

It's About Time: An Untimely Article on Time Management

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As we approach the end of the semester and the year is winding down with another new year waiting in the wings, I would like to admit to my shortcomings in using my time well and talk about what I am trying to do to make better use of my time at work, particularly with regards to research and writing for professional development.

Time management for the purpose of promotion and tenure activities – I know that time management is important to make sure I am doing the activities and producing the outputs that will eventually show my case for promotion and tenure as worthy, but reality is so much more of an avalanche involving meetings, requests, events, and getting stuck, that I often end up frustrated and wondering how anything has ever been done in the history of time. It is a dramatic conclusion, but it is also a dramatic and crushing feeling to be so overwhelmed. I do not have answers here, but there are some things I have tried that I am discovering might be having a positive impact on preventing that kind of turmoil in my outlook. I think I am discovering that time management is all about consistency, habit, expectation, and perspective.

Advice abounds on managing time for writing and for research ([wikiHow](#) has an article that includes illustrations in case words are just not enough). The tendency is to emphasize [planning](#) and [prioritizing](#); breaking down the work into smaller discrete tasks so the overall goal is more manageable. While a project certainly does benefit from having a plan and prioritized actions to produce an output, the habit of making the time to work on the project in the first place seems to really be what can spark the will to get something done. After all, time is needed to construct a plan and prioritize those tasks in the first place. Forming a habit is like training a muscle, and if nothing else comes from reading this story about my weak attempt at time wrangling, take note that training yourself in the habit of making and keeping time to work on your professional development activities is a great New Year's resolution.

Time management has been an issue for faculty at Indiana University at least since 1984. That year it was deemed necessary to produce an educational film from the IU Audio-Visual Center called [Time Management: A Second Chance](#). The Indiana University Libraries Moving Image Archive now takes care of this piece of IU history and you can see that many of the problems we face today are nothing new – there have always been too many meetings, too many drop-ins and unscheduled tasks, and not enough time to process much, let alone write about anything. The biggest differences appear to be that email has supplanted phone calls as one of the biggest interrupters, multi-tasking used to be called double-timing, and writing was done directly on the typewriter (that seems awfully brazen!). Another major difference is this film actually recommended the practice of double-timing/multi-tasking. But after a couple decades of trying to do all of the things all at once, I think we have now realized that multi-tasking really just means you are not focusing on anything (Jackson, 2009, p. 436).

IU now also seems to be considering time management just as much of a health issue as one of productivity, which I think can be a welcome shift in thinking for faculty. IU's [Health Blog](#) and the [Health Center](#) both have tips regarding time management. The Health Center's post is more

focused on student time management and how to plan out large tasks to break them down over the course of a college career, but it does have some tips that might be worth trying. For instance, it recommends that if something is on the “to do” list and is categorized as a low priority, it should just not be on the list. The Health Blog post focuses on managing time to reduce stress as well as improve productivity. It begins by stating that there really is no way to manage time. We all have the same amount of time in the day and so all we can really manage is the way we make use of that time. It also recommends avoiding perfectionism, establishing routines, learning to say “no,” and rewarding yourself. I imagine I would make better use of my time if I did not worry so much about how to get everything done.

The acknowledgement that one of the biggest blockers to getting things done is worrying about them is even something discussed in the 1984 educational film. The film describes a technique called “discounting” that is meant to move you forward by producing something that is consciously not perfect (like a first draft) but can be improved upon once it is out there (second draft, final draft). It is meant to prevent perfectionism and boost confidence. Worrying about getting things done is kind of the flip side of perfectionism, since trying to think of all of the things that can go wrong is just as counterproductive as trying to make sure everything has been done just so before considering something finished.

I thought something interesting I could do with this article would be to discuss the process I went through to actually write the article as a kind of time management use case (self-referential but hopefully not spiraling out of control). With a deadline of December 1, I started to work on this on the morning of Friday, November 14 with about 15 minutes to spare before the start of a meeting, because you do not work at a library unless you have a meeting on Friday at 9am. Not a stellar beginning by any means, I know. On the other hand, I got it started – GOOD JOB, ME! See that? Perspective. The next week was the week before the week of Thanksgiving Break and while I had a packed schedule, I thought I would have this totally in the bag because I keep an hour blocked off on my calendar every day to write. Consistency! I could totally get this done. Then I took a closer look and realized I had already double-booked my writing time on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday and they were not meetings that could be moved (another thing I am figuring out is that most committee work happens the week before any major holiday). Not being in the habit of writing daily, my plan is squashed. Now it is Thanksgiving Break and I am writing this while traveling to eat turkey with relatives in another state. Do not feel sad, though; I am actually enjoying this writing assignment! And it is really making me want to share things that I still need to put into practice for my own research and writing.

When I can be dedicated to my calendar writing time, it really does come in handy. It does become a habit. Keeping that time on the calendar helps prevent meetings from encroaching, but, obviously, it is no guarantee. If I can keep that time for myself, I can close down communication channels (email and instant messaging) and even physically go someplace else. Focused time with no distractions – it is not just for parents! And I call it my “writing” time, but when I use this time, I do not always use it for writing. Researching and exploring is just as important as writing, so if I am not to the point of writing something, I can use that time to actually read, comprehend, and think. It almost feels to me like exercising or practicing yoga - I have a sense of accomplishment and a sort of Zen feeling of calm when I take that hour for research and writing. It generally only lasts until I open my email again, but I know I have done something good for myself and I do feel accomplished.

Part of what led me to try this method of blocking off an hour a day on my calendar was advice and information I received from the [National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity](#) (NCFDD).

Indiana University Bloomington (IUB) became a member institution in spring 2013 and IUPUI is also a member. As institutional members, faculty and graduate students on those campuses have access to a variety of resources from the weekly Monday Motivator email to a multi-week Faculty Success Program aimed at “increasing your research productivity, getting control of your time, and living a full and healthy life beyond your campus,” (<http://www.facultydiversity.org/?FSProgramDescription>). The Faculty Success Program does have a registration fee, but many of the services NCFDD provides are free to members. I was a fairly new faculty member at the point that IUB joined NCFDD. I knew how to complete work tasks and be a productive member of a team in the library, but I was not as clear on how to handle doing things on the faculty side - researching, writing, and contributing intellectually to my field (metadata and digital libraries) and to the university.

I signed up for an institutional sub-account membership and it turns out the Monday Motivator email, even though it sounds distinctly self-help-y, is often full of useful reminders (everyone is going through the same things throughout the academic calendar year) and regular advice (“write 30-60 minutes every day” is pretty much a mantra in every email message). The biggest support it gives me is a weekly reminder to give myself a break and recognize that my time should be just as valuable to my needs as it is to the meetings I have to attend and the work tasks I have to complete. So that is what I am trying to do – declare to the scheduling world and to myself that I need a specific amount of time every day for myself to work through the things that I am interested in learning about, the things that confound me or seem really impressive, the things that make me want to say something or figure out something.

Another recommendation from this organization involves spending a little time on Sunday evening planning out the tasks and activities for the week. I feel like I do this already, although it tends to be more of an anxiety session than a planning session. The idea is to plan enough of the week to make sure “writing time” is preserved and divide up work tasks as much as possible based on what needs to be done that week. That way you have a better sense of what you will be working on and when you will be working on it, which can then help you better handle unscheduled tasks or requests. I tend to panic on Sunday nights then try day by day to fit in the work tasks that need to occur. If my writing time has not been double-booked with a meeting, I make a point of using it to work on something research-related, but I only really manage to stick to that if there is a deadline of some kind coming up and a conference output or journal article needs to be submitted. So I like that idea, but I have not been able to make effective use of the Sunday evening weekly planning technique yet.

NCFDD also provides other resources such as webinars, workshops, and something they call the “14-day writing challenge,” (http://www.facultydiversity.org/events/event_details.asp?id=515241). I mention this one in particular because I participated in one of these free two-week writing challenges in the spring of 2013. I had a poster to prepare for a conference that summer and nothing was even started yet. I was grouped online with about 10 other faculty members from various institutions. We never spoke with each other, but there was a web site where we stated our goals for the challenge. Then each day during the challenge we reported online about how much time we spent working towards our goal. Other members of the group would leave encouraging comments and helping words. I was able to meet my goal of completing the poster for the conference, but reporting online to strangers about my daily writing progress was not really all that inspiring, and I did not necessarily feel all that compelled to comment on anyone else’s progress. But the poster was completed, so success?

Perspective is often gained after the fact, but knowing that just doing something, even if it is not perfect, will get you closer to a finished output is helpful, especially when combined with the daily habit of having and keeping that time for yourself. Back in 1984, the recommendation at IU was to only schedule 80% of the day – that is actually more than 1 ½ hours of time during every single average 8-hour workday just for the researching and writing and thinking that you need to do for you! It feels luxurious to imagine having that every day but I know when I make use of even that 1 hour per day, my research progresses.

Another aspect of time management I want to explore is expectation. We all have preconceived notions about almost everything in the world we encounter. How we go through our workday and how we see others going through their workday is no exception. My expectations of myself are fairly simple - I will get everything done that needs to get done, with no mistakes, and no whining; I will make it to all meetings where I will contribute and pull my weight without whining; I will publish and be brilliant and figure out that thing about metadata that is going to make it click for everyone and we will all high-five and do the wave. My expectations of others are that they are going to call me out on everything and come to the horrified pearl-clutching realization that I do not know things (and tell me to sit down, stop whining, and stop trying to start a human wave).

Suffice it to say, I need to work on my expectations. By expecting myself to be a contributing part of everything, I am setting myself up for the week I had before Thanksgiving where my time was supplanted by other things (and now sitting in the car heading eastbound on Interstate 64, I cannot really remember what any of those “things” were). I do not think I need to expect more from myself, but I do think I need to expect different things from myself. It coincides with making this regular writing time every day a habit, but expecting that I will take that time for myself to research and write helps to reinforce the habit.

Another activity that proved more helpful to me than the NCFDD’s 14-day writing challenge was a program hosted by InULA this summer called the InULA Summer of Writing. I joined one of these multi-campus groups of librarians and we did not just put a meeting time on the calendar – we actually physically met every other week in the same room on each campus, called each other, and remained connected throughout the entire writing time. We said hello to each other at the beginning of each meeting and declared what we were going to try to work on during that time. Then we went silent until the end of the meeting time when someone piped up and said it was time to finish and we all reported back on (generally) how much we got done - so simple and yet really effective.

This group ended up meeting every two weeks for one and a half hours but that really seemed to work for me. It was not just a time on my calendar. I had to physically go to a specific room and make actual contact with other folks doing the same thing. This put something physically separating on that calendar appointment and I could not double-book it. This experiment took me through times over the summer when I did not have a paper or proposal or poster with a submission deadline, so it really ended up being time that I could use to research and investigate things for which I want to be able to submit a paper or proposal or poster at some point in the future. That is the expectation I want to have of myself – that I will consistently practice this habit and I will keep perspective on the daily work that I am doing and the projects and service in which I am involved so that I can continue with my research and writing.

The biggest hurdle to sticking with this regular time for researching, writing, and investigating is recognizing that this time is just as important for your progress as a faculty member at Indiana

University as all of the meetings and tasks each week. For me it does not seem important unless I have a deadline for something (like this article) so I am still trying to figure it out. I am not giving up on that time and I am keeping it on my calendar. Paying attention to that time is just as crucial as making it to all of those other meetings. Continuing to make progress towards promotion and tenure means establishing regular habits, such as a daily “writing time” hour, that provide a pathway to move professional development forward.

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