



AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

Work and other labours of love

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Source: [David Lyttleton \(URL=#\)](#)

The science professor

Sometimes my day starts as early as 3am. I have three young children, and I compensate for the time I make for them in the evenings and at weekends by getting up before they do. This gives me an average of about six hours' sleep a night, but I can't say I hit the ground running every morning: I usually require a good litre of caffeine to kick-start my day.

I am almost obsessive-compulsive about trying to maintain an empty email in-box. I turn off the email only if I have to meet a particular deadline - something I constantly struggle to do owing to my tendency to underestimate how long things will take. I receive an average of 40 or 50 emails a day and try to respond to students' specific queries about coursework or exams within 24 hours.

I love the variety of academic life, but sometimes I resent the fact that focusing on a single task for an extended period proves impossible. I'm currently a research council fellow, so I have only a third of my school's standard teaching load. In principle I could excuse myself entirely, but I really enjoy teaching so I want to keep my hand in during the six years of the fellowship (which I applied for to help me build up new research activity).

People have sometimes given me plants to brighten up my bland office, but I've always killed them through neglect within a couple of weeks. I spend three or four days a week there: the rest of the time I am away at conferences, workshops and meetings of the various committees and European networks with which I am involved.

There is rarely a time when I don't have two or three papers to review on my to-do list. I also skim-read between 10 and 20 published papers a week. Travelling gives me space to do this, but it also encroaches on my family time, of which I don't have enough. We need to focus more on videoconferencing. Meetings can account for up to 10 hours a week at worst, and most could be significantly shortened with no detriment to the business done.

The hardest part of running a lab is dealing with friction between its members; thankfully, though, that occurs only rarely. I drop into my lab regularly to talk to the PhD students and postdocs, but if I want to do an experiment myself, I come back at around 9pm after I've put the children to bed. Experiencing the tribulations of experimental science is important to connect you with your researchers, and I still love those rare moments (usually around 3am) when the experiment works and you see a facet of nature that no one has seen before.

The increasing number of incredibly dumb attempts at top-down university management also eat up time. The most recent irritation is my university's "personal development and performance review" system, whose documentation features some of the most patronising (and poorly written) junk I've ever had the misfortune to read. Despite management's best efforts, I do not subscribe to the idea that I should feel loyalty to the University of Nottingham's "corporate brand", and my objectives certainly do not automatically align with theirs, as they seem to think should be a given.

I get involved in quite a bit of outreach and public engagement. This includes video journalist Brady Haran's *Sixty Symbols* ([URL=http://www.youtube.com/sixtysymbols](http://www.youtube.com/sixtysymbols)) and *Numberphile* ([URL=http://www.youtube.com/numberphile](http://www.youtube.com/numberphile)) YouTube projects, which explain physics and mathematics to a general audience. It is gratifying to receive emails saying that one of the videos has convinced someone to study physics, or rekindled their interest in the subject. I've also been using YouTube to complement my undergraduate lectures.

I recently wrote a video blog that explains the links between heavy metal music and the Heisenberg uncertainty principle ([URL=http://physicsfocus.org/philip-moriarty-when-the-uncertainty-principle-goes-up-to-11](http://physicsfocus.org/philip-moriarty-when-the-uncertainty-principle-goes-up-to-11)) (it's on the Physicsfocus forum). I've been meaning to write something like that for about a decade because I'm a big heavy metal fan and listen to music all the time when I'm working. I also play guitar and write music.

Being Irish, I am genetically/culturally incapable of communicating in fewer than 140 characters, so I don't use Twitter. Besides, it would be a big distraction because I'm somewhat...let's just say argumentative.

I guard my free time with my family rather obsessively, so I rarely socialise with colleagues. In the evenings I play with my kids, help them with their homework and read them a story. I also sort out dinner if it's my turn. If my wife, a nursing auxiliary, isn't working a night shift, I spend some time with her. Otherwise I read the newspaper or watch a bit of television (with laptop open). But the last time I watched a film that wasn't from the Pixar/Disney stable was many moons ago!

When I started as a lecturer 16 years ago, I never expected to make it to chair level, so I'm more than happy. I am well remunerated for doing a job that, for the moment at least, allows me to pursue the research I like in a subject I love.

Philip Moriarty is professor of physics at the University of Nottingham

Readers' comments (4)

- [Neil Stanley](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/neil-stanley/2004212.publicprofile) | 07 Jun 2013 9:59am

Where are the programme leaders and teaching academics? The library and support staff? Those that work daily with the demands of the students who think that £9k buys them more than we know it does. As a teacher educator working to a schools schedule not a straight semester model I love my life (work and not-work frequently merge) but don't see anyone like me above.

- [Ken Haynes](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/ken-haynes/2003570.publicprofile) | 07 Jun 2013 10:36am

Dear Neil Stanley. Then write one



- [\(URL=http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/migrant-intellectual/2008612.publicprofile\)](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/migrant-intellectual/2008612.publicprofile)
[Migrant Intellectual](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/migrant-intellectual/2008612.publicprofile) ([URL=http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/migrant-intellectual/2008612.publicprofile](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/migrant-intellectual/2008612.publicprofile)) | 08 Jun 2013 11:57pm

Adjunct Day in the Life

I am always woken up on any given workday by 6am "mental math." I have no idea how I will be able to pay

my bills given the latest cuts in work hours or increased expectations of donated time per online or face to face course. Since my day feels like a treadmill, I tend to avoid the fitness club which is easy since I haven't been able to afford a membership since before starting graduate school.

If I had any time to think about not having enough time to attend to personal health, I would spend countless hours recalculating the lost time and money since the mid-1990s which would make difficult thinking on how I might manage some difficult students or force my expertise into a curriculum discussion or find the patience to attend another passive-aggressive adjunct orientation or meeting about how I need to know how to obey, to mind my place because a good team player does not complain about low wages and high demand and fatigue. I found that shutting down emotionally is the best exercise to help me deal with the length of my days.

The handwritten sticky notes I keep in course folders could very easily forge a sail to coast me away from the endless meetings and events that last well into the evening. I am a member of the Adjunct In Kind Donation Board and Adjunct Avoidance Committees at my college, in my region and across the nation, so these activities occupy quite a lot of my typical day. Then there is unpaid one-too-ones with every student and message by message replies to emails, posts to course discussions online, phone calls to students who "think the government is watching online so they prefer to use a land line," ad hoc meetings with rebel adjuncts and student allies and administrative double agents and state legislators, local politicians angling for re-election by pretending to care about labor abuse and the gross mismanagement of public education funds and maybe once or twice a term an ad hoc meeting with a college senior team member who carefully listens and expresses deep, very profound concern about adjunct labor matters but ultimately ends the meeting, the same meeting, for seven years, by saying: it's just business, and one of the many variations.

I therefore consciously have to block out most of the emotions and thoughts I experience any given day. I make time for detachment and nonviolence, to write clear sentences rather than rage-filled fragments and to be able to walk around the college and actively avoid chatting with staff and students for at any give moment they may mistakenly ask, "How are you?" I fear my answer; I fear for my very sanity should I actually answer that question without finding more power for the defensive shields that have been pounded for more than a decade by the enemies of higher learning.

I try to plan three hours ahead, as that seems to preternaturally fit the adjunct abuse cycle. I am constantly moving from triage to triage so I cannot reserve time for any form of "big picture" meeting. I have yet on even the best day found myself able to transport a course, a student, an idea from triage to intensive care. I failed most days to make a three hours deadline—prep, email, phone, meeting, paying this bill with this credit card, calling that parent or that relative or that colleague or sometimes the very person who cut my hours at the college for just a moment of sweet fiscal relief—a gas card, a grocery store gift card, an Exxon/Mobil discount auto service card. Needless to say, I am confronted by the simple yet deeply unnerving thought that I am not going to make it.

I'm often moving between car and classroom, cafeteria and library, downtown coffee house and WalMart café, because you cannot spend time in an office when you don't have one. The McCafe is not glamorous and doesn't have an executive feel to it, but it is spacious and open, with one wall that serves as a window to the other contingent workers I get to know. Many of them offer me free lunch because, well, that's just how they roll. We admire the new multimillion dollar renovations together as we sip our stolen Hi-C orange drink and devour the "comp'd" quarter pounder and cheese, large fries, and milk for the kids. I tended to eat with my family whenever we could plan a park day while I taught my classes, the wonderful blank stainless-steel façade of our faces changing colour in the different light of different working poor situations.

When we talked to Senior Staff recently about workloads, their response almost always included not having enough income to pay bills, buy insurance, or pay for basic necessities like rent and food. Rather than address our concerns, the Senior Staff introduced electronic punch cards to monitor our online and advising activities. Even though the numbers proved our case that we were working 6-8 hours above the contact hours without compensation for prep, grading, etc., we were told to log in less or help them by keeping our actual work hours off the records. After all, we're a team and we're all under pressure by the System (state offices) to work within budgetary constraints.

The Senior Staff expressed concern when we complained of the tyranny of email. They suggested we have a ready to use copy/paste series of statements we can forward to students to save time. So, if Billy wrote a complex question about Descartes or wanted to explore class issues in Buchner's Woyzchek, I would best answer both questions with "Thank you for writing [insert student name here]. Your question is a very good one that requires more time that I can give at this moment. Please bring your question to class or post it in a new thread on the discussion board."

It was also clear that my time spent email student was a function of my own choosing, not an intricate

part of the learning process that strengthened the relationship between student and teacher. To do my job, then, I needed to volunteer my time and talent whereas Senior Staff and Full Time faculty were compensated and contracted for their essential duties.

Every evening is occupied by work-related events. They felt most like a chore because they were unpaid. The pleasure of working closely with a student solving complex problems or exploring ways to overcome learning difficulties were always clouded by the simple fact that my superiors thought so little of me and the people assigned to my care. It was most satisfying to learn that my in-kind donations and extracurricular work with a few students across my time as an adjunct moved deeply impoverished and broken men and women from nothing to something, from feeling lost in the world to finding and embracing their own self-driven goals toward a life they were promised by an admissions counselor or orientation speech delivered by the Vice-President for Academic Affairs.

I enjoy activities outside work, but often time doesn't allow for deeper or more sustained engagement with music, writing, hiking, and theatre. So, no instead of donating my time teaching, I earn a considerable living in mass media (theatre, television, film, and internet) while donating my time to teaching and supporting adjuncts around the world in their struggle against the laziest of bee keepers ever to keep watch over the colony. I do not have time for my garden or exploring Food Network or even take in a full length DVD or Netflix program. I cannot tell you the last time I attended a sports game.

I feel very lucky as I never enjoyed my adjunct job and now enjoy even the most mundane of tasks with a production unit or the most satisfying moments of closing a multi-million dollar development deal. I have already experienced the lowest points and difficult moments across my late twenties and all of my thirties. But, my belief in the value of people taking their broken lives and weaving them together into a revolutionary community of teachers and activists means I am prepared to volunteer whatever time it takes to dismantle and rebuild higher education in a way that celebrates the day in the life of an adjunct rather than the mundane professional and highly paid struggles of university upper management.

- Catherine Mclean ([URL=http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/catherine-mclean/2008471.publicprofile](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/catherine-mclean/2008471.publicprofile)) | 12 Jun 2013 9:35am

Well said Ken Haynes.

As for the Migrant Intellectual, if you've found time to write a small essay's worth of negative comments on this article, then I'm sure you've got more time on your hands than you say you do.