

CASE STUDY: ELLEN

Ellen was a student on an MSc programme in the Department of Education. She is in her late twenties and was living in a town about 10 miles from Oxford with her husband and their two dogs. As well as having a commute, being a full time student and having family obligations, she also had a part-time job and had taken on responsibilities for organising social events in her college. Ellen liked to have a busy lifestyle, but the first two terms of the course in particular proved very stressful.

Coping with a demanding course

From the beginning Ellen was surprised at how challenging the course was: "I am spending far more time studying each week than I anticipated and am finding it difficult to maintain a life-study balance." The bulk of the work on the course was assigned during the first two terms, leaving a more calm third term for the dissertation. "This 'front-loading' of all the really difficult bits of the course content for the MSc [...] had some unfortunate consequences for the students on my course and was not providing the most conducive learning environment." The time after the Christmas break was especially tough:

"When you've just come back from not having a Christmas break, having done all the assignments, not sleeping for two weeks, handing in your assignments on the 21st January and then going to class the next day, completely exhausted [...], it just felt like the expectations were growing higher and the mental energy and effort we could expend was going down."

Ellen had to sacrifice almost all activities that she was not required to undertake for the course:

"I feel I have been generally disconnected from all non-essential/required course related things since the new year has started, largely because I've been using what little 'free' time I have to do background research for my dissertation and have not had the time to attend optional study group sessions, surfing Facebook and attending other special linguistics seminars which I am not required to attend."

In response to the pressure, Ellen changed her approach to the course. She became very strategic about her study choices in order to maximise the returns on the time she put into studying:

"I took the approach at the beginning of the year that I wanted to learn everything there was to know about [my subject], and to take on board every issue we were learning about in class. Within four months, I had reached a state of complete burnout and frustration when I realized how limited time was [...], I really disengaged from the modules and decided to focus almost exclusively on my dissertation."

She learned to calculate which topics she would most likely need for assignments, and directed her attention to those issues:

"my approach to studying (and even choosing to attend the weekly lectures) became very strategic in February and March – if I felt that the lecture and readings addressed a major issue that was likely to emerge as one of the essay topics, I would attend, engage in class and do the readings. If not, I stayed at home and worked on my dissertation and did readings for the topics that I found more interesting. This is what I have more recently re-defined as 'flexible learning': the notion that time is an extremely limited commodity and that for me to make the most of it (in terms of maximizing results and performance) I had to become much more selective about what I was willing to spend my time and effort on."

Ellen was not alone in finding the course challenging. A group of students on the course were supporting each other through the hard times partly by sharing their worries and venting frustrations and partly by helping each other manage the workload. On the mornings of the lectures, the group would exchange text messages to co-ordinate who would be skipping class that day and to arrange for one of the other students to pick up handouts for them. Tongue-in-cheek, they referred to this arrangement as "the skipping circle."

Coping with the pressures of the course alongside her other commitments affected Ellen's health, mostly due to lack of sleep. Still, she was happy to have kept her job while studying, although the college commitments proved less rewarding. Ellen admitted that it was not unusual for her to take on too much, and that she likes living at a high pace:

"I've always multi-tasked lots of things and it seems like my life just happens to be the way [...] as much as I would like to just deal with one thing at one time, I don't think I have the character to do that, [...] I won't say I thrive on stress but stress is always just part of my life and I just find ways of getting better at task managing, time management, prioritising and trying to... So in that sense this course has kind of been good because it's taken what was already the kind of pace of my life for that and just accelerated it to a level where I've never quite been before."

Use of technology

Ellen is a proficient user of technology and gets pleasure from figuring out technological problems by herself. Although her husband is the expert on technology in their household, she tried not ask him about problems unless she needed to:

"I try to not refer to him too much though because there's a real satisfaction from feeling like you go do something on your own and that you didn't need someone to hold your hand and walk you through it."

During the course Ellen's use of technology both increased and changed in nature. She perceived this technological change as having a profound impact on her ways of thinking, organising her work and even defining herself as a person.

"It's changed the way that I think about things and the way that I go and approach big tasks, the way I break them down into smaller tasks, the way I organise that information, the programmes that I've used, and SPSS has now become one of those programmes resentfully [laughs], that it's just changed the way that I go about thinking."

The greatest change in her thinking came about when she started using Excel, and this led her to form a different view of herself:

"I think Excel has done that for me because coming from a liberal arts background everything for me is always about words, and it was just the way that I thought. And then once I started using Excel to develop things like timetables for these intensive short-term residential courses [...], then when I started on the dissertation I found that by default instead of using Microsoft word to make notes to myself about deadlines, everything started going to Excel. [...] when I got all of my questionnaire forms it just was so obvious to me that I needed to use Excel, I need to put all of the questionnaire numbers down the side, [...] it just came naturally at that point."

"All of a sudden I went from being a Word person to being an Excel person, and it was like this weird almost paradigm shift of 'I'm no longer just bound to being a liberal arts student, I'm a researcher now, I can think scientifically and think about organising my thoughts and my data in such a way that you can see this here and then it correlates with this.' And now that I've done that I don't think I can ever go back."

Instead of using the most commonly provided tools or just the ones that were available at the department, Ellen carefully selected the technological tools that would help her work. One such example was her discovery of Zotero, a free online referencing and note-taking tool. Having investigated EndNote and Refworks together with her husband, they settled for Zotero, which Ellen then used daily. She took an online tutorial to learn about all the features of the programme and used a wide range of these for her studies.

Another example of adoption of specialised tools for her work was Ellen's acquisition of MacSpeech Dictate, a Mac-specific voice recognition program which she used to aid her interview transcription. She got the idea of using speech-recognition software when someone at one of the library orientation sessions talked about how time-consuming transcription could be. Using the speech-recognition software saved Ellen a lot of time, although she had to invest a considerable amount of time training the program to recognise her voice and developing the working patterns that would be most efficient when coupled with the software:

"What I do is I have the interviews on my iPod [...] My whole mission is to listen to the interviews basically in one ear, as long as people are speaking more or less at natural or slow speeds I can almost follow it verbatim [... but] after about two hours of doing it I would get tired and the accuracy would drop [...] towards the end when I'd figured out the techniques that would make it accurate and quick, I was able to transcribe a half-hour interview in about 45 minutes."

Although she enjoyed using technology to aid her work, Ellen also made choices not to use particular tools when she could perceive no need for them. One such choice was to use Word rather than a specialised data analysis package for the qualitative part of her analysis. In part, she saw no need for the more advanced functions such packages afforded, and in part it was an economic decision made after spending a considerable sum on the speech-recognition software. Another tool that Ellen chose not to use was Skype, firstly because she didn't see any advantage in using it, as she had free calls to America on her phone contract, and secondly because so many people were so persistent in urging her to get it that she became stubborn in her refusal.

While Ellen made strategic choices with regards to her technology use, one tool she initially found difficult to control was Facebook. She wrote to us in the first term:

"Facebook has been a wonderful blessing... and a terrible curse all at the same time. About half of my class are registered users and we have actually set up our own Facebook group to provide support to each other, share resources and organize social activities. On that front, Facebook has been extremely positive. My personal Facebook account, on the other hand, gets spammed daily with silly requests from all my friends to sign up for movie quizzes, comparing music taste, taking surveys and other rubbish that I would prefer to not be bothered with. However, I can't seem to help checking my page several times each day and enjoy seeing pictures of everyone and receiving updates on what they are doing; in this capacity, it is a huge distraction from my studies."

By the end of the second term, however, Ellen had found a way to manage her use of Facebook, restricting herself to an hour or so in the evening.