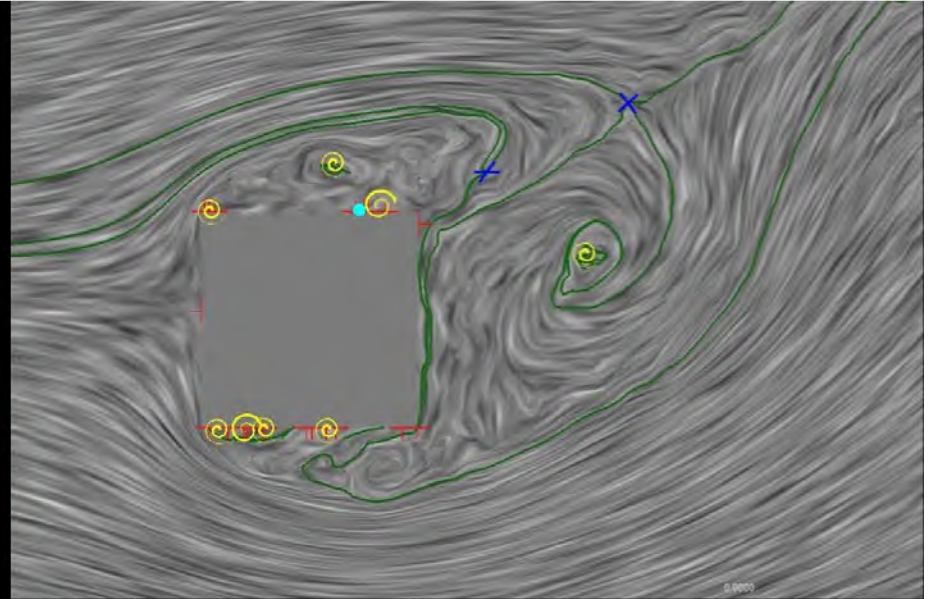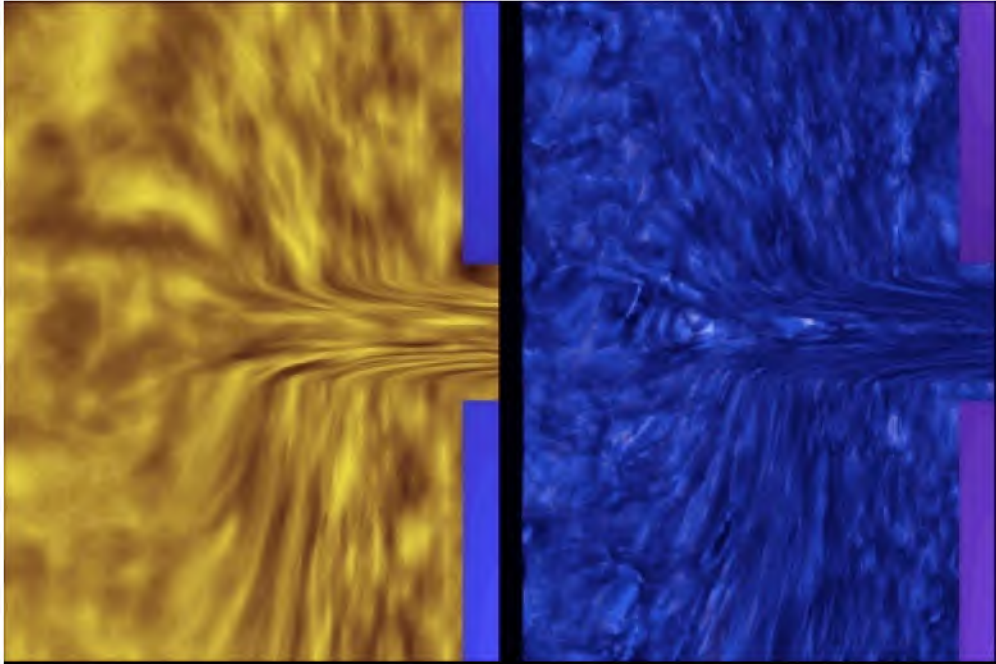
# SIX ADAPTATIONS TO OVERLOAD

Stanley Milgram (1970). The experience of living in cities. *Science, 167*(3924), 1461-1468.

Influential attempt to use systems science to understand urban life as an adaptation to stimulus overload

Has the potential to be applied to other situations of stimulus overload

Boundaries
Information

# APPROACH TO OVERLOAD

# WHY BOUNDARY MANAGEMENT?

# BOUNDARY MANAGEMENT

- When college teaching is viewed as facilitating student learning (in contrast to disseminating knowledge), it becomes an *educational helping relationship*, which is similar to, but different from, other helping relationships such as counseling, psychotherapy, social work, and ministry.

- In an educational helping relationship, avoiding overload depends importantly on boundary management or relationship issues.

- Unlike other helping professions, college teachers generally receive no training regarding boundary management in this helping relationship.

# Principle 1: *Be able to be efficient in all things.*

Be able to take less time to do the same things with similar quality.

# Related overload adaptation: "...allocation of less time to each input"

Interact with students with intentional time and depth.

# Principle One: *Be able to be efficient in all things*
## TEACHING APPLICATION

- Use technological tools in as many aspects of teaching as make sense.

# Principle One: *Be able to be efficient in all things*
## TEACHING APPLICATION

- Use group feedback thoughtfully (e.g., group feedback on reflection papers).

The *Chronicle of Higher Education* asked several professors who are retiring this year (2003) to estimate the number of student papers they have graded (average = **22,860**).

- **Michael McLain**, religious studies, Rhodes College: **22,000** papers in 36 years. "Makes me tired to think about it. It's the least fun part of the job. Probably the most important, but the least fun."

- **Claudette K. Columbus**, English, Hobart and William Smith Colleges: **34,800** papers in 43 years. "I don't know if that makes me feel happy or sad."

- **Bob J. Frye**, English, Texas Christian University: **44,400** in 42 years. "Oh, jeez, I think I need to go lie down."

Principle One: *Be able to be efficient in all things*
**TEACHING APPLICATION**

- Remember that perfect is not beautiful (points of diminishing return; painting mantra).

## Principle One: *Be able to be efficient in all things*
## TEACHING APPLICATION

- Do not permit handwritten student work (reading speeds).

# Principle One: *Be able to be efficient in all things*
## TEACHING APPLICATION

• Parse your time and set appropriate expectations (e.g., two hours per course per week for class preparation and evaluating student work).

# Principle 2: *Express your values in how you use your time.*

Avoiding overload involves values clarification, which is expressed in the setting of priorities.

Develop a framework, explicitly based on your values, for making tough choices in how you will spend your time.

# Related overload adaptation: "...disregard of low priority inputs"

- Corollary: "Principles of selectivity are formulated such that investment of time and energy are reserved for carefully defined inputs...."

If basic necessities such as commuting and hygiene require 2 hours a day, our week has 98 hours left for work, meals, family, friends, worship, exercise, recreation, or whatever we choose (14 hours x 7 days).



A week consists of 168 hours (24 hours X 7 days).

If we sleep 8 hours a day, a week consists of 112 waking hours (16 hours X 7 days).

Principal Two: *Express your values in how you use your time* **TEACHING APPLICATION**

- Identify the major areas of your life.

# Principal Two: *Express your values in how you use your time*
## TEACHING APPLICATION

- Identify the major areas of your faculty work.

# Principal Two: *Express your values in how you use your time*
## TEACHING APPLICATION

- Assign a weight (percentage) to each area.

# EXAMPLE

- Teaching and advising, 40%
- Research, 40%
- Service, 10%
- Professional development, 5%
- Discretionary, 5%

# Principal Two: *Express your values in how you use your time* **TEACHING APPLICATION**

- Do the math.

# EXAMPLE
## 50 hours for work per week

- Teaching and advising: 40% = 20 hours per week

- Research: 40% = 20 hours per week

- Service: 10% = 5 hours per week

- Professional development: 5% = 2 ½ hours per week

- Discretionary: 5% = 2 ½ hours per week

# Principal Two: *Express your values in how you use your time* **TEACHING APPLICATION**

- Keep doing the math.

# QUESTIONS

- How many courses do you have?
- How many courses are separate preparations?
- What are the relative states of development of the courses, ranging from new to well-developed?
- Are you trying a major innovation in one or some of them?
- How many required office hours do you have each week?

# EXAMPLE

- 20 hours per week for teaching and advising
- Minus 4 office hours per week
- Leaves 16 hours per week for teaching to be divided by a 3-course load
- Which results in about 5 hours per week for each course
- Which means for each course, about 3 hours per week in class and about 2 hours per week for preparation and feedback on student work

# Principal Two: *Express your values in how you use your time*
## TEACHING APPLICATION

- Be discreet about the details.

# Principle 3: *Don't hoard responsibility, share it.*

Identify ways for other agents in your environments to do what you do with the same or better result.

Related overload adaptation: "…boundaries are redrawn in certain social transactions so that the overloaded system can shift the burden to the other party in the exchange"

# Principal Three: *Don't hoard responsibility, share it*
**TEACHING APPLICATION**

- Employ NICs and NIFs.

# NIFs (Non-teacher instructional feedback)

- Information from any source other than the teacher that students can use to understand the quality of their learning and, ideally, how to improve that quality

- Some sources of NIFs:
  - Students
    - Short term dyadic or small group exchanges in class (e.g., reflection papers, self evauations)
    - Enduring work groups that may involve face-to-face meetings outside of class
    - Electronically mediated *agorae*—Gr., gathering places (e.g., lists, Blackboard or WebCT discussion boards)
  - Mastery learning programs (print-based, web-based, and CD-ROMs)
  - Outside experts
  - Research

# Principle 4: *For every aspect of your life, find a time and place befitting it.*

Be able to block access to yourself completely when necessary.

Related overload adaptation:
"…reception is blocked off prior to entrance into a system…"

# 4: Some Teaching Applications

- For every season, there is a time... AND A PLACE...
  - to prepare class
  - to read and comment on papers
  - to do scholarship
  - to meet with students
- Have protected times and places ready for regular use (e.g., for reading, thinking, and writing).

Be able to block access to you.

- Leave the office.
- Know your campus options.
- Know your community options.

Principle 5: *Be short with many so that you may be long with a few.*

Use devices that buffer you from interruption, while preserving the information communicated, thereby allowing you to respond at a time, pace, and intensity of your choosing.

Related overload adaptation: "...the intensity of inputs is diminished by filtering devices, so that only weak and relatively superficial forms of involvement with others are allowed [unless chosen]."

# 5: Some Teaching Applications

- Use asynchronous technologies intentionally (e.g., answering machines, email, discussion boards) in order to manage immediate, unfiltered access to you and to select and pace the intensity of your interactions.
- Encourage students to reach you through asynchronous technologies by positively framing the use of those technologies, by telling students when you check your messages, by specifying how long students can expect to wait for a reply, and by sticking with your commitments.
- If you want an "open door" policy, establish some boundaries: my "door" (actual or virtual) is always open...*during this time.*
- You have a choice on how "connected" you want to be; exercise that choice in line with your priorities.

# 5: Some Teaching Applications (continued)

- Voicemail, email, and discussion boards can function as your personal secretary; use them as such.

- Do not automatically answer the telephone when it rings, or check email when it signals arrival, unless you define the time as open access to you.

- Set a defined time to process your voicemail, email, and discussion boards.

- Fit the depth and duration of your responses to the amount of time that you have available, whenever possible.

# Principle 6: *Stick to your knitting: refer, defer, delegate when possible.*

Use the professional practices of referral and delegation when appropriate.

Related overload adaptation: "…specialized institutions are created to absorb inputs that would otherwise swamp the individual."

# 6: Some Teaching Applications

- Learn to make appropriate referrals to campus and community resources.
- When students appear to need counseling, refer them to the counseling center; don't just take it on because you want to be a good and caring teacher.
- Do not take on teaching students to write; refer them to the writing center.
- Do not take on providing on-call computer support for students; refer them to the institution's computer help desk for students.
- Do not take on trying to teach students to use the library; the library has paid professionals who do that.

# 6: Some Teaching Applications (continued)

- Make it a point to become familiar with pertinent campus and community resources; others might include a statistics help desk, disabilities resource center, multicultural resource center, international education office, women's resource center, developmental education office, and so forth.

- Develop a referral sheet with contact information that you keep handy; update it as you become aware of support services pertinent to your students and your teaching.

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5: Be short with many so that you may be long with a few.

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