CASE STUDY: INDRA

Indra was a student on an MSc programme in the Department of Education. She was in her early twenties and had come directly from a BSc in Education at an American university. Indra applied to Oxford because the programme here was the most advanced of the ones she investigated and best fitted her wishes to prepare for work with post-conflict countries. She successfully applied to read for a doctorate at the department, but found that the MSc year was a very short time to think about future plans: "Everything is happening so fast, like in the December you had to like submit your DPhil application. So it was like you'd barely started the programme and you're suddenly thinking about your DPhil."

As a learner Indra is calm and methodical and she has worked out strategies that help her manage different aspects of her learning and social life. She knows when to integrate and when to separate her social and academic life, she knows how much material she can get through and how to prepare for exams efficiently.

Strategies for managing learning

There were generally not enough books available for everybody on the course in the library, and rotating them between the classmates didn't always work. Therefore Indra developed a clear approach to the reading list. Firstly, a good share of material for one of the courses was to be found on websites of the organisations that they would be learning about. So when looking at a reading list Indra started by finding out which of the materials are accessible on the web. Then she would progress to "look at the books, most of them aren't in the library, they're hard to get. Or you can't get access to it, they're not in the library, you can't get access to it or something like that. So you're like, okay we'll check those off." Then she progressed to looking at the essay questions provided for each class and tried to find ways of answering it in the available material: "So you look at the essay questions and work backwards. Okay, what would I need to answer this essay question and then look at that." Finally she would look at whether the book would seem interesting: "Look through and I'm like no, it's too boring, too many statistics, and I'll pick something else up."

By using this "working backwards" strategy and reading a manageable amount of literature for each class, Indra managed to stay on top of her readings and used the same strategy to turn her readings into coherent writing:

> "I'd only read as much as I need to read […] I have a classmate who loves to read everything and then work from there. But for me it's like I can't sit with all those books and have to read through everything. So I start writing, I read a couple of like broad things and then based on that start writing and I'd reach a point where I'm like okay, I need to find out more about this information so I go look for a book, read that and then come back, fill in the information like that. It's just it's my way of trying to save time."

She used the same approach of doing what is necessary to answer a particular question, coupled with creating visual aids, in preparing for her exams:

> "I'd spot questions […] and I'd, like, take those essay questions and then literally it would be like, okay, 1) introduction, like these are the key points I need to hit […] and then based on that I used to go and look at what literature is there […] So what could I find and then I'd write that down on a note card and stick up on my wall. So by the end of the exams I had my walls full of note cards" [..] "I need the visual thing, and you would wake up in the morning and be like, okay this is Germany and this like the people who have said key things about Germany and key aspects […] So that gave me key points. All I had to do was take those key points, put it together and be able to add my own thought to it."

Indra was also aware of alternatives and clear about why she had chosen this particular strategy:

> "I know there was some of us who said that they weren't prepared for, like, any questions, but I think it was just they went so broad that they weren't able to specifically prepare. So then had they got a question they would just speak a little about, but not as much. But what I did is I worked backwards, so I found specific questions that I needed to prepare for and then branched out a little bit from there. So if those questions didn't come I would only have… I wouldn't be in good shape, but I knew I'd be able to speak a little bit about some thing."

Academic support and peer support

Indra had to adapt to adverse circumstances on the course with respect to the support she received from her tutors. Because she was not very keen on asking questions, preferring to work out problems for herself, and because her supervisor was not been always available, Indra to a great extent substituted peer support for tutor support:

> "I haven't met my supervisor since a long time because he has been in and out of the country. […] Generally, I email him and if it's an urgent question, he will reply. However, to be truthful, he isn't that great with emails and a lot of emails go unanswered. […] I had emailed him asking him for an appointment […] However, I never got a reply, and later on I found out from another classmate that he had left the country for some professional business a day or two back."

> "So every time there's been a glitch in my research and I email him he wouldn't get back to me. But because it's, like, your research and it's so much to figure out. So I used to always end up discussing it with my classmates."

Indra got used to working on her dissertation in the library along with a few of her course-mates. Although they did not work on the same thing, they took breaks together, kept each other good company and provided each other with moral support: "They've helped me out a lot. And even today morning the first thing I did was, okay, so there's another glitch so be prepared, I'm going to be at the library." In the end Indra felt that this way of working suited her well because she preferred to learn independently and she had found a good balance between direction and independence.

Outside the library the class used a Facebook group to provide each other support. As well as for the more common social coordination, Facebook was used for academic purposes:

> "The people in my course created a Facebook group where we discuss logistical stuff like availability of books or clarification of certain concepts or sometimes even, outlines of formats, etc."

> "Our Facebook group is amazing and convenient. We post messages regarding our work, social outings, any questions we have, reminders, etc. I would say 90% of us use the group actively. […] During our vacation when we were studying for our mock exam, we were posting messages to each other regarding material. It's an easy way to stay in touch with each other and get immediate help."

On one particular occasion the Facebook group was used to settle insecurities about the exam. Although it was usually possible to "spot" the question that would come up in the exam, one module was changed in response to the students' requests for specific themes and approaches. However, this rendered the students unsure of the format that the exam would take:

> "I remember in class […] he had just mentioned like a question that could come up […] So I then jotted that down […] And I remember I had to actually put it on Facebook because a lot of people were getting worried. And I was like, well this is what you're looking for."

The Facebook group was still actively used in the summer, although the topics of conversations had shifted mostly to social matters as the students were engaged in their own research and had less in common academically.

Although everybody joined the Facebook group, a few people chose not to participate in it. These were same people who tended not to participate in the group's social activities. Did these people, therefore, miss out on some of the academic activities as well as the social ones? According to Indra, although most questions discussed on Facebook would be brought up in class as well, some of the topics would not reach the students who didn't follow the Facebook group. Although these topics were few, the non-participants could still be said to have missed out.