Time in Neoliberal Academia – How to Make the Most of It

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Abstract

This article looks at changes in academic culture and related challenges to time management both to junior and senior academics. Through personal examples and references to popular research, six time management strategies are discussed: working shorter hours; focusing on tasks; sleeping; planning; multitasking; forgiving yourselves if something is not as it should be. These examples come from personal experience of being a young aspiring academic with small kids and challenging expectations from academia, but they hopefully challenge open discussions about time and related expectations in different contexts.

Keywords   Academic Pressures, Time Management, Neoliberalism in Academia, PhD Studies

1.   Why this story needs to be told

I am starting this article on a Sunday morning, when I should be cheering on my 7-year-olds during their football training. Or at least a social norm exists that says moms are better if they watch football training rather than work extra hours. At the same time, the story of an academic parent, or any kind of academic worker for that matter, spending her/his weekends working is very common and could be considered a norm on its own.

    With this article, I would like to contribute to the on-going discussion about academic speed and time management. The most recent examples in this discussion include *Slow professor: challenging the culture of speed in the academy* (Berg and Seeber, 2016), and *Accelerating academia: the changing structure of academic time* (Vostal, 2016). The speed of academia can be an idea or an issue of strategy and choice, at least to a certain extent, and hence the aim of this article is to provide examples from the strategic choices I have managed to make. I am very much in favour of the ethos in the *Slow professor* book because I like the fact that the authors open the topic up for discussion. The book is about issues and challenges that academics face in todays stressful work environment. Through chapters on time management, pedagogy, research, collegiality and collaboration, Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber discuss their challenges and solutions as professors in humanities in today's academia drawing inspiration from Slow Food movement (2016). While there are studies investigating academic job satisfaction and issues of stress (for example, Shin and Jung, 2014; Sabherwal et al., 2015) open discussions on many of these issues are brushed aside or only slowly infiltrate our departmental cultures. At the same time, we can shape academic culture, and while I do not remember the good old academic times of 1980s, where professors supposedly had time to focus and were not pressured so much by accountability to outside forces, I firmly believe that open discussions of mutual expectations are needed to shape academic culture in a favourable direction.

    This text has grown out of the workshop Research Kitchens, which I conducted at the European Media and Communication Summer School in Milan 2016. The aim of the workshop was to address the questions and issues that are considered an implicit norm in academia, but that are rarely discussed. Academics, as everyone else, are governed by normative understanding as to how we should do our jobs, and I want to argue that very often these norms are wrong and should be avoided if we are to have healthy and productive (even in the neoliberal understanding of the word) work lives.

    In this text, I want to focus on the issues of time management, as a lot of myth, issues and problems can be associated with this. The topics of time management and issue prioritization are the ones most typically problematized and these are the

ones that make us feel most inadequate. The text is also inspired by countless discussions with fellow young academics struggling under pressures to work more and to produce more, and dealing with that constant more-ness creating a sense of inadequacy. This is also, to a certain extent, a self-help text, a self-justification that I am not inadequate and, by spreading what according to literature could be considered healthy working culture, I justify my choices of working and managing my time.

2.   The pressures of neoliberal academia

More and more of us work under the auspice that we, as spenders of public money, need to be accountable for what we do, for every working hour at least. With these ideals of transparency and output oriented-ness of our work comes extra pressure on accountability, making our work results visible and countable. Zaloznik and Gaspard (2011)in another Summer School book discuss the tensions that neoliberalism brings to the understanding of the public role of the universities. They connect the trend of marketization to the following processes in the academia:

> [A] strong focus on research evaluation and accountability, an upsurge in university-industry cooperation, the heavy use of ICTs, the internationalisation agenda, the extreme massification of student enrolments, the imperative of publishing in top level scientific journals, the professionalization of the researcher, the fixation on "quality" or "excellence", the implementation of management techniques, etc. (Zaloznik and Gaspard, 2011: 205)

These kinds of new roles and pressures have put academics in a situation where you first have to do all that was done before, but now, in addition to that, there are new roles and expectations, which need to be serviced as well. Altbach (2015) points out that academic freedom allows us to choose what and how we teach, but it does not necessarily dictate how universities are managed. The increasing external interference with governing what it means to be academic is interfering with people's ability to make choices in the basic categories of academic freedom. These external pressures of quality and measurability of the academic work have brought in the notion of "publish or perish" (Harzing, 2007), but also the increasing pressures to communicate to external stakeholders. However, very often the student and the scholar will have to choose a direction, since satisfying both the academic and the non-academic audience is not possible. At the same time, not serving both is not good for your CV or for your career. Neoliberal common sense (as discussed by Torres, 2011) has brought conflicting agendas. On the one hand academia needs to "service the customer", the student as well as the public. On the other hand academia also needs to perform the task of produc-

ing new knowledge, which might mean not giving the easy answers, but difficult questions (Torres, 2011: 193).

Smeyers and Burbules (2011) are criticizing the quantification of the academic performance. They point to the ways these kinds of metrics influence the academics to behave in strategic ways, and the ways in which the system can be fiddled in order to achieve "better" results. They remind the reader that the increase of an impact factor can be achievable when set out as the only aim, but that can mean making too many compromises to quality and academic integrity. So, in the spirit of the recommendations from Smeyers and Burbules (2011: 14-15), let's allow us to be critical and strategic about the academic performance measures and consider the activities we like and feel to be relevant as more worthy of pursuit.

In the following sections, I would like to discuss six ideas, or principles, which have helped me to reclaim my life and my work in a meaningful way. I will discuss personal ideas and practices that have worked for me, but may not necessarily work for others. They have helped me to be a mother of three, a partner and a young professor and to cope with burnout and stress. Some of these remarks will go against academic cultures and norms, but then, maybe, these norms actually need to be questioned.

3.   Six to eight hours are productive hours

The academic liberty of working when it suits us, or the principle of flexible working hours, does not mean – and by no means should mean – that we can work all the time. This liberty does not justify working late in the evening, or over the weekends or putting in extra hours when you do not manage to get work done outside "normal" working hours. This liberty does not justify pressuring others to work outside the "normal" hours and bragging about the loss of summer holidays in favour of writing.

There are two issues that need to be considered here. One is about the time spent working. Wergeland et al. (2003) show that a 6-hour working day is better for avoiding some diseases. Some anecdotal evidence from experiments done in Sweden (Crouch, 2015) indicates that people work better if they limit their work to six hours. The eight-hour working day, originally introduced in factories (Wikipedia), was established because it indicated better productivity and ability to get work done. Heffernan (2016) summarises the dangers of working overtime too long: they include anything from loss of productivity via depression to suicide. No career is worth that. If people whose work is measured according to the attention to detail at manual labour work better with less hours, who are we, academics, to think that these rules do not apply to us? So, whenever possible,

opt to work no more than eight hours per day as the quality of your work during the ninth and tenth hours is usually not worth the effort and you might simply need to redo it later.

The second issue is related to choosing when to work. Academia gives you the liberty of working whenever, from nine to five, or ten to six, or eight to four. You could opt to work from four in the afternoon until midnight, but considering how much the structures of the society govern our actions this is not a very realistic work-goal. At least some of our working time needs to overlap with time of our peers and external actors, like spouses, partners and kids, and family puts additional pressure to conform to socially acceptable working times. In order to keep the time spent working in check, try not to work after hours. This, of course, does not apply when you have writing binge or you have no family to consider, but once kids come along, working outside the socially acceptable working time becomes difficult and unnecessarily draining.

4. Focusing and concentrating your working activities

It is extremely hard to minimize interruptions in the contemporary digital world, but we do know it can be done. We have silent modes on our mobiles, we don't stop to read e-mail in the middle of lecturing. Why should we not dedicate the same focus to the tasks of reading, writing, marking etc.? Another new trend in discussing productivity and getting things done is to reduce the interruptions for designated periods. Slotting away time in our calendars for focused activities is worth the effort, and most of the time allows us to get things done quicker. There are plenty of tips and tricks, recommendations to try to reduce your interruptions to minimum on a whole day, for 90 min cycles, for one hour slots – do whatever tickles your fantasy. But from experience – this is well worth the effort.

5. Sleep is worth the effort

Fryer (2006) summarises the importance and the relevance of sleep and outlines some devastating consequences of the lack of sleep. My oldest kid was born during the third year of my four-year PhD. That allowed me to take a parental leave from the office work as well as from daily teaching and meetings, but I did not want to take time off for my PhD-thesis. My oldest was a great sleeper, so I could wheel out the baby in the buggy and he would sleep 2-4 hours during daytime. These were my once-per-day moments of working with my PhD-thesis. I went to bed early: I often joined my kid at 9 or 10 for going to sleep and we slept until 8 or 9

in the morning. That meant eight to ten hours of sleep (not uninterrupted, but still), and after a while I felt that I could focus better and get more things done during those 2-4 hours of focused writing. So, when years later I heard a podcast about the sleep-deprivation of our society, it made perfect sense to me and it validated my choice of sleeping over trying to work extra time when kids are asleep.

6.   Having dates with yourself and your assignments

Our calendars tend to get filled with meetings, conferences, classes etc., but when we neglect to mark in calendars the class-prep times, the marking times, the hour or two we need to send in the reports or to write funding applications, these jobs slip between our fingers. This means we do it at twelfth hour, trying desperately not to miss the deadlines and ending up working during evenings or weekends. A professor, a while ago, confessed that every year, when he gets a new calendar, he marks two weeks with a conference in a faraway place and avoids putting anything on those two weeks. Then he goes to an off-season resort and gets his academic publishing done during those two weeks. This extreme way of working may not suit all, but remembering to put in the calendar not only the deadlines, but also actual time to work on the assignments is a trick that I have had to learn.

7.   Multi-tasking does not work

Have you tried answering a work-email while doing something else? A quick two-liner should not be that much of an effort, should it? The inability to focus on one thing leaves us not only tired and frustrated, but also less capable of doing our tasks. Multitasking is discussed in work context and, as the research shows, the cost of switching the tasks is taxing on our brain (APA, 2006). At the same time, multi-tasking on the account of family is often considered more acceptable. For example, Semenza (2010) promotes saving work for weekends that can be done together with socialising and other family obligations. This might work one-off, or for brief bouts of unexpected workload, but it is not a sustainable tactic over longer periods of time. We end up being angry at ourselves, at our family and at our own efforts. My own experience is that the extra stress of trying to get work done while being with the kids leads to frustrate your families and yourself. Kids are snapped at; I hate my work and myself. Another colleague shared a frustrating bedtime experience – while cuddling and bedtime stories should be lovely time, you keep an eye on the clock to nervously count the minutes you are losing of your after-hours work time. This leaves you frustrated and tired and angry at the world. Instead, make a deal

with yourself: you will not attempt to work before the morning comes and hopefully you can enjoy your family time more and you can enjoy your work time more.

8.   Some choices must be made

As a young and frustrated professor, I found myself in a situation where more and more tasks were being piled on me with, indeed, more salary, but without consideration of my working hours or realistic expectations. I had the good girl syndrome (Fezler and Field, 1987), which came with very high expectations on myself: I kept on working and trying to fulfil the mounting obligations and expectations. And, of course, I failed at that. I entered into the vicious circle of trying to do more, and being less and less effective at doing this, and needing to put in more and more hours, without any idea as to how should I break this cycle. A study of perfectionism among psychology professors (Sherry et al., 2010) shows that self-oriented perfectionism (expecting yourself to be perfect) was negatively related to total number of publications, first authored publications and number of citations. This supports the idea that if something must be given up, then "done is better than perfect". We strive for the quality of our work, and often taking the extra week or two to polish our articles is worth it, but staying up another hour to find that perfect image to illustrate out lecture is not.

The hard thing is deciding what matters most. It would be simple to go with productivity gurus' advice and prioritize what gives most relevant results. But often that is not so easy. Especially in the neoliberal academia, where there are conflicting demands on our time. And unfortunately, there is no good advice to give, except, sometimes, we must just decide not to attempt doing everything.

9.   In a way of conclusion

I have written this text as a self-help "do and don't" guidance. I realise that my advice does not necessarily work with everyone and that the circumstances are different. But what I would encourage you to look at is some of the popular or the research articles that promote healthy work-life balance. And in addition to looking things up for yourself, discuss those with your colleagues. Discuss it, because working over the weekends, having unrealistic short deadlines for quality work and not sleeping is not only bad for you as an individual, but also bad for the academia. If in academia our work is our life, I think that for surviving it, we need to actively work towards containing it. Otherwise, we become frustrated victims of a neoliberal "monster" for whom more of everything is always needed.

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Biography

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