

Interruptions Are Inevitable

Efficiency

Working in a school environment or teaching in a classroom is challenging in a myriad of ways. One of the causes for stress and work dissatisfaction is the number and severity of interruptions experienced by staff. We've all felt the frustration of getting stuck into a work task or classroom lesson, gaining momentum and starting to see great results, when... BAM – there's a knock on the door; the phone rings; a student arrives late or must leave early; and so on. Rarely does it matter WHAT the interruption is, the focus is lost and it can be difficult, sometimes impossible, to regain momentum in the available timeframe.

Life is made up of interruptions.

William Gilbert

Whilst it's tempting to throw your hands in the air and bemoan the relentlessness of the system and the lack of support from whoever might be "responsible" for the interruption, this won't solve the current problem or avoid similar occurrences in the future. Complaining probably won't make you feel better or help you to feel competent and capable as a professional. So what DO you do? Thrive WITH, not despite, interruptions!

When we expect disruption, we can work with it. Some tips:

- Lower your expectations for yourself to allow some breathing space – not just once, but always. Doing your best doesn't mean you always DO. Build in time for interruptions in EVERYTHING you do. If you don't need that extra time, take it as a bonus!
- Anticipate routine interruptions and invest time in contingency plans eg if your classroom has a phone, assigning a student who sits close by to answer it quickly minimises the disruption.
- Acknowledge the interruption when it occurs. If you are working with colleagues or students and their focus is drawn away, don't ignore it.
 - If it's brief, address it and bring their attention back.
 - If the interruption is significant, model acceptance and plan your next steps together. Use humour if possible... some people are great at doing this seamlessly – watch them closely and mimic them!

If there are many unnecessary interruptions it may be time to review the school's procedures to more effectively and proactively manage them. Form a small working party to make recommendations.

Interruptions can be reduced or made less bothersome by putting strategies in place. It is also helpful to set boundaries at the times you CAN control your working conditions. Gihan Perera suggests five tips you can use to maximise your productivity when you DO have autonomy eg planning lessons; completing administration tasks or writing reports.

Taking charge in small ways can create big, long term differences.

Key points

Gihan Perera's 5 tips to maximise productivity:

1. Set goals and use them to determine whether an interruption is worth your attention.
2. Use pomodoro technique (google it) to reduce your distractions.
3. Switch off phone and social media notifications, unsubscribe from emails.
4. Review communication systems to prevent unnecessary interruptions.
5. Get it right next time – reflect after an interruption to determine whether it was necessary.

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Steve is an expert in school leadership and work-life satisfaction. Steve was a Principal for 20 years and is the author of four books, 'Time Management For Teachers', 'A Gr8 Life...Live it Now!', 'First Semester Can Make or Break You!' and 'Attitude is Everything'. Steve lives in Brisbane with his wife and family but works with school leaders and staff in schools across Australia and internationally.

