Work-life balance: Perspectives from graduate students

Reflection 1

I am going to begin this reflection by defining what a work-life balance means to me. On the life side of things, instability arises for me if, in my daily life, I do not attain some level of fitness, a healthy meal and evening time with my partner. Therefore any work that I do cannot take over these parts of my life. That is work and life balanced in a nutshell for me.

Starting at Carleton this fall was a roller coaster. I somehow made the first two months far more stressful than they should have been. But in all fairness, moving to a new city only ten days before grad school contributed to my initial stress (and I would not recommend it to any one). On top of moving, as soon as I began my program I somehow managed to diminish my previous experience and accomplishments as an undergrad. Doing so seriously hindered my wellbeing and confidence and after the first two months of my Master’s program, I was already feeling burnt out. I knew I needed a sustainable change.

So this is what I did, and what I now do, to maintain a work-life balance:

1. I keep a very regimented work schedule. Every due date, TA duty, and commitment that pertain to my role as a student and my job as a teacher’s assistant is recorded. Nothing goes unrecorded – not even an email that I have left off to write later. Then I go one step further. In my calendar, I chart out the days I will set aside to complete my tasks for the entire semester. I stick to it – only changing my calendar if a new event or duty arises. I treat my schedule as set in stone so that I can make time for integrating the life side of things.

2. The best thing I did for myself mid semester of last term was to join a yoga studio. After a week of yoga, or five 1.5-hour sessions in a week, I got rid of my back pain that I cultivated over those first two hectic months. To commit to yoga (and the expensive fee) felt a little daunting. But once I reduced my “internet socializing” time, I was able to fit in regular yoga sessions. I will never go back to wasting my precious time by sitting at a computer longer than I have to again. As students and TAs, we tend to spend many hours hunched over screens, sitting at desks. Incorporating movement and stretching is crucial. It has also improved my academic performance since physical activity gets my mind off work and helps me regenerate concentration.

3. When I follow my schedule and make sure I achieved my deadlines for the week, I am able to relax for a night (without guilt) and hangout with my partner and friends. As long as I don’t fall behind my schedule, my life stays pretty balanced. After having experienced the initial two very stressful months, I am cognizant of injecting stress relieving activities into my schedule and sticking to it! I just make sure I don’t commit to things I can’t accomplish.
The domination of one's life and social relationships by one's professional activities is not a condition unique to academics. Over the last few decades, changes in labour and technological development have precipitated the seemingly perpetual subordination of one's consciousness to professional concerns or problems. Still, this development is acute in academia insofar as the professional concerns or problems one faces is without finite perimeters; one often finds themselves thinking about the activity of thinking itself; thus, the problem between life and labour for the academic is formed by the fact that professional life does not confront the academic solely as a set of outstanding tasks or finite problems; part of the labour of the academic is to cultivate a disposition towards the very activity of thinking; thought itself is the chief form, if by chief we meant the most continual input, of the academic's labour process. That professional life appears as a disposition to the academic is not inconsequential; rather, we have the peculiar problem that we are beset both with a large task that we are perpetually conscious of and, at the same-time, are engaged in the activity of thinking about thinking.

Professional tasks and activities can be allotted to set times and spaces or rather it is from consigning productivity activity to set times and spaces that professional life itself develops as a discrete sphere of activity. A disposition though is a disobedient thing; it will not tolerate being partitioned for it is a general conduct towards life and the events and social things that confront us; it is disfigurement, a disfigurement far more palatable than Cain's mark but a disfigurement nonetheless. Still, I think there are a few helpful things that can render the academic disposition more passive than active. First, I find that part of my tendency to actively work on my projects and, therein, spend less time with friends, my partner or on other fun activities, is when I feel that I have not otherwise accomplished enough. In other words, I find my inclination to be 'perpetually at work' is a product of feeling guilty or unsatisfied with the work that I have done. I have found that consistent focused-work carried out with set tasks or objectives in mind have alleviated my feelings of guilt. I structure my 'working' period every day of no more than 6 hours max. In this period though I have firm rules: no checking email, no random novelty sites (I have cancelled Facebook), no phone/texting. Before setting to work I have a mentally prepared list of things that I want to do during this time period- this can range from reading, researching, writing abstracts for conferences or writing paper articles. By having a list of available things I can do (rather than just amorphous task of 'doing my PhD') if I feel sluggish or unable to get any traction on one task I am able to switch to another and still feel some sense of accomplishment (note, the tasks need to be necessary). This is one way in which one can avoid feeling the need to devote my attention to my projects at the exclusion of all else.

Second, I also structure more than just my working period. I have found if things like exercise, activities (fiction reading, movies, playing a musical instrument) or basic elements of social reproduction are not built into my life, these things confront me as additional tasks or duties that I suddenly have to make time for; and, as such, when I do make time for exercise or other activities, I find them to be obligations rather than things I genuinely enjoy. However, if these things are built into the day, things you know you have to do, they are less likely to be sacrificed by work- except in exceptional circumstances like pending deadlines etc. I find if I approach things like exercise or social activities as part
of my working week or working month, I confront these things not as distractions to my work but necessary parts of the working process, breaks or chances for reflection. Last, and my thinking here may appear unclear, I try not to turn down social invitations but I don’t attend them if I feel I won’t enjoy them. In particular, I try to prioritize what needs to be done to ensure you can go and enjoy the activity without constantly focusing back or working through your projects. If you can’t get these priorities done and you feel strongly that they need to be done, don’t go. My reasoning here being that you will spend the evening preoccupied with work and feeling stressed not only about work but being at the event and being unable to work. I found when I felt this way I was unlikely to go out to another social event simply because my default position was that I did not ‘have time’.

These are just some strategies I use to try and keep a balance between what is a permanent disposition and a number of different social relationships. They might be suited only to my particular situation.

Reflection 3

I’ve found from talking to other grad students, that I am not alone in feeling like I am not very good at finding something that feels like work/life balance. I often have feelings of guilt or inadequacy when I compare myself to what I think others are doing and have to remind myself that while we can learn from each other, finding balance is a very personal endeavour. I do not feel that I have a lot to offer in the way of tips and tricks for finding a better balance but I think that reflecting on our own habits and challenges can be a helpful exercise in addressing some of these feelings.

I am in a position where school is a main priority so I find this often goes one of two ways. Either, I cut everything else out because I am feeling pressure (from my self) to spend more time on school. Or, I take advantage of self-imposed deadlines to ignore school and do other things. To me, this is the exact opposite of balance, and I need to make conscious efforts to find a middle ground.

I find that my biggest challenge is avoiding distractions during times when I have decided to work. This could be the Internet, or texting, or other things that I would rather work on such as TA work on so I have to actively try to avoid these distractions.

I have had to think about how and when I work best and then within that I try to treat school like a 9-5 job. I also try to make plans for activities outside of school and to try new things. This can include recreational activities or just getting out to explore Ottawa. Having some non-work activities scheduled in my week helps me to better use my designated work time.

Reflection 4

I wanted to be a part of this workshop because I think, like most students, balancing work/school and my personal life has always been a struggle for me. I have made some improvements in this area particularly since starting my doctorate and would like to share those with you here today. But, I am also interested in hearing what tips, suggestions, and ideas we can come up with as a group for finding a healthy balance between work and our personal lives and use those in my own life as well.
In terms of the experience that I bring to this workshop:

I know what it is like to feel like you are juggling a million different roles and responsibilities at once: Just last year I moved to this city to start a new program with my partner who I married in October of my first year in the PHD program (talk about balancing act). I know what it is like to try to maintain relationships with family members who live in various provinces. And, I know how tough it can be to deal with family illness and loss while in a graduate program.

Most importantly, I have experienced feelings of guilt for reading a fiction novel instead of sociological theory, for going to yoga instead of working on my comps or watching a movie instead of grading just five more papers. I’m looking forward to sharing some of the scheduling and time management strategies that I have used to build ‘down-time’ into my schedule to make sure that I feel productive while making time for my family, friends, partner, and myself.

On Scheduling and Time Management

- Scheduling work and personal time has helped me greatly to find a balance in my own life. I think building downtime into your schedule is an important element of making sure that you take some time away from work/school and for yourself.
- It is quite difficult to break the day up into work time and free time when you are in grad school- it's not the same as having a nine to five job. So, scheduling and time management become really key skills for ensuring we avoid burn out etc.
- At the risk of sounding business-like it is all about figuring out what times you are most productive and working through those times so that you can enjoy "guilt-free" free-time. For example, if you are a morning person use that time to work through some grading, reading, writing and then know when your limit is and call it quits. So, for me I know I am typically unproductive after dinner. So, I try to get as much done in the morning/afternoon as possible and then I spent my evenings doing something for me. Watching TV, reading a novel, talking with friends etc.
- Building in activities that ensure you are spending time off the books is also key: Take a yoga class, walk the dog, ride your bike, watch a favorite television show, go to a coffee shop with a friend and so on.
- Mutual Scheduling: Also, working with other important people in your lives that have a schedule that you can base yours on too is also really helpful. For example, My partner works during the day (8-5) so I tend to try to get my work done during that time so that I can take my free time when my partner has free-time. I know the same is true for my peers and friends who have children and work around their kids schedules. Another possible way to utilize this strategy is to make a schedule with a friend where you work during certain hours and enjoy some free time during certain hours.

- I want to emphasize that taking time for ourselves is key for actually getting through the program successfully and should NOT make us feel guilty. I think a lot of grad students
suffer from this guilt complex where if we are not working we assume we are slacking. As grad students we also tend to tell ourselves that everyone else is working far longer and harder than we are so we too must pick up the pace. However, this is NOT the case and scheduling time for ourselves helps to ensure we do not burn out. Even a little bit of free time goes a long way.