

## CASE STUDY: NATALIE

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Natalie is in her early twenties and was studying for an MSc in the Division of Medical Sciences. When she moved to Oxford from America, she made a transition between two very different educational systems. She had a very positive outlook on making the changes in her study patterns, attitudes and approaches and lived her Oxford life to the full.

### Adaptation to independent learning

Natalie was consciously open-minded in her encounter with the new system:

"I came abroad to expose myself to a new environment and a new system. In my opinion, it's a very valuable skill to adapt to a new environment and identify the value of a new system. Otherwise, without adaptation, one may become frustrated." "I think the biggest thing is just to realise that it's different and appreciate it for what it is rather than getting frustrated and anxiety-ridden, which you easily can do. [...] it is what it is, you have to make the most of it, so take advantage of what you can learn."

She quickly noticed the difference between the teaching style at Oxford and her previous university: "Oxford is much more self-directed, while in the US science courses were very regimented and structured in material covered".

Initially, she didn't know what to do with all the "extra" time she had in Oxford, but she soon came to appreciate the less structured teaching method in Oxford: "At first, this new sense of freedom in guiding my own education was confusing, but once I realized we were not expected to read EVERYTHING on the reading lists, I appreciated the freedoms the programme affords." She found by herself a way to manage this freedom effectively:

"I have found that here, you can make your experience as intense or relaxed as you would like. Since I know my deadlines in advance and have plenty of time to work towards them, I can chip away at the work bit by bit and take weekends off, unlike my undergrad experience when I constantly had exams and needed the weekends to play catch-up."

Natalie also noticed a shift in what she learned:

"Instead of memorizing loads of information [...] just for an exam, I have the luxury of investigating certain topics (in which I am interested) in depth for essays. At first I felt like I wasn't really learning anything new because there were no immediate assessments, but then I adapted and spent my time really thinking through topics critically. Thus, I acquire investigative and critical analysis skills here but perhaps lack broad, concrete knowledge."

There was a trade-off, however. Natalie found that whereas this type of study was good for going in depth with the issues that interested her the most, it was not conducive to gaining a broad knowledge of the field:

"I think the real sign of learning is your ability to explain information or a concept to somebody else, and I don't think I would have that capability necessarily. But on the topic, the one topic I did choose to investigate for an essay, I could talk about it for ages."

She found advantages and disadvantages to both her previous and the Oxford systems, but was happy with the depth of knowledge that she was gaining at Oxford: "I think for graduate study where you are meant to be specialised in something specifically I think this is a great system."

In line with her open-minded approach to the new educational experience at Oxford, Natalie also took a proactive approach towards new challenges and sought them out where she

could: "I'd be disappointed if I came here and didn't learn new skills and so I try to acquire as much as I can while I'm here". The course requires students to write two shorter dissertations consecutively (as opposed to one long one, as with most Master's degrees). For her second project she chose a topic which, methodologically speaking, lay outside her comfort zone. While acknowledging that it was potentially more risky to take on challenges, she was motivated to take the plunge: "we're encouraged to really learn new things. What's the point in doing something that you've done before?" When in doubt she recognised the value of drawing on the expertise of others around her:

"I'm not embarrassed to say, oh I don't really understand what's going on, please tell me. These are the people that know what's going on and created these things and so while I'm here I'm going to try to make the most of it."

In fact Natalie specifically chose to work in a lab in which she expected there to be a supportive and helpful environment. There she made good use of her supervisor's expertise to keep herself on track:

"I'm always going to my supervisor to touch base [...] During our discussions we make a plan of action and then I go away and get down to business. [...] In general, supervisors and other academics are readily available and I'm not afraid to ask them for any help that I definitely need"

## Use of technology

Natalie's use of technology could be described as pragmatic. While on the one hand she was a highly proficient user of the complex specialised technologies that were required for her studies, she did not enjoy playing with the computer for its own sake and often preferred manual ways of doing things.

For her studies Natalie used a wide range of specialist technologies, including equipment for magnetoencephalography (MEG), *in situ* hybridisation and software for functional brain-imaging analysis, many of which were new to her, and which she had to learn from scratch during the course:

"I had to learn how to use software programs that a PhD [professor] in the lab had written, which often times required me to learn command line prompts, etc. Also, most neuroimaging labs use Linux/Unix as an operating system which I had a bit of experience with but I had to learn a whole lot more last term in order to carry out my research. [...] Part of the challenge of conducting research in a new field over the course of 3 months is simply learning, understanding, and perfecting the methods."

Still, she didn't feel especially "tech-y" and had no desire to keep up with her coursemates on that front:

"My coursemates are really computer-savvy and they're always emailing me saying, [...] 'I've just got this cool new programme that does this' [...] And I always sort of look at those emails and think, oh I don't want to figure it out".

"...it's like their computers are attached to them actually, they all take their laptops to the class and then while professors are talking they're looking up anything they don't understand and it's just too much, I just like to listen and take notes, rather than divide my attention."

Even though Natalie's typing skills were good (she felt that typing was so automatic that she was almost not thinking when she typed), for much of the course she preferred to take notes by hand on index cards. Using different-coloured pens to highlight different aspects of her thinking, was time-consuming, but helped her work through and understand the material:

"I'm much more of a tangible person and I like to move things around. So when I have all the pieces of what I want to say on cards, then I can put them in piles, like this is my first bit, this is my second bit."

Index cards were also more practical to carry around than her laptop. However, as time became a constraint in her second dissertation project, Natalie increasingly wrote her notes on the computer.

Although Natalie was aware that tools such as referencing software would make writing essays much easier, she didn't use them, and was also unfamiliar with useful functions in Word such as generating tables of contents. She didn't feel the need to customise her computer: in fact, her desktop "wallpaper" had been chosen for her by a friend.

Natalie allowed pragmatic considerations to guide her choice of online tools, although she was not immune to the distractions of the Web. She had organised her email accounts so that all mail was forwarded to her Gmail account where she could easily search and organise it, and was a great fan of Skype because it allowed her to keep in touch with her family for free. Her family had even tried out conference calling for 'family get-togethers', which they eventually had to give up:

"we used to have these family phone conferences where it was my dad and my mum in [their home state] and my sister in another location where she attends Medical School, my other sister at her computer in another country where she has been studying abroad, and then my grandfather and my grandmother jump in from another location. so we'd conference call in from multiple locations around the world, which would... you wouldn't talk about anything because everybody was talking over everyone".

Natalie was also a keen Facebook user, admitting that she spent possibly too much time catching up with her friends. Although she had been on Facebook since its inception, she found that it was "taking over" and felt that the electronic means of communication so readily available that they sometimes detract from real-life relationships:

"people just email back and forth, or chitchat back and forth or Facebook message back and forth all day while they're studying. Rather, they could have studied together or met up for coffee and had some face to face discussion."

She also preferred the individualised, personal touch of a good old-fashioned postcard:

"I like to write postcards. [...] I think because everybody sends these massive emails, like 20 people on the list or more and so you just don't make the effort to read it maybe. A postcard is a more personal note geared towards one person. It is more likely that that person will actually want to read the individualised message and that you may actually get a response."