

Study skills: Time management

KAREN FOLEY: Hello, and welcome back to the Student Hub Live. Well, we've been having a fabulous day, and we've been getting lots of information from people on Twitter, on Facebook and through our mailbox, etc. and in the chat about why we love part-time, because that's a big theme for today.

Jocene says it's wonderful to be a student and fit her life into other commitments. Eleanor finds part-time learning less overwhelming compared to full-time study. And Daniel says it means he can work and study at the same time-- very common and a very good thing to be doing. Stephanie finds the thought of entering a brick university terrifying, and loves distance learning. Some of you are terrified about that as well. Kevin says that the OU allowed him to gain employment suited to his health condition. Alison likes the fact that she can pay the bills and come home to study, which is something that she really loves.

So thank you for those. Send us more of your information about why you love part-time work with the hash tag loveparttime, and also our hash tag is studenthublive15. Right, so I'm back on the sofa. HJ and Helen, how's it all going there? I'm missing it.

HELEN: Well, I tell you what, Karen. I have a bone to pick with you. There's banana skins, there was a coffee mug. There was, just honestly-- my side of the desk was a bit of a state.

HJ: Although it matches mine now. That's no excuse.

HJ: Oh, we have mail, it seems. I love that sound. I can't get enough of it. Oh dear, we need to get this spam filter repaired. All right, let's have a look at what we've got today. Oh dear, we've got loads being sent in. So remember, studenthub@open.ac.uk for your pictures, selfies, comments. We absolutely love it. And there's some great stuff that's come through.

KAREN FOLEY: We might need to make a board. It looks like you're filling up a bit there.

HJ: I know. We've got loads of lovely stuff there. But Peter Hubbard has sent in this lovely shelfie, and we have to say it's lovely wallpaper there. It's looking very nice, and very tidy and organised. I've also got all these lovely books. This one's from Andrea, and she says, "spot the Terry Pratchett bookends," which are fantastic. I might have to get some myself. Very neat there.

HELEN: Yeah, and we've got Tita Bevan, who looks like she was at a graduation ceremony, which is fantastic, and I'm guessing that was today, because there's the hash tag loveparttime on display there, which was released today. So that's fantastic, Tita. Congratulations on graduating. And then we've got Tracey Buchanan, who's arranged a heart shape there out of books, I believe, which is brilliant.

HJ: And if you're wondering why all our hearts are up on our social media board as well, it's all the stories that Karen was just saying about, and all the ones that we've absolutely loved you guys talking about. We've put them on our board, because we do we just absolutely love hearing about part-time time learning. But I think--

HELEN: I have a final one here. I'm guessing this is a study buddy, Sharon. This is Sharon's little dog. Isn't he gorgeous? So thank you for sending those in. That's brilliant. We love receiving them.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful, thank you very much for all of those. OK, so now I welcome my next guest, Susanne Schwenzer. We're talking about time management. Susanne, pinch and punch for the first of the month and no returns. No, no, no, don't worry, everything's going to be OK. Time management-- very, very common thing. All right, we've got 25 minutes.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: All right, that's good to know. That's the first step, know how much time you have.

KAREN FOLEY: Lovely, and you've prepared a really helpful list of notes about how to manage time. I'm terrible at this, I really am. You should see some of my lists. In fact, HJ and I were doing a list the other day, and I was saying, oh, it's a really good list, because it actually relates to some of the tasks I'm trying to do. But I really struggle with this whole idea, and I'm sure that a lot of people at home do as well. So what are some of the things that you wanted to talk about?

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Well, first of all, time management is something that I always compare with, say, ballet, when it looks totally nice and totally easy, and you think they just have it. That's when it's hardest, because you need to put a lot of effort in that. But it's the basis of almost any success you have, whether you do studies like what we are talking about here, but also if you have a job, do work-- even in your private life-- it's time management that's the basis, the clockwork for everything you do.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. So we always like to start with definitions here, because we've been talking about this a lot today, and how important it is to define things. Would you say that that's one of the most important things, to start defining some of the tasks that you need to do in terms of managing that time.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Yes, define and describe. That's the first step. And the second step to me always is break them down into their parts, because every single part has its own little time management to it.

When I was coming here today, I had several tasks. I couldn't forget the props that I should bring, I needed to make sure I'm all dressed up, and all of this. Every single of these tasks they have to come in an order, so just saying "today I have to come here" isn't enough for time management. You have to understand all the little tasks that come with it, and something I might have had to do yesterday, something I have to do an hour before, and then I come. So it's understanding what these tasks is all about, not just the task itself.

KAREN FOLEY: Now some of my students are very, very organised, and I know this. They go through their study planner, their weekly one, and they allocate the tasks and they do things by time. I, on the other hand, I'm running around like a lunatic a lot of the time, trying to get so many things done with this, that, and the other and juggling things. I know that that's been a very common experience for students, trying to cram and study to a very, very busy, full life. When do you have the time to write this list, and is writing that list a good use of time?

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Yes, of course it is, because I personally take that time every evening, because then I can see what have I achieved today. Not always everything on my list gets achieved. Of course not. So I can see what tasks are actually there. Because if you are running around and just start with whatever you see, you might not go by the most important things, because tasks come in certain groups.

If you think you've got four pots in front of you, you can put the tasks into these pots. There are tasks that are important and urgent, and that's the ones you need to start with, because if you miss something that's important, that will have serious consequences. If it's urgent, you need to deal with it now. There are tasks that are important, but they are not so urgent. You could do them tomorrow. And then there are tasks that are not that important. They might still think they are urgent, or they are not urgent.

So you can start with the most urgent and most important tasks. That way, you relieve the pressure and stop yourself from doing something which might be important but could have been done yesterday, and then not being able to do something that you would have to do today.

KAREN FOLEY: So it's all about categorising some of those tasks. I guess I'd like to know how you're categorising some of those. I'm seeing all the Post-it notes up there, and I'm sort of thinking, actually, that might be quite a good way of compartmentalising those tasks and maybe being able to move them around. But I'd be very interested to know what your tips are in terms of how you make these lists and share your good ideas about those, and how you categorise tasks.

You recommend, then, categorising them in these sorts of importance and urgency, so it's on that sort of parameter. What do you do, then? How do you do those lists, and what do you do with all of that? You're spending your time in the evening brainstorming and going, I need to do this, this and this. Then you maybe put a category, I'm imagining, next to that? Is that what you do?

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Yeah, and I always also say, time management is a Russian doll exercise. So if you take these two studies, if you get your study planner out, then you've got the entire year in front of you. That's the huge task, because you want to pass that exam in the end. But it's already broken down for you, because the next step is all the TMAs that are in there. That's the next smaller unit, but it comes in even smaller units, because you've got the weeks, and the weeks come in chapters.

So that is something that I do first, the big picture. My big picture looks like this. I don't know if we have a camera that can look at this, but my big picture looks like this. It's got the teaching side, it's got the research side, but that's anything that isn't in yellow on here is this month. So it's a long, long, long-term plan. There are yellow things that should be probably done in November, and they are red things that are this week or next week. So that is something how I break down my tasks.

And then there comes the next thing. What have I actually done? That gets recorded in something that looks like this. These notebooks, if for your studies, that would also be a notebook. This is my laboratory notebook, so I note down what gets done. I keep track of what I have to do and what I did get done.

But then it comes to the real day-to-day things, and the real day-to-day things are what I do in the evening, because any of those tasks on there have smaller parts as well. If there is write a TMA or do something like this, I have to actually sit down and put the words on paper. And I need to allocate the hours for that. That's what I do in the evening.

Then I usually for the next day go by hours of the day, because I have things that I can't shift. I have a meeting, my students want to see me. I can't shift that. So I go by the hours in the day. I have the list of what I need to do, and then I start, oh, you've got three hours in the morning. That's a good time to do some reading and thinking. Then you meet your student for an hour, and then you have another two hours, and then you could write up what you have read. So it's important to think about everything, and it's also important to not forget the breaks.

KAREN FOLEY: Yes, no indeed. Well, let's go and see what our audience is saying, because there's lots of tips and advice. HJ and Helen.

HELEN: Yes, there's lots of tips. Some people are picking up on the list idea, making lists. But also, Elena said, if you feel a bit less motivated, try for one day writing a list of all the things you have done, rather than the things to do, and that will make you realise how much you get done in a day.

Also, Georgina says, "yay, Pomodoro Technique". And I sort of typed in the chat, Pomodoro Technique question mark. Apparently it's named after those little tomato timers you get in kitchens. And Pomodoro is Italian for tomato. So you work for 25 minutes, and then you take a five-minute break. You keep going, and after four pomodoros, you take a half an hour break, which is brilliant, I think.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Yes, and that is a really good idea, because as I just said, you can't keep going forever. Maybe you can when you are stressed out and there is a deadline, but you are not performing at your best. But if you have the luxury to take those breaks, it's brilliant. That's a really good idea.

KAREN FOLEY: But what about when things are outside your control? We all know best laid plans and all that, and we can have our study planners and we can do all of this. What's your advice, though, when things happen, when you have to go away, when something happens, when the dishwasher floods the floor, or a cat brings in a mouse, and all of a sudden that-- Which has happened today, this morning. When things happen that you just have to then deal with.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: First of all, you can a little bit plan for those by thinking ahead. If I have very big tasks, I add 10% more time than I would think. If I already know there are things in there that aren't entirely in my control. Say I would know I need to get a piece of text from you, but you're on camera all day, so you might not get to it. So I need to add 20%, because I know there is a factor in there that is out of my control and has a high risk, because I know the person who wants to give me something is actually doing something else that day.

So you need to put in a little bit more time than you actually need, and the moment you do that, something gets buffered out. But if really the kitchen is flooded and you need more than just these 20% of time, then it's important that you know your tasks very well, because then

it's important to deal with the most important and most urgent ones first, so that you get those done. And the other ones, you might get a second chance.

KAREN FOLEY: So you're really saying that you need a macro and a micro level in terms of what those tasks are. What then happens? I mean, I often have tasks on my to-do list that sometimes I don't get done. Sometimes I think, well, actually that wasn't very important anyway, so why did it end up on my list, because nothing happened when I didn't do it, for example. And you're talking about prioritising and weighing up the importance of these things. Is there any sort of way that you judge those?

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Well, first of all, I need to know my goal. If you want to do this TMA, you probably have a very good idea of what's important for that, like you have to have studied your course material because that's the basis to be writing it. Usually people have a very good idea of what is important and what is required. If you don't, then you need to talk to people who have. I've just started a new job. If I don't know what the most important tasks are, I need to go and speak to a colleague about it.

In the case of the OU students, why don't they bring up their tutor? Why don't they go on forums, talk to each other, talk to their peers, and learn and get the information they don't have. That is critically important. So either you have it from your own experience, or you get help. But that's the basis for all time management.

KAREN FOLEY: I'll tell you who does help me, is HJ, because we had a list the other day. We wrote this list, which was brilliant in the end, wasn't it, because I had all the tasks, and I had all the importance, and it had what we could delegate and what we didn't. Then of course, I kept flapping around, and he kept going, Karen, you've got to focus on the bits that you are doing. You can't keep-- because I would keep doing other things, because I would think they were important. They were a little job, I can do that quickly, and it was stopping me, then, from doing the big thing. HJ, what's everyone talking about?

HJ: I think there's been lots of great advice from different people about the different tools people use to write down their lists. Some people like to use online tools. I like to use OneNote, because I have it on my phone, and I have my little day-to-day list. Some people like their pen and paper lists and like to do it in lovely different colours and block it off. I'm really enjoying, actually, these different tips about what people use. So I'd love to hear more about that as well.

HELEN: Yeah. Mara has a question. She says, "As most of us have life aside of studies and tasks like doing the laundry, taking the dog out for a walk, should the lists be separated?" So have a study list and then a sort of home life list, rather than merging them together.

KAREN FOLEY: Interesting

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: I would say no, because you've got one life. Your life has got one day. Your day has 24 hours. You need to sleep, you need to eat, you need to do all of this. Plus if you neglect all your day-to-day tasks, your family, your friends, totally, you won't make it. You are a person that is embedded in your everyday life, and your studies are part of it. And if you work. That's part of it. If you have a carer role, that's part of it. I think you can only make that work if it all fits together, and not make them compete against each other.

KAREN FOLEY: I'll tell you one good tip, because, admittedly, I am terrible at this. But one good tip-- somebody said to me, actually, once, when I said, why can't I get through my to-do list? What's wrong? I've got so much time, and just this idea of there being one day.

They gave me a diary, one of these page-a-day diaries. They said, write down what you're actually doing. So instead of making the list, I was actually writing down what I was doing, so that I could be quite mindful, then, about how I was spending my time and how long things took, because I didn't quite get that. I would say, do this, it would take one hour. It didn't, it was taking three hours, etc.

So it was about being mindful and about being able to prioritise my time. Which leads me to this idea of time-wasting and motivation, and how we can keep focused on some of those.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: I think we've already heard something with the Pomodoro Technique. I didn't know that word before, but it is something that you should plan as well, because yes, there is Facebook, and yes, we want to speak to friends and we want to play with the cat. But we must make sure that it doesn't take over what we actually also want to do, which is study. And there is this thing. Studying is hard, you need to focus, you need to concentrate. Playing with a cat or on Facebook is easier. So somehow we always go and do the easy things first.

But if you start with the hard things, if you start with your studies, read that chapter, it's much more fun to play on Facebook or with a cat. So just get going. Start. I think that's one of the big things that I also myself quite often don't do. If we have a task that looks too big, that is a bit hard, then we just don't get started. We waste so much time, and we could have done it before we started, if we had just started. If you are mindful of this, if you reflect on why didn't I get this done yesterday. That's usually the start to actually get it done.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, [INAUDIBLE] says-- I'm not sure if it is an app or if it's going to be an app-- but she says there's an online tomato that has the time and then goes "ding." So that's great. Do share that with us, if one indeed exists. That was brilliant.

OK, procrastination, a very, very common area for students, and this is something that you talked about already. But how do you refocus all of your energy onto doing these things? You've got the important tasks, and we want to play with the cats. How do you physically shift that?

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Well, you first of all need to know why this is happening, because there are many reasons for procrastination. One is sometimes you just feel this task is way too big. I can't manage that. This is something where time management can really, really help you. Because if you feel reading Chapter 1 is way too big, Why don't you sit down and look at the pictures first. You just watch it half an hour, to do nothing but look at the images that are in that chapter.

Then you budget another half-hour after you've taken your break to read the first two paragraphs, so that task becomes smaller and more manageable. You can stop yourself from procrastinating by putting a task in front of you where you feel, I can do that. It's not the entire chapter. It's not scary. I can do that. And once you've started, it sometimes becomes easy, and before you know it, you've actually done everything, because the scary big mountain was broken down in little steps. That's one thing.

The other thing is you might be physically not fit on that day. You might have had a night out, you might be tired, you might have had a hard day at work or feel otherwise distracted. If it's a temporary thing, then I would say don't push yourself. Go have a good night's sleep and start afresh. If it's something that's bothering you more because it's a bigger problem in your life, then you need to find a method to find peace and find that place for study. To me, a good workplace is a good thing. I have a desk where I am very special about, like Helen is about hers. I like to have this nicely decorated, and it's a place where I think this is for my studies, and this is where I sit down to do a certain task. I like to say, the world can go under. If it wants to do this with me, it has to wait until I get up again.

KAREN FOLEY: People love to talk about cats. We've had a lot of cat study-buddies. What we've found is that the cats inevitably sit on the bit that is most interesting or important, the keyboard, the notepads, etc. Is your cat allowed in your study area? Because cats are very therapeutic.

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Yes, my cat is allowed in my study area, but not on my book.

KAREN FOLEY: Let go to the social media desk.

HJ: Well, there's a lot of talk about animals and how people, like, walk their dog so they can clear their head and think about what they're doing, which I think is a really great idea. But we've also had a little bit of talk about motivation as well when we're doing all this. And I think Holly has a lovely point. She says, "Remember, we're human. We're not machines, so don't beat yourself up if you don't complete your task." I think that's a very good point. I think one thing I like to do is on my lists, I put successes as well when I have completed steps towards big tasks. I'd love to hear your guys' motivation techniques. I think that would be really nice. We've talked about cakes-- that's one big thing we like to motivate ourselves with. Jelly beans, successes. I'd love to hear what else you guys have got on that front.

HELEN: Yeah, I think for me the biggest joy in writing a list is ticking off the things that you've completed. That's the motivation for me. But Holly as well-- she's been working as a PA for the past five years, and she has a prioritising system in work and in study. She says that next to something that must be done today, she puts an A. For something that would be good if done today, a B, and then C for it could be done another day. And then she might need to re-prioritize throughout the day, but she does have a system, and she carries that over into the next day.

KAREN FOLEY: Tell us about these Pomodoro apps.

HJ: Yes. Well, we have found them. We found the tomato timer online, so we've tabbed that and saved it for you, and I think we both could test it out at some point, couldn't we? We're looking forward to using it, so thank you, guys, for finding it for us.

KAREN FOLEY: There are [INAUDIBLE] ones, as well, so that would be great. So do get us those links, and we'll pop them on the resources page, so we can all be perfectly time-managed afterwards. So then this idea of being kind to yourself and being mindful of tasks and things. How do you do that? I mean, you're sort of saying, well, you know, if you've had an night out or whatever, maybe don't do that.

But sometimes things need to be done, and we've got these priorities. So is there a sense sometimes that we might then consider-- I don't know. Are there high-risk or low-risk tasks? There are some things that I would never mark, for example, if I was tired, whereas I might do the dishes or do something [INAUDIBLE] that sort of thing. Well, that's a big chunk, but it doesn't require as much attention as something else might. Is there a sense of that being useful in terms of prioritising also, if you don't have time to do things, or if something happens, that you then need to reshift some of those priorities?

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Yes, of course, and you should also not only adjust your tasks how you feel. For example, I'm a morning person. If I really have to do some maths or something, I do it early in the morning. It's quiet around me and I'm at my best. That's a part of time management as well. But if I have done two hours of maths, then I better get and do the dishes or do something that lets my brain relax. In a way, it's enjoyable, because actually, if you do two or three hours of reading, you've nothing to show for it. If you do the dishes, there is this big pile of done dishes, So you need to do the tasks in the order they have to be done, but mix them up so you have different tasks, and tasks that give you different kinds of rewards.

KAREN FOLEY: It's nice to have that sense of accomplishment. One of the things I do myself, but sometimes I'll have, like, a five-minute task. I'll send an email or something. If I sit there and I'm, like, this to-do list is too long, I might go, where's an easy win? Where can I just cross something off, so that I can then feel a bit motivated as I'm taking too much time, so that's a good idea as well.

I run a lot, and I was very interested in the nice idea about going for a walk and taking time out, because I think sometimes we can be so busy reading. I know that before exams, a lot of my students say, I'm just going to re-read that chapter, and I say, no, don't do that. Go for a run or a walk and think, what do I know and what can I recall? Because actually, whilst you've got this big chapter, often it's maybe mentioning five or six key points that you need to understand, and if you've done that reading, all you need to do is understand those little bits of the big bit. So what would you say in terms of getting that mental space? We've talked about a physical space. How do you mentally align yourself to use your time well?

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: First of all, if I know the structure of the day, and I also know where my breaks are, that helps, because it helps me focus on the task at hand. We had it about procrastination. If I know I have an hour to do this, I will probably sit down and do it, in contrast to, oh yeah, I've got all morning. Maybe I can do it in two hours as well. And then the mentally refocusing to me also, as you said-- a walk, a hike, go to play some sports if you are into this. I love badminton, because it really gets your mind off what you were doing. If you are not on the court with your mind, you just don't have to be there, it's too fast a game, and then you come back and you can refocus on the other tasks. I think that change is very important. But in terms of time management, to me, these hours of you have to be there are also a good help to avoid procrastination too much.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful. Susanne, you have gone through, I'm pretty sure, every single thing on this list, all in the perfect amount of time. Is there anything else you want to add before I go to

the social media desk?

SUSANNE SCHWENZER: Well, if you say social media, what I find really important is to switch Facebook off. I love Facebook. I spend quite a bit of time on it. But I plan it in as well, because if you don't plan social media in, they just take your entire day. That is something that I am a bit wary about.

KAREN FOLEY: Wonderful. Well, thank you, Susanne. You obviously practise what you preach, so you're getting an awful lot done. Including all your missions to outer space and the various things in those guises. Let's go to the social media desk.

HJ: There's been lots of great chat. I love the tips in this session about the different tools people use, and the different methods, and going out for walks and runs is fantastic. And I think Helen's picked up on a really good final point for us to wrap up.

HELEN: I think that it's important to remember that you're not just a mind, you're a body as well. So make sure you get enough sleep so that you're not tired so you can study at your full capacity. Maybe reward yourself with a bit of exercise, and make sure you eat properly as well, and not too much caffeine.

KAREN FOLEY: Lovely. Thank you very much for that and for sharing all of those tips. That's been wonderful. Another thing I'd like you to share is to fill in our survey for us. So if you haven't done that already, we would love to know what you think. You can either do that by giving us your details and either myself or one of the other receptionists will give you a phone call to talk about your experience at this event. Or you can fill in the brief survey, which is very, very quick and easy to do, because we'd love to know how you've been enjoying it.

So we're going to go to a quick video break. We're going to see a couple of videos about who wants a poll. And then I need to be very nice, because after slagging off maths, we have some people from the maths department. But luckily, they're going to be talking about upskilling and maths. So we'll see you in a few minutes.