

Getting Rid of Excess

Steven Van Zoost



So there I was, getting rid of excess. In fact, that has been one of my personal goals for 2010 – to get rid of all excess in my life. It’s time to part with my childhood stamp collection, convert those family slides into digital formats, and sort my CDs, books, and clothes. It’s time to get rid of extra weight, extra emotional baggage and superficial friendships. It’s time to let go; time to be lean. I’m overhauling my life as if I have a television host from HGTV beside me who can help me part with my junk and reorganize my spaces. I have proverbial bins labelled “keep,” “give to...,” “donate” and “garbage.” And yes, my professional life is also under renovation; I’m getting rid of excess in my classroom and I have a five-step plan.

Professional library

My bookshelf is buckling from the weight of years of collecting. It is useful for me to have a professional library in my classroom as I refer to books for occasional inspiration or pedagogical guidance. However, there are many books to which I have referred so frequently

that I no longer need to open their covers for inspiration. There are other books that I have never used and it might be reasonable to ask “Who else might use them?” There are new teachers, or teachers who are new to the school, who might be ideal readers of my professional library. I intend to identify these new teachers and assemble welcome packages from my professional library.

The big metal filing cabinet

Opening the big metal filing cabinet at the back of my classroom can be daunting. Sure, it’s well organized, but why am I storing all this paper? Increasingly my students and I are finding electronic versions of sample texts to reference rather than photocopying from a book. Or, if the paper resource is really great, I have been scanning or typing it for the “big screen” so that students can see how one might mark it up as an active reader of the text. The digital version has also allowed me to access my resources faster, move them around easily, and keep different kinds of resources together electronically. I’m also able to make these resources port-

able and easily accessible from home or “on the road.” Now I am interested in making that big filing cabinet at the back of my classroom obsolete and replacing it with an external hard drive. This is not rocket science, but we are in the 21st century and it’s time for me to let go of my big metal filing cabinet. It’s a clunker.

Digital folders

I like my computer desktop to be neat and relatively free of too many icons. I prefer organized folders and the search feature of the computer to keep track of all of my teaching resources. So, it’s time to sort all those files that have somehow gotten out of control in a busy week of teaching. It’s time to organize them into folders: school-wide documents, English department documents, files for specific courses and units of study, and maybe even a file for special projects. This isn’t a complicated task but I just need to sit down and do it. I created and labelled the folders three years ago, but they need to be tidied and old files discarded.

The teacher desk

I like to see the surface of the teacher desk but the teacher desk seems to be more like a working table for everyone in the room. For example, students often plunk down the film and video gear all over “my” space during a busy class because it’s the natural spot to set something down as they continue to look for a microphone cable from the cabinet. I am not suggesting that there isn’t room for the messiness of teaching, but that I want a way to hide my mess throughout the day so that students don’t have to trip over it to get to me or to get to the cabinet where the video gear is stored. My solution is to monitor what sorts of things are making a mess on the teacher desk (things like student books, handouts and lost and found items) and develop routines to look after them. For example, if it’s handouts that are cluttering my desk, then I will house the handouts in a cupboard – something with doors to hide the daily mess – and sort the papers at the end of each day. I already hide my quick “notes to self” under the keyboard to keep them off the surface of my desk, (don’t tell my students), so I know I can find other ways to keep the surface of the teacher desk clean.

Professional involvement

I am ready to streamline my involvement with committees, extra-curricular activities, and volunteer commitments in an effort to find ways to further synergize my professional life. I have come to think that the most efficient use of my professional time is when I am able to make connections among the various ways in which I participate in professional development and service. For example, in my NSTU Local (Hants West Local), I coordinate a program with an admired colleague called “What’s it like to be a teacher?” for Grade 5 students. This initiative can involve my high school students, student council members, teachers and administrators in my school, local elementary teachers and their administration, my school board, and my union. I want to think of ways I can make learning more relevant and engaging for students by making connections among my various current professional involvements. I also want to think about new ways of being involved in the teaching profession for my own professional development.

Excess of any sort – physical or mental – can slow me down and has the potential to interrupt my focus on teaching and learning in my classroom. I have spent too much valuable time managing and thinking about clutter in my classroom. Now, I have a checklist with five tasks before the end of 2010: sort through my professional library, the big metal filing cabinet, my digital files, my teacher desk, and my professional involvement. I am sorting with an eye for what to keep, what to give away, what to replace, what to discard, what to connect and what else is needed. I must admit that together, the five tasks are a bit overwhelming. One each month however, is quite manageable; I started with the bookshelf at the end of August. By December, the list will be completed and with this de-cluttering I hope that I will be ready to welcome new ideas, accommodate new resources and invite new teaching and learning strategies. I will feel renovated and rejuvenated; I will have gotten rid of the excess in my classroom. Then again, it will be December, and I might just feel exhausted.

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