Surveys for Wednesday 15 December 2010

Uid 11

Still formally off work, convalescing from my operation - signed off until end of teaching (on 17th December). Notice I say formally! Even though I personally arranged to get my teaching covered, it is not so easy to cover module leader duties on tightly organised modules with large numbers (one Level 2 with 65, one Level 2 with 120, and one Level 3 with 120).

So, I have been co-ordinating marks on assessments, project allocations, dealing with student queries and marking of assignments (this has been the one area where my normal quick turn-around has suffered). I have managed final year project supervision, albeit with a lighter touch than I prefer, but have kept all of my serious students going in my physical absence.

It isn't right that I f feel that I have no alternative but to do this work, even though I am signed off sick. My wife says,"What if you had a heart attack? - you \*\*aren't\*\* irreplaceable. Sure the courses would be affected and the students would suffer some upset, but that is not\*\* your\*\* problem." Easy to say when you haven't justified, written and crafted the courses from scratch, built and defended the staff teams, and put in lots of extra effort and creativity over the years.

However, given the assault on funding and staffing that I see coming from the senior managers in expensive suits (who are \*\*not\*\* having to apply for their own jobs again!) - I see no alternative to being \*\*less\*\* public-spirited and more defensive of my own health and well-being. Let the students complain about teaching standards when they are paying £9,000 fees - I will tell them to address every single complaint directly to the Vice Chancellor, their MP and the Prime Minister. I will be a mere functionary.

I have had to apply for my own job at the lowest level of departmental management again, but it is with no joy, and purely because I am thinking of maximising my pension in the 6-8 years I have left/can stomach before retirement. I just wish I could realistically afford to plump for the offer of Enhanced Voluntary Severance I have had.

Sorry to grumble - I am usually a can-do person, and I will continue to do my best in the circumstances we endure in the coming years, but I am more and more in agreement with a colleague's catchphrase that his "cynicism is hard-won". I wish it were not so.

Uid 13

This was a particularly odd 15th. (Perhaps all of my days are odd, and I'm simply more aware of it on the 15th of each month this year!) I have a group of collaborators at another campus two+ hours away by car. Today, I visited them.

So, I left at 0800, and I got lost. Rather, my GPS sent me to a new extension campus of the university, 36 minutes away from where I needed to be. So I arrived at 1045, rather than the 1030 I expected.

We had several matters to discuss, related to both research and teaching.

- We have a joint project around outreach to younger students about trying out CS. Their outreach activity hasn't yet started, so we discussed how to get it started.

- They have a high school CS teacher certificate program, the only one in the state, which is not currently succeeding. They had one student in the program, who dropped out in the first third of the first class. Only one other student has applied to the program. We spent much of the time talking about how to improve those classes, how to better communicate with the classes entail, and how to help students succeed in them.

- One of my students conducted a study of students in their online classes, and she's still not comfortable sharing the draft. I discussed the findings with them.

- Finally, there is a new call for proposals for next April. We discussed what we might do jointly.

Two hours later (by 12:45), I was back on the road. I stopped for a salad for lunch, and got back to campus by 3 pm. I did some email and worked on some travel reimbursements until I went home.

Uid 14

Woke up 30 mins early to make sure I had time to take a shower and have my hair dry before walking to campus for an 8:30 meeting.

This is Wednesday of finals week, which is significant because I had three service-oriented meetings scheduled for today. Some at these meetings complained about having one meeting during finals week. I was not unsympathetic, but I also made sure to mention my trio of meetings.

In my morning routine, the first thing I did was triage my email. Four new messages. One was a notification from a nearby graduate school that one of my students had applied, a message I had been expecting. Another was a personal email from the student, letting me know he had just submitted his message and "reminding me" that the letter of recommendation had to be in TODAY. I barely know this student to begin with, though I was instrumental in his getting a scholarship. Suffice it to say his letter of recommendation was submitted later in the day, but it was not strong.

Yesterday, our administrative coordinator said she was going to bring a crock of potato soup to share for lunch, so I asked my wife if she had the time to make some bread. She's been making a lot of bread lately, as she and her friends have gotten into the artisan bread movement, and she was kind enough to make a loaf for me to bring. It was hot out of the oven as I walked to campus. I was running a bit late, so I just briefly came into the main office and delivered the bread to the administrative coordinator, apologizing that it was probably not the best loaf. She was very excited, saying she hoped someone would bring something like this, and it made me happy to bring her some happiness, since she has been quite grumpy lately. (For good reason, incidentally, due to problems at home, but she has a hard time leaving the problems at home.) I will come back to this point in my day's chronology.

The first meeting this morning was an 8:30 one with my colleague M (history education professor), his colleague G (archaeology professor whom I don't know), coordinator of a service-learning unit on campus H (whom I had met due to previous work with M), and professional staff of a student-centered digital media support group on campus S (whom I didn't remember having met, but he assured me we had). This meeting was about a grant proposal that was primarily written by M, with some input by G. M asked me a few days before it was due if I wanted to be involved: the project is to create an interactive software experience (perhaps a game, perhaps not) that shows 4th grade students that there is more to archaeology than just digging. It sounded fun, and going for internal funds, had a high chance of getting funding. I provided just a paragraph or two, and it was indeed funded --- but this was our first face-to-face meeting about it.

M ran the meeting quite well. The most interesting thing to me is that G kept saying that he didn't think we would need any of his students for the project, and I kept telling him that we did: it's true that a team of all Computer Science or media production students could create something in 5 weeks in the Summer, but without the involvement of domain experts (or budding domain experts), it was likely to miss the point. Despite my saying this several times, I got the feeling that G didn't understand what I meant. It would not have been useful to explain the agile ideas of client-on-site, so I left well enough alone. We'll have some loose planning during Spring, and I will be able to help guide the recruitment process, so I'm sure it will all work out.

Next meeting was College Curriculum Committee, of which I am chair. The meeting was projected to take 30 minutes, but it took 1 hour 45 minutes. Only one thing on the agenda: approving the curriculum of the interdisciplinary Ph.D. in Environmental Science. I could write many essays on this experience, but suffice it to say that this effort represents everything that's wrong about higher education. The president got this idea in her head and has allocated an enormous amount of money to it, despite the fact that no faculty are really invested in it, and it is directly contrary to our mission for excellence in undergraduate education---which is why I came here in the first place. It's a top-down political push, with money attached, so no one is saying "no" to it, despite the fact that a $6M budget cut for the next biennium was just announced. I am especially sympathetic to a committee member who is from one of the departments involved, since it is clear that he has been unhappy with the lack of transparency involved. The whole thing stinks of politics, but there was nothing in the curriculum that we could really turn down, despite the fact that none of us thought it was a good idea. We ended up approving the curriculum, but we are going to submit a statement of our concerns for the record.

On the positive side, this same upset committee member congratulated me after the meeting for my "dance": how I had run the meeting effectively, ensuring that our concerns were brought up without identifying the person who anonymously voiced them, and how I was able to handle vastly different perspectives. Honestly, I didn't feel like I had done anything that great, but I'm glad this colleague felt that I did. One of my alumni on Facebook referred to my having "the curse of competence" recently, and I fear he may be right.

I was back to my building around noon, and after a quick processing of email, I went to the main department office for some soup. I was really looking forward to some social time with my colleagues, since we have practically none of that. It's fair to say that my department is dysfunctional, with at least two warring factions. Food being the social lubricant, I was happy for this excuse to share bread and soup. I came into the office, and none but the administrative coordinator was there. I asked what the plan was for soup, and her response was, "Just eat some." It was in the mail room, so I got some and went sadly back to my office to eat by myself.

I watched Zero Punctuation, processed some emails, and wrote the students letter of recommendation and submitted it. Then, I worked out a survey for my game programming students on which they could indicate if they give permission for their contributions to the semester project to be open-sourced. My main concern was with FERPA, that the contributions have students names on them, so I put an explicit element on the form where students could indicate if we can use their names and email addresses in the source release. I am hopeful that they will all agree. If they don't, I will likely have to replace their modules so that we can do an open source release. I think that it is worthwhile, since there would be a lot of value in others' seeing this code, especially since it uses an experimental software architecture that at least one blogger has put out a call for open source examples of.

Quick meeting with the chair to talk about end-of-semester business and my frustrations with our Chinese students. We have a program where they come here to study for their sophomore and junior years, but their language skills are just not up to snuff, even after a whole academic year of intensive English courses. No one at the university wants to hear this, because they are a cash cow. (Maybe I'm jaded, but I do think this is a major incentive for my university's participation, and I've heard similar stories from peer institutions.)

Next meeting is with the two co-chairs of the Future of Education Task Force. This is a great task force to be on, and in my own inimitable fashion, I have challenged some of the decisions that the co-chairs have made. I think they interpreted these in the manner they were intended, since they invited me to run our major meeting in early January. The meeting with them today was to discuss our upcoming meeting at the end of December and the following meeting in January. (Note that both are during Winter break, a time during which I have to complete an externally funded project and write a book chapter, both of which I obligated to before being put on the task force at all.) This was a positive meeting in which we made a plan to share subcommittee ideas in December in hopes of some convergence, and then in January to try to assemble ideas into a framework, which itself would go through at least one more prototyping iteration. It pleases me that this task force has adopted some of the vocabulary of design thinking, but I'm afraid most still haven't really seen the value of sketching and "proper" prototyping, by which I mean, designing explicitly to throw it away.

I was supposed to go to a holiday party with a unit on campus with which I am affiliated, but that was at 4, and by 3:30, I was done. My wife had mentioned that she wanted to go to an event downtown in the 4-7 window, so I came home to watch the kids while she did that. The rest of the night was spent being Dad and Husband, and a little bit of Mr Fixit with the mythtv box. As I type this, my kids are in bed, and my wife is now hosting the Women's Club Cookie Exchange. I will stay here and either grade, play games, or get on Netflix. At this point, I have a headache and am tired, so I think it will be the latter.

Uid 17

Daily Activity Log

Wednesday 15 December 2010

As I've described before, this year I am chair of the educational policy committee of my university system's faculty senate. As chair, I also sit on a variety of other committees and task forces, in particular the systemwide Senate Cabinet, whose membership consists of the president and vice president of the systemwide senate, the chairs of the standing systemwide senate committees, and the senate chairs from each of the individual campuses of the university.

The Senate Cabinet meets once a month at university headquarters, an hour's flight up the state from where I live. Today is the December meeting. So far I've been averaging about three trips a month for these various committee meetings, plus two or three web- or teleconferences. It's great for my frequent flyer miles and, given my long drive to work, it's not that much worse to fly up to headquarters. But I do find that it's harder than usual to schedule meetings on campus and the burden of paperwork---agendas, meeting minutes, memos for comment---has been daunting.

To make it to the 10:00 meeting, I have to catch a 7:15 a.m. flight, so I get up at 5:00 to shower and make it to the airport by 6:30. I go through security---I haven't quite gotten to the point my predecessor described, where the security personnel all knew his name, but I'm very efficient with the shoes and the laptop and the metal detector.

One of the pleasures of serving on this particular body has been renewing my acquaintance with the current chair of the faculty senate at the largest of our campuses. She and I first met about 25 years ago, when I taught at that campus; I gave a two-week short-course introduction for computing sponsored by the engineering dean to bring selected non-CS faculty up to speed on modern computing (on the occasion of the opening of a new computer lab, which she attended as a young faculty member in engineering. We hadn't seen each other from then until the first cabinet meeting this year.

Most of the issues discussed at this faculty meeting derived from our state's financial crisis and our university's budget problems, which were already difficult before the last couple of years' decline.

One issue was how to bring faculty salaries up to competitive rates; apparently our total remuneration is about 10% below that of comparable institutions, and now the gap is widening. The university had budgeted some money for salary increases this year, but it's likely that some of that budget will decrease due to unexpected shortfalls and anticipated mid-year cuts. Still, the faculty define the quality of the university, and a mass exodus is something we wouldn't recover from for decades. The complexity of the issue stems partly from the political difficulty of contemplating any kind of salary increase in this economic climate and partly from the byzantine complexity of the existing faculty salary system, which does an excellent job of recognizing faculty productivity (though not at competitively remunerative rates).

A second issue was trying to inform academic program reviews (the province of the faculty senate) with actual budget information (the province of the administration) so the faculty's decisions can be informed by the relative costs of the alternatives. A task force will be formed (on which I expect I will sit) to consider how to implement this.

A third issue was how one campus may have reduced costs by inviting major programs to consider the number of courses they require, and reduce that number (consistent with academic quality). Some programs apparently exceeded even the maximum recommended number of courses; many others were at the high end of the allowable range and, as a result of this effort, many majors did reduce the required courses.

A fourth issue was a redirection of endowment money on one campus without faculty senate consultation.

A fifth issue was how to deal with drastically increasing subscription rates to academic journals; the research and libraries committee is in the process of negotiating with one publisher about this, with a view towards shifting to an authors-pay model.

As it happens, I had another senate-related meeting the following day. In situations like these, the university will spring for a hotel room. So after today's meeting, I arranged to get together with a colleague who teaches locally. He picked me up, we picked up his son from school, and we had an informal dinner at his house where he and I could talk about teaching, institutional politics, and our respective kids. Mine's in college; his is five years old, already reading quite proficiently and studying Chinese. When he dropped me back at my hotel, I went out briefly for a glass of port and a cheese tray before retiring.

Uid 21

15 Dec 2010

Today will probably be an atypical day, as I finished grading and

turned in grades yesterday. For the first time in 3 months I don't

have any classes to rep or papers to grade. The 4-day conference I

went to last week is over, as is the all-day symposium I organized for

the day after the conference.

I expect to relax and catch up on my sleep debt a bit today.

7:15 got up

7:20 started breakfast

7:25 made tea and started reading e-mail

7:30-7:35 started this time log

7:35-7:45 read e-mail

7:45-7:55 commented on draft letter from professional society about

open-access literature policy

7:55-8:45 prepared a blog post about the open-access literature policy

and announced it on mailing lists

8:45-9:10 read local newspaper on line.

9:10-9:15 read more e-mail

9:15-9:30 read blogs

9:30-9:55 showered and got dressed

9:55-10:00 shared a new idea (that I got while showering) with my grad

student by e-mail

10:00-10:15 cut and paste narratives from file to web server. It's a

good thing I only had 15 students in the class, as it takes

about a minute a piece to enter the narrative evaluations,

not counting the time it took to write the narratives (which I

have been working on all quarter as I graded the students'

homeworks).

10:15-10:35 read and responded to e-mail

10:35-12:15 read and commented on grad student applicants

(about 5 minutes for each applicant)

12:15-12:20 read e-mail

12:20-12:35 lunch

12:35-1:50 shop online for used (or cheap) oscilloscope

1:50-2:10 reading and responding to e-mail

2:10-2:40 reading blogs

2:40-3:00 reading and responding to e-mail

3:00-3:10 evaluated computational experiment from Dec 3 and set up new one.

3:10-4:15 read blogs and updated E-bay bids on oscilloscopes

4:15-4:20 changed water in aquarium

4:20-4:40 lost the E-bay bids, looking for more oscilloscopes

4:40-5:15 modified program that analyzes pattern of answers to

international multiple-choice test. Still not finding quite

what I expected to in the data---now looking for different

patterns. This is more a hobby than a professional interest,

so I count it as recreation rather than research.

5:15-5:20 read e-mail

5:20-6:00 read blogs and kept trying phone system to see if I needed

to report for jury duty tomorrow (no, I don't)

6:00-6:15 worked more on program

6:15-6:30 talked with contractor and checked delivery of parts for

under-house fan (the battery and charge controller were

correct, but the fans have not arrived yet)

6:30-7:30 purchased oscilloscope and looked for function generator on e-bay

7:30-8:15 dinner and work on cryptarithm from last week's NY Times

8:15-8:40 episode of Whose Line Is It Anyway? with family (from the web)

8:40-9:00 night-time ritual with son (situps, pills)

9:00-9:11 read blogs

9:11-10:40 fixed program that analyzes pattern in the multiple-choice data.

Results now start to make some sense.

10:40-11:10 plotted parts of data looking for simple model to fit, but

having trouble with the way quantization messes up the curves.

11:10-11:15 brushed teeth

11:15-12:00 read a fantasy novel in bed

Overall a very relaxing day with nothing much accomplished. The

amount of e-mail (which often takes up a lot of my day) was typical.

Uid 22

6:00 - Time to wake up

7:30 - Away we go, lovely winter weather today and only -15 degrees outside, yesterday it was -25

8:03 - Arrived at work

8:30 - Started to fix some non-work related stuff. My fiber connection at home is so slow that I can't upload anything from home ... probably need to change the fiber converter tonight - I can't stand it anymore

9:10 - Started to select papers for my dissertation

9:30 - Started a long discussion about a course

10:05 - Back to the papers, first select resulted in 6 papers - need to read and remind myself what they were about

10:16 - Need to update my "study plan", hopefully this will be the last time I ever do this.

10:40 - Right now it feel like the major motivation for finishing my degree is to get rid of these #()/"&€) forms that I need to fill in

10:45 - Back to transcribing interviews

11:45 - The planning of spring teaching is on it's way and it's changing by the hour. Right now it looks like I'm teaching two python courses and is to develop/teach a distance learning course in HTML5 CSS JavaScript etc etc. None of which I really know, just dabbled with.

16:12 - Spend most of the afternoon transcribing interviews, will soon go and celebrate my advisors 50th birthday, then quick drive home to get my camera and then off to my wife's choir concert - she politely suggested that I come and bring my camera with me so I better do that. Then home again and try to fix the fiber converter and then set up my camera again for tomorrows big event. Looks like it's going to be a busy evening.

19:30 - Choir photography done. I really dislike that place, the lighting is really horrible and the windows in the background make flash photography really difficult

19:49 - Started changing the fiber converter ...

20:35 - After some really exciting minutes it turned out that I've managed to successfully change the converter, Working with fiber isn't fun, they are way too sensitive.

21:30 - Washing done

22:07 - Time to pack the photo gear for tomorrow and go to bed. The worrying thing is that I've now been sick for 65 days and lately things have started to become better in the last two weeks but today it feel like I'm getting sicker again. No fun.

Uid 23

Stayed home all day working on my research write-up. Contacted a collague at another uni for advice in a key area - will we lose this collegiality and support when more departments - and even unis - start to close? Lovely to just work on one thing, but it won't last as next term's workload beckons.

Found out today the new department we have been merged with does nothing for Christmas, while we have a tradition of fun parties. Miserable lot! Haven't got the energy to try again (3rd re-shaping in 8 years) - we'll just do our own thing...

Uid 24

Dec 18, 2010

On the 13th I spilled coffee on my laptop :-( As luck would have it, it survived :-) and now that I have my machine back I can contribute my entry.

On the 15th I had a leisurely work-session at home in the morning, grading practical coding exams. I went in for the afternoon, when I gave a 3 hour final exam. There were 209 students writing the exam; I had a few nervous moments when one of my invigilators didn't show up. Thanks to texting (SMS) we were able to get her to the exam within 15 minutes - pretty impressive use of technology. It turns out she had thought the end-time of the exam was the start-time.

After the exam I was very happy to head home!

Uid 25

At SRHE conference. Stimulating as ever,if mixed in terms of main speakers - two superb keynotes to date, an impenetrable keynote this morning and what looks like a recyled one in prospect. Smaller discussion groups and presentations fruitful.

Frustration with venue: my laptop dies and I depend on the hotel business centre for email access and it closes at 5 - so this entry is in haste and I do not feel I have time to compose my thoughts.

Hugely looking forward to a real rest this Christmas. This term with the cataclysms which appear to be engulfing the sector, has been gruelling. In previous entries I burned with rage. Just now I feel too tired for such a response, but know we have to maintain momentum in pointing out the social injustice of denying equality of opportunity to access,let alone the abdication of responsibility by government for a decently - not extravagantly,just decently - funded university sector which does not have caveat emptor as its motto. There are barricades to be manned...

Uid 28

Share project diary for December 15th 2010

In the heat of the middle term, I always imagine the last week of the semester will be relaxed as many of the lectures are consolidation and assignment workshops. I forget about the demands of stressed students who are working to the wire and need support immediately if it is to feed into their assignment. So far this week, there has been little time for relaxation.

My plan for today was to finish reading through the 8 PhD proposals for a faculty research meeting this afternoon and prepare a consolidation lecture for my MSc students tomorrow. I had a nice idea for this which involved developing three different version of the same software to illustrate different approaches and give examples that could be built upon for the assignment. Unfortunately, such examples do take a long time to prepare and the 50 minutes we are allocated for each hour of lecture preparation does not begin to cover this.

As usual, my first task of the day was to answer my emails. Although I try to keep on top of my inbox and file appropriately, I now have well over 1000 emails in my Inbox and deal with about 50 a day. Sometimes I can take a whole morning to sort these out. Today’s cases are dominated with MSc business as usual. I had to

\* deal with a student appeal from someone who had failed their MSc and then decided he had not had adequate support, but had not complained about this earlier;

\* explain to a desperate student that we could not hold a special exam board to consider his mark even though this means he will lose his job offer and his visa will expire;

\* reply to a satisfied MSc graduate who had enjoyed the degree ceremony and wanted me to act as a referee

I was pleased to have a lift to my research committee meeting as I was still recovering from a virus and not feeling up to cycling up hill in the cold to one of the other campuses. This was the first faculty research committee meeting I had attended now we were in a new faculty with Arts and Humanities. I was interested to see how my new colleagues would react to Computing PhD proposals and how my comments on proposals in disciplines such as Creative Writing and Sculpture would be received.

As it turned out, the meeting was quite an ordeal. The first part ran over by an hour due to input from the student rep and my colleague from Computing (who had been dozing due to jet lag) suddenly waking up and being very animated on the subject of research students being allowed to do some teaching. He wasn’t alone in his condemnation of our very centralized University system which does not allow for this.

Supervisors of the students submitting research proposals had been invited to the second part of the meeting in 10 minute intervals. By the time we began to address the proposals, there was already a queue of incensed supervisors waiting outside the door. Some were fuming by the time they were finally invited in to the discussion of the merits of their student’s proposal. Three Computing supervisors had been waiting for over an hour and then realised they could wait no longer as they had evening teaching and a class test to administer. I was able to defend these proposals but realised that criticism from others on the committee boiled down to the proposal forms not being filled in the way that was required in this faculty. Three out of the four Computing proposals were rejected for this reason. My questions about how criteria would be arrived at in a proposal relating to sculpture were met with deep disdain by the supervisor as I was informed they would “emerge”. I had to leave before the discussion of the final proposal as I also had evening teaching and it took all our local knowledge of back streets to negotiate the rush-hour traffic to get back just in time to pick up the key to the lecture room before the campus staff locked up and went home.

The number of students attending my assignment workshop was well below those attending the normal lecture session. I realised this was because they were busy finishing off assignments due earlier in the week, so my essay (due in on the Friday) had not even been started by many. I was able to spend time with each of the students there and hope this will help them improve their essay writing and analytical skills. With one student, whose essay draft I had already commented on earlier in the week and seemed not to have improved with his second attempt, I was not optimistic. One of the students there is deaf, so had an interpreter and note-taker in attendance. Even so, I am conscious that there are things that he often misses because of his disability and am pleased that he has managed to do so well on the course. However, I know that he finds the format and approach of an essay quite difficult and is much happier when the task is more constrained, such as when writing a computer program.

Once the workshop was over, I staggered back to the office feeling completely drained. I had been off work 10 days previously but was still not right. I knew this was because I should have convalesced for longer but was aware that there was no one else to cover and the students would miss their lectures. I now only had one more lecture to do (tomorrow from 5.15pm – 8.15pm) but it still needed preparing.

As I was quickly dealing with my afternoon’s emails before going home, a student from my MSc module called in for some help with his assignment. I had to tell him that I was too tired to think and he would have to come back another time. Luckily, his assignment is not due in until January. I dragged myself home, glad that the roads weren’t too icy, as I still have the bruises from falling off my bike the previous week. I ate my dinner and crawled into bed to gather energy for my last day of teaching in the semester.

Uid 28

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As it turned out, the meeting was quite an ordeal. The first part ran over by an hour due to input from the student rep and my colleague from Computing (who had been dozing due to jet lag) suddenly waking up and being very animated on the subject of research students being allowed to do some teaching. He wasn’t alone in his condemnation of our very centralized University system which does not allow for this.

Supervisors of the students submitting research proposals had been invited to the second part of the meeting in 10 minute intervals. By the time we began to address the proposals, there was already a queue of incensed supervisors waiting outside the door. Some were fuming by the time they were finally invited in to the discussion of the merits of their student’s proposal. Three Computing supervisors had been waiting for over an hour and then realised they could wait no longer as they had evening teaching and a class test to administer. I was able to defend these proposals but realised that criticism from others on the committee boiled down to the proposal forms not being filled in the way that was required in this faculty. Three out of the four Computing proposals were rejected for this reason. My questions about how criteria would be arrived at in a proposal relating to sculpture were met with deep disdain by the supervisor as I was informed they would “emerge”. I had to leave before the discussion of the final proposal as I also had evening teaching and it took all our local knowledge of back streets to negotiate the rush-hour traffic to get back just in time to pick up the key to the lecture room before the campus staff locked up and went home.

The number of students attending my assignment workshop was well below those attending the normal lecture session. I realised this was because they were busy finishing off assignments due earlier in the week, so my essay (due in on the Friday) had not even been started by many. I was able to spend time with each of the students there and hope this will help them improve their essay writing and analytical skills. With one student, whose essay draft I had already commented on earlier in the week and seemed not to have improved with his second attempt, I was not optimistic. One of the students there is deaf, so had an interpreter and note-taker in attendance. Even so, I am conscious that there are things that he often misses because of his disability and am pleased that he has managed to do so well on the course. However, I know that he finds the format and approach of an essay quite difficult and is much happier when the task is more constrained, such as when writing a computer program.

Once the workshop was over, I staggered back to the office feeling completely drained. I had been off work 10 days previously but was still not right. I knew this was because I should have convalesced for longer but was aware that there was no one else to cover and the students would miss their lectures. I now only had one more lecture to do (tomorrow from 5.15pm – 8.15pm) but it still needed preparing.

As I was quickly dealing with my afternoon’s emails before going home, a student from my MSc module called in for some help with his assignment. I had to tell him that I was too tired to think and he would have to come back another time. Luckily, his assignment is not due in until January. I dragged myself home, glad that the roads weren’t too icy, as I still have the bruises from falling off my bike the previous week. I ate my dinner and crawled into bed to gather energy for my last day of teaching in the semester.

Uid 32

Dec 15th. The middle of final exam week - the second busiest day of the term (second only to the first day of the term!).

We start the day at 4:15am. There are lots of emails to answer - all variations on a theme: "my grade is not where I want it be, how can I recover?" Wow. I wish I could answer this question at the beginning of the term more forcefully - there is no way to improve your grade during finals week. It might change a little (in either direction), but certainly not 2 or more letter grades. I craft one good, heartfelt email along the lines of "Perhaps now that you have a grasp on the vocabulary of the topic, you can join us next term and really shine" and send it to all the supplicants. I never hear back, so who knows if that works.

After the emails are answered, it's time to grade. 40 essays, written by math students. We are trying to encourage critical thinking across the board - students need to synthesize their thoughts, the concepts, ideas, and vocabulary of the course. The results are hit or miss. As I am grading, I am keeping notes. What can be done to improve writing in this course? There is no writing prerequisite, so everything has to be done here. There is no assumed knowledge here - many of these students simply cannot read, write, or do math much above the middle school level. How do get the message out? I have no answer. Small steps, one more change for next year.

Time for lunch. As is normal, today is my lunch meeting with my faculty mentor. We talk about funny things students write on evals and exams. Buried in the discussion is how to avoid some of those oddly worded criticisms, how to get around being the worst. teacher. ever. period. Always excellent words of wisdom. Constant communication seems to be the key.

Off now to administer my last exam of 2010. Only half the class shows. How very odd. No way to pass if you don't make an attempt. They take the exam, while I finish my grading. An hour after the last student leaves, I am done with everything except this last exam. The actual grading can wait, but a quick look-see shows that they really didn't study. They depended on remembering everything we discussed (it was a comprehensive exam). They didn't. Oh well. We'll see how this affects their grades.

I set all the papers in my office, turn off the computer and the lights and head out. We are supposed to have bad weather (again), so off to the grocery store. I get home about 9pm, check the mail, and go to bed. Tomorrow is another day.

Uid 34

15 December 2010

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07:40-08:00 Breakfast

08:00-08:15 E-mail

08:15-08:45 The three S's (s\*\*t, shave, shampoo)

08:45-09:00 Bus into University

09:00-09:10 Look for presentations by candidates for a chair in an intellectually adjacent department, which is in my dairy for today: then check original mail: it's tomorrow.

09:10-09:30 Admin, including buying stamps for Xmas cards

09:30-09:45 Discussions with Dept's Director of Research on how to motivate staff to apply for research grants. Many people quote the University's costing system as the obstacle, but we conclude it's a proxy for the general bureaucracy.

09:45-10:30 More admin, chasing up personal tutees etc. Long debate about ontologies: I am tempted to ask how many ontologists can dance on the head of a pin.

10:30-11:30 Sort out Programme Committee etc. for a conference I'm chairing next July.

11:30-11:45 Discussions with computer support on why my e-mail system mistags PDF attachments: turns out it's MY Firefox on MY laptop that's to blame, but we still don't know why.

11:45-11:50 Remember it's SHARE day and complete the diary above from my usual TRAC return.

11:50-12:00 I'm standing in tomorrow for a colleague on our jointly taught course, as he's on the interview panel for this chair: check on what I'm meant to do.

12:00-13:00 Lunch with one of the chair candidates: wants to discuss the University's High Performance Computing with me (I manage it).

13:00-13:15 Admin

13:15-14:10 UCU Local Association AGM: I present an update on the USS "reforms"/robbery of our deferred pay/

14:10-16:35 Graduation and walk Hon. Grad. (Marcus du Sautoy) down to station. He reminds me, which I had completely forgotten, that we examined a thesis together 12 years previously.

16:35-16:50 Bus to colleague's house.

16:50-19:15 E-mail, worried students (no, I don't know what I covered in week 6, but if you tell me what the things in your notes are either side of the gap, I'll'll be able to tell you what's missing); reference for an MSc student of 2007/8 (fortunately I've done one before for him, and it's on my laptop); conference admin; more ontologies. All interspersed with cooking dinner for colleague and eating it. TRAC records 1 hour of 'pleasure', the rest admin of various kinds.

19:15-21:45 Walk to Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, attend, bus and walk home. Meet chair candidate (see lunch) again by accident.

21:45-21:50 Post from Nectar, and check on-line account to see if I qualify.

21:50-22:20 Finish and e-mail reference for MSc Student.

22:20-22:30 More misc e-mail.

22:30-23:00 Work on updating lecture I'm giving to school children in Dundee on Friday, to persuade themof the benefits of studying computing.

23:00-23:15 International Mathematical Union is looking to dispensing advice on mathematical software, which MIGHT be a very tricky area. The Committee I'm on is being asked to look into this, and we have some useful e-mails flowing.

I've worked a 37.5 hours week, and it's only Wednesday.

23:15-23:45 Sudoku on an Australian site.

Uid 38

Marking!!!!!

Apart from that, I had a meeting with a representative of a local SME to discuss some possible consultancy work funded by a grant from an external body. There's a lot of pressure to bring in new money, for obvious reasons. This contact seemed quite promising, but it's too early to tell.

I volunteered to invigilate an exam for evening class students which, because it takes place in the evening, has to be organised and staffed from within the department rather than by the Exams Office. Fortunately, the weather is a bit kinder than it was last week, so all the students managed to get to the exam, and just as importantly, they and I managed to get home afterward! The university decided a while back to bring in external invigilators for centrally organised exams, rather than using academic staff, so I haven't done this for a while - forgot just how mind-numbing it is.

Meanwhile, the outlook for the next while is marking, marking, and then some more marking...

Uid 41

Got up, ignoring the whole breakfast thing, and straight to reviewing a journal article I promised a colleague I'd have done the Friday before. Got another 5 pages through it before brain started to go weary; moved onto doing some housework to avert disappointment from my better half when she gets home. Off to kung-fu in the evening to grade the students; came home without any significant bruising! Spent the last couple of hours writing some code (in PHP, yuk!) to deal with module evaluation, avoiding the centralized system provided by the University which, frankly, sucks as far as analysis of results and customization is concerned. Settled down to sleep with a nice mindless action film (can't remember which one, fell asleep!).

Uid 45

I have been grading finals all day and my back is killing me from hunching over a table or desk or wherever I am. I took my grading to the Chinese restaurant last night, and to the coffee bar later. I am determined to get them all done and everying turned in before I quit for tonight.

I am in my office with the door closed and paper taped over the windows so I don't get students wondering when the tests will be done.

I do see a light at the end of the tunnel! Or, is it an approaching train?

Uid 46

Extremely busy week, attempting to clear my desk before holidays in the US with family. Highlights of the day:

1. Meetings with all of my 4th/5th year students regarding their projects; lasts meeting before the holiday break; all making good progress except Y, who is experiencing health problems; after consultation with class head, have put Y in touch with appropriate support people in the university

2. Met with Head of College to discuss P&DR ratings for professoriate in School

3. Met with PhD student that the University disciplinary committee had expelled; bad situation, cannot do anything with or for him, indicated that his only recourse is to appeal the decision (unlikely to have any positive effect)

4. Met with two PhD students for which I am 1st supervisor, M is doing well, R is still a problem. Once again emphasized to R that he simply must write substantial portions of his dissertation over the Xmas holidays, and that I expect to see large PDF files to review when I return.

5. Met with problem PhD student (has successfully appealed two decisions to terminate studies) and his supervisory team to lay out exactly what he has to do in order to continue to pursue his PhD. We have set an achievable, but aggressive, set of quarterly milestones, with termination as one possible outcome at the end of each quarter.

6. 2-hour programme committee meeting by Skype this afternoon (5-7); managed to resolve all borderline accepts/rejects except one.

7. I am well and truly beat, collapse with a glass of Paiullac this evening. Full day of meetings tomorrow and Friday, so I can fly to the US on Saturday. I intend to sleep on the plane all the way to San Francisco ...

Uid 47

15 December 2010

Overslept to 7, fortunately we're a smooth, finely oiled machine here in the morning and so we'll probably get the kids to school on time. Except for the not finding socks and stuff like that…

It's finals week so schedules are a bit kerflooey. Both kids have field trips this evening and we're trying to coordinate getting everyone where they need to be with only one car. My kids, somewhat proudly (I hope), have noted that they are the only kids at school with 0 TVs and 1 car in the family. It's fine until you realize the planners expect us to have more of those things.

8:45 Kids to school, now getting ready for the kind of meeting I hate to attend.

10:20 Ah, joyous meeting, glad it's done. Now waiting for a student to arrive for a make-up final. She's a student that tears my heart out, lots of personal problems but determined to finish this course. In the meantime, trying to provide guidance on broken code for students whose project is due in 2.5 hours…

11:00 Student needing make-up final is working. Broken code student is probably helpless but at least I tried sending advice. I am also now receiving the parade of faculty in person or email telling me about various students that may be upset about grades (generally resulting from the student not showing up for the final).

11:07 One of my students sent me the perfect comic for today: http://xkcd.com/69/

12:00 An hour of helping students makes the time fly.

12:30 Why is it so hard to convince people that touching students is a bad idea? It's not about being loving to the student, it's about recognizing you don't know what traumas they've had that your touch might trigger.

1:00 And away we go with the final. Nice to be done with this course. Nice students but not as willing to work as one would hope. While they're working on the exam, I will be grading their final project.

2:30 Wow, just finished grading the first of the final projects. Should I care less why it doesn't work? But it was so close I just had to debug to find the error… Meanwhile, we're now getting worry messages from Provost and some students about the inclement weather headed our way. It could make finishing finals week difficult. I'm not so worried about my non-majors and their final, but I'll be sad if it means we have to cancel the poster session that was going to run during my upper level elective tomorrow. I want people to see the nice work they've done.

2:55 The last student has finished just as I finished grading a second project. Yay.

3:30 Money from the bank, christmas cards distributed to the staff, checking in our new hire as she finishes her first semester, and catching up with a retiree. Maybe back to grading now?

1:00 am Well. From 4:00 - 8:00 I was with my son on a field trip to the museum center and observatory. Sixth graders who have recently studied astronomy make for a very excited and inquisitive bunch.

From 8:30 until just this moment was games night with the computer science club. I was dethroned as the monopoly champ.

So now I need to catch up on 9 hours of email, wondering how many panicky students will have sent mail regarding the weather.

1:10 am Only one panicked email, not too hard to handle. Time to get some sleep because unless they cancel school, I need to be back there in less than eight hours.

Uid 49

Today is the Wednesday of the week AFTER final exams. Final course grades were due yesterday at noon, and I even managed to make that for my 700+ students across 3 courses this term. The BIGGEST and most SUPER important thing about today is that it was to be my first official day NOT “teaching CSE3” since probably early September. Of course, I did end up tracking down one more student grade – a guy taking it from outside the university, -- taking a freshman course after already having a bachelor’s degree – and he had no midterm grade. Never an email from him. So I unilaterally decided to give him his final exam score for the midterm one so he wouldn’t “fail” and he thus earned a low C. Sigh.

(BTW, I just realized that to remember what I did, I should look at sent mail. Normally my gmail calendar holds all knowledge, but as this is supposedly “break” it looks rather empty – especially since I’ve been working in my office solid since 7am) This morning, my first goal was to beg off on a “test” I was supposed to help administer to determine if a foreign graduate student has sufficient English language skills to be a TA. The other administrator is excellent and has heard me ask “explain the difference between stacks and queues” and “how do you explain how to insert an element into an already full array” so many times that despite being a linguist with no programming experience whatsoever, she’d be more masterful at these explanations than just about any faculty member in the dept.

Next, a graduating PhD student who has TAed for me many times and participated in CS education research with me (including adopting peer instruction when he taught a course in summer school) dropped by. He is on the job market this year for a “teaching” faculty position in the US. The market is probably bad this year, but he already had one interview and they made him an offer on Monday and want him to accept in 5 days. Most other institutions won’t even interview until late Jan or Feb. So we talked about strategy for delaying, I made a personal request that his favorite school try to consider him NOW even though their application deadline isn’t until mid-Feb and we spent an hour discussing what points to negotiate with the Dean. Argh. Like I know this. I probably did a bad job myself, and bizarrely for the 3 jobs I have had, I was only “applying” one place at any given time.

Then I got back to what I was supposed to spend un-interrupted morning time on – working on a grant proposal we need to finish in a few days. Got like 45 minutes of time out of the 2 hours I was hoping to spend. But it was fairly effective time. Then I got to spend a nice 1.5 hours with my colleague here on sabbatical (that I am writing the grant with) and we got to have nice discussion about our planned research – which looks at the impact of the course I just designed and taught. It will look at how various instructional design aspects of peer instruction led naturally to 2 key (hard to assess) learning goals for the course – analysis and communication skills.

Just before running off to a dept meeting, I managed to finally touch base with my Dean who is trying to offer me a directorship position regarding teaching and learning on campus, and the process is one month delayed because, get this, my university can’t figure out how to hire me. I am already a senate faculty member… I don’t get it. Luckily, since I can’t actually give up my teaching requirements, since there’s no one else to cover them, I am teaching a crazy 450 students in one course, AND it’s the subject of my research, the “hiring” problem is kind of moot. I’ll do the job anyways, and ask for some extra resources in terms of students to “cover”.

Luckily! No faculty meeting! When was it cancelled? I don’t know, I have been ignoring almost all email all term…..

Finish off the last of grades, negotiate for extra TA resources due to possibly new director position… Back to lunch. Skip lunch, work more on grant. Faculty member from cognitive science who is teaching CS1 for “them” next term comes by to talk for 60 minutes about using clickers. He’s already assigned them, but doesn’t know how to use them effectively. Luckily he’s a good guy and listens and really had the right idea already, so I think it will go well. Although when I review his teaching evals on ine I’m a bit more concerned. But I advise him for an hour. Back to the grant. Brain is pretty toast at this point – we work 40 more minutes, then realize we should be doing our Share project journals since it is the 15th. (Where’s the email reminder today? There wasn’t one. Takes 5 minutes to figure out the link…).

Now husband is here, off to the gym to run, then meeting a new TA who is a beer brewer at one of the best bars in the world… &#61514;

Uid 50

We're on the semester system, so there's a flurry of activity this time of year. As I type, I'm watching 22 students from my computer organization course struggle over their final exam. (Later this evening, I'll be struggling with the grading.) I've been swamped with the final crush of grading, exam creation, and (soon to be) exam grading. The end is in sight!

Additional issues on my plate today: Revising and expanding a letter of support for a colleague's NSF grant. (Mentioned in the 15 October 2010 entry.) Multiple meetings with students who are trying to line up independent projects for the spring semester and need my approval. A chat with the chair about one of my departmental colleagues who's almost certainly going to leave us because he (and his relationship) are having difficulty surviving in the face of an academic workload.

I'll expand on that last item, since it's on-target for the Share Project: This colleague is a relatively new hire -- he's finishing his second semester with us, and came straight out of graduate school. He had a stellar academic pedigree and fantastic research credentials. He could've gone anywhere in academia or industry, and we counted ourselves extraordinarily lucky to have "landed" him. In the span of two semesters he's so discouraged by the demands of a faculty position that he's going to look for a position in industry. To be fair, he's a perfectionist, and puts MUCH more time into his lecture prep and grading than he should, but doesn't want to do the job unless he can "do it properly".

Uid 52

This morning involved a range of meetings with individuals to try to progress some funding bids I am working on. I seem to be more organised than the usual scenario of hearing about a potential source of funding 3 days before the deadline – however, there are still frustrations in having had so many snow days that people are still catching up on things they have fallen behind with. Also I will need to get signatures before everyone disappears on holiday.

It really has been a disrupted few weeks thanks to the big freeze. In the end I had about a week where I couldn’t get into the office due to snow, ice, frozen pipes, power cuts and public transport disruption. At least I can do a lot of work from home but we ended up having to cancel some teaching which never feels good. The University also cancelled some exams, which I think must be very difficult for all students and staff involved. So there has been a lot of catching up this week and my diary is busier this week and also in early January as a consequence.

I spent some time catching up on emails this morning and giving feedback to two members of staff who have sent me drafts of work related to the PG Certificate they are doing. These are pieces of work they are resubmitting because they failed their year 1 assessment. It always feels difficult failing members of staff and I am committed to spending the time necessary to help them make sense of the feedback and to know what kinds of things they need to work on in order to make a successful resubmission. Often it is similar things we are picking up – the need for more evidence that participants have engaged with the learning and teaching literature and made sense of it in relation to their own practice. Also commonly we are trying to encourage a deeper level of reflection upon their teaching practice. It was encouraging to see that both of these participants had really listened to, and acted upon, the feedback they had received.

It was a lovely surprise this morning to receive a Christmas card from a member of staff who completed one of our programmes a few years ago. She is still very positive about her experiences on the programme and it is great when people stay in touch. In fact this turned out to be the start of a run of really nice thank you messages sent by programme participants saying how much they had enjoyed the experience this year. It is so nice when people take the trouble to say thank you – it is not only affirming, but sometimes these messages are sent by participants who I haven’t been entirely sure how they would judge their experience of the programme.

Off to a meeting at lunchtime with my team to discuss the MEd in Academic Practice proposed new timetable options. This was such a valuable meeting for me and the feedback will let me move on with the design and suggest some concrete ways forward in terms of wider consultation about this programme. I then ran straight from this meeting into teaching. I was running a session on Course design for members of staff from all different disciplines. The first challenge was that it appeared the pipes in the building had frozen and there was no water – so no water cooler (linked to the mains) and no coffee machine (linked to the mains) and no toilets if you wanted to flush! So we managed to find some bottles of water in the building and I assured everyone we would have a break after an hour to enable folk to go to get a coffee elsewhere.

The teaching went well, with participants asking lots of really thoughtful questions and engaging in good discussion with each other. They were enthusiastic about the practical task of designing their own course with aims and learning outcomes and assessments that all aligned well. I used to find in this session that people wasted a lot of time deciding which subject they were going to concentrate on and what level of students it would be aimed at, so now I use some write on wipe off dice and write the different possible levels of students on one die (first year, masters etc) and on the other one I ask them to write different university disciplines. This way each group throws the dice to ascertain what kind of students they should be designing their course for and in what general subject. This is effective in focusing them a bit quicker whilst still leaving a bit of space for choice of topic within a broad discipline. It also models the use of more unusual resources that they can try with their own students – something I try to do frequently.

I ran straight from this teaching into a PhD supervision meeting. I am lucky I have PhD students looking at such interesting topics. I always learn as much from them as they are likely to learn from me. This student is at the stage of nearly having finished all his data collection and feeling slightly overwhelmed with all this qualitative data and how to make sense of it. I felt this was a really seminal meeting because the other supervisor and I both emphasised that it was common to feel anxiety at this stage in not knowing how to ever make sense of all the data, but that from here things will be likely to get interesting as he immerses himself in the data. He has fed all his data into NVIVO and has had a go at coding the data. He was originally quite resistant to using a software package for coding, but I think the amount of data he has and the successful first try at coding the data has made him realise the power of this technology to help him in searching and categorising the data. We were able to spend time discussing the nature of the codes and how they linked to each other and asked numerous questions to try to stimulate ideas about how to go forward from here. I think there was a real sense of achievement shared around the table as to how well he has done to get to this stage within the timescale when studying for a PhD part time.

Then it was a bit of a dash for me to run to the station to catch a train home because I new my mother and father in law were coming for dinner. Thankfully my husband had already done the cooking, had cleaned the house and had made me realise how lucky I am, even if I hadn’t had time to go to the toilet since midday!

Uid 53

It's the end of Viv's course, the one that I've been working alongside on my sabbatical out here. Yesterday, the final grades were resolved for the 570 students on the course. The difference between the UK and the US is so marked at this point - nearly all students in the US got A or B, and a tiny tail technically failed with below a C - whereas a D is a pass in my institution in the UK.

And so many points towards this final mark are given for participation. "Students go where the marks are." Although I find this slightly odd, there are interesting consequences: the students had a "take home" part to their final exam which was termed a "reflective essay" and was in reality an extended evaluation form to help with Viv's research. Great!

Now we're working on a grant application to further analyse what's been going on in the course - in particular, in Peer Instruction discussions,

-what do students speak about

-even with PI, how much time is really spent discussing

Growing realisation over the last few days and weeks around the strange emphasis we put on construction in CS - not like this at all in other subjects - far from us, Eng Lit doesn't expect graduates to be able to write Jane Eyre, and closer, Engineering don't really teach the specifics - there's too much in the subject to do that. So why do we? This particular course of Viv's appears to have been particularly good at developing students analysis and communication skills, though not necessarily their construction skills. Perhaps this is a better way to start embedding students' skills in computation?

No e-mail from back home! (Christmas!) I notice how ever more quickly the corridors empty out once teaching is done, whether it's in the UK or here in the US. Where does everyone go? Do so many of us work at home? Or have visits away in the vacation? Or are there large armies of academics sitting at home, feet up with a beer, recovering from the onslaught?

I've just been to the loo, and in the cubicle next to where I was standing doing what men do, I could clearly hear intermittent tapping on a keyboard. Now, \*\*that\*\* is taking work toooo seriously!

Uid 59

Morning - write feedback for a re-submitting MSc student; catch up with online forum of Cologne and GCU students, follow up potential project partners, submit expense claims.

Afternoon - Department Meeting to discuss the third university reorganisation in as many years. Meet collegue to discuss FP7 proposal. Chase up spare equipment for visiting students from Crete who will be on a training placement at GCU from January.

Uid 60

I woke up to find grey skies and a forecast that promised single digit temperatures. My day revolved around the programming class that I taught from 12:30 to 3:30.

I spent the morning clearing my email inbox. There was some good news. The local telecom giant has agreed to take three of our students for a work experience stint. This has taken two months of correspondence and telephone calls to set up! Now I have to chase the students to get their schedules for January. Another bright spot for the day is confirmation from a local IT professional to teach a project management module. Nice to know that local professionals want to share their experiences with our students!

In the staff room there is a discussion about the looming Christmas break. Like me, most of my colleagues seem to be happy to stay at home and avoid airport chaos. I spent the rest of the morning grading assignments and returning feedback. A couple of students came to show me their progress with the next assignment. They have decided to tackle the challenge level and I am pleased with the effort they have put in.

I returned from the programming class feeling very satisfied. The role plays to understand how to associate classes was fun. The student pairs managed to generate their javadocs and create jar files. The noise level was high at times, but the engagement was intense. I still have a problem with the low language ability of one of the students. He did not attend the session arranged with the programming tutor. However, he has signed up for extra language classes, so I guess he has prioritised his requirements.

It started raining with squally winds. Later in the afternoon, I had my annual medical check-up. My doctor was impressed with my blood pressure readings. I left the hospital and spent the rest of the evening at home with my husband.

Uid 65

0700h Arrived at work, a cold biting wind blowing through the car park. Had a shower in the Law School as our boiler is under repair…. Good to know there are occasional perks to the job!

0730h Began to prepare my third year lecture on applications of periglacial geomorphology. Being the penultimate day of term, I wonder how many will actually turn up this afternoon?

0900h Held my final group session for the final year project (dissertation). Most supervisors just have one-to-one meetings with their students but I decided a couple of years ago that in the early weeks and months I was repeating myself – saying the same thing about ‘how to write a literature review’ etc to students over and again. So for the past two years I’ve held group sessions for term one – I then revert to one-to-one meetings in term two. I think today’s session went well – only two turned up but that made them less inhibited about speaking and contributing. They asked lots of questions and took the opportunity to browse through some past dissertations – good and bad.

1015h I was supposed to be meeting with two students who missed the assignment drop-in on Tuesday for the third year unit. However, neither turned up. That’s disappointing, when I have made a special effort to accommodate them in terms of fixing a time to provide them with a back-up for the session they missed due to work commitments.

1130h I received an email from one of the students who missed my earlier meeting . She apologised and explained that her laptop has broken and she didn’t get the email I sent her two days ago…… Anyway, re-arranged the meeting for 1.30pm. Continues working on my lecture for this afternoon, in amongst numerous interruptions from ‘urgent’ emails, phone calls, and various people ‘popping in’ to ask questions or dump more work on my desk. This is what is so frustrating about my job – if left alone to just get on with it I’d be fine! But I just get hassled from morn till night – is it no wonder that so many academics prefer working at home.

1300h Popped out to get a sandwich and then saw my student at 1.30pm. Then gave my two-hour lecture from 2pm. Fifteen students turned up out of 31. In my day as a student this would have been considered appalling, but nowadays it seems to be considered a reasonable turnout for Christmas week. One of the students who failed to turn up is coming to see me tomorrow for another one of those ‘missed assignment drop-in’ one-to-ones – I’ll make my feelings known to him!

1600h Lecture over, one of our part-time staff is leaving just after Christmas so we retire to the pub for an hour or so to say goodbye. Afterwards I shuffle back to my office to complete a few lecture note uploads and prepare for tomorrow. I leave for home at 1815h.

Uid 69

Oh.. end of term looms with all the consequent problems. Last minute student queries, managing that bit, but not all the last minute staff meetings, they are worse than students as in leaving it until this week to sweep up things we were asked and responded to ages ago and then nothing happened, so now expect a fast response!

I am so behind myself and chasing my tail I feel like I cannot really do this diary entry justice this time. It will just be a rant.

Am annoyed about various things and just need a break!

I will come back after big piles of marking renewed and more positive, I am sure (?)

Students fed up. We are all fed up. There is no money, all budgets shot to pieces. No Xmas cheer here.

Very negative. Sorry folks.

Uid 70

Well with the weather and battling to get in some days this has been an okay day. I managed to read some articles on the way in which is unusual but made a nice change.

This morning a collague from our academic development unit and I are running a workshop for 30 new external examiners. This is a new event for us but was a good monring discussing their role within the University structure and then having the programme directors come to meet them at the end of the morning. It was an opportunity for them to share experiences they had elsewhere and for those who had not done it before to gain from the discussion.

Lunchtime I then had a meeting with some collesgues about a one day research workshop that we had run the week before and to look at what worked well and what we might change for future events.

The end of the day was spent interviewing with a colleague for a part time research assistant for one year. We had 17 applicants and they were good so we had shortlisted to six but on the day only four came for interview. We did however have good candidates and have offered the job.

All in all this was a good day with an opportunity to explore a range of activities that as a team we are involved in

Uid 71

Last week of term. Knackered.

Wednesday does not usually involve teaching but this term I am supervising my 3 undergrad dissertation students. I am doing this as a group in the hope that we can create some team spirit (not really a success) and/or encourage critical reading of one's research (remains to be seen). One of the 3 is off sick, of the 2 that turn up one is decidedly hungover.

We have a mercifully short meeting about work submitted. We have spent the term designing research projects, from defining an area, looking at the literature and turning it into research - i.e. operationalising concepts. This is hard work and they have mainly pushed themselves. Research is not like normal study and I have been trying to emphasise the fact that it is different and requires them to think independently. I read some really awful dissertations last year and am determined that these 3 be really good and they all seem determined to work really hard. One has said that she really needs a first. I find this really annoying: when I was at uni we were grateful for whatever mark we got and I knew few folks who were ever that explicit about it. I am trying to see this as a pedagogic issue and use it as an opportunity to make explicit what counts as a good research project without being too prescriptive...

I am also trying to finish a journal article. It's getting there. It has taken me a year so far. I am an early career researcher and have been told to aim for high quality peer reviewed journals. It has been a massive task but the journal editor has taken an interest and has been really encouraging. This will be the 3rd time I have submitted it so it's now or never, really. A colleague has offered to proof read which is really helpful and I like the pressure of knowing it has to be done soon and it has to be good!

I am also moving house soon. So much to do, so little time!

Uid 72

Arrive at University 9:15 to attend course on Strategic Leadership together with other Heads of School and similar. Like a lot of these sorts of things, the course is a mixture of useful techniques and ideas and fairly useless ramblings. Have lunch as part of the course, then from 13:00-15:00 I have a further session with the same group about the student admission process - this is much more focused and gives me some useful information. From 15:00-16:30 I see a PhD student who has lost his direction somewhat and have a substantial talk about his work. 17:00-18:30 I go to listen to a research seminar talk (on the way over stopping to hear a brass band playing christmas carols!), which was rather bitty and unfocused. Finish work, meet up with friends and have dinner on campus then go to the comedy night at the campus theatre.

Uid 73

Carrying out some collaborative work with a colleague from another institution. High in our thoughts were how to cope with current situation of raising of higher fees. This impacts me as a parent as well as a lecturer. I have grave concerns about the amount of debt that my child will emerge with should they choose Uni. Seriously considering apprenticeships as a suitable option.

Have grave concerns about the amount of violence being depicted throughout the media. Of course I know media have their stories to tell, but interesting that I can easily get different perspectives online - national press, tabloids, BBC, independent media, youtube etc. I don't like the violence on either side - both the protesters and the police - but can't help but wonder if mediators with expertise on de-escalating situations were there there may not have been so much violence??? Every action that somebody takes results in a reaction - protesters and police - both sides should learn that calm the whole thing down. For me a key image that will stick in my mind is the biased questioning of the national union of students president by the press - almost goading him into trying to condone the violence. Sickening.

Work goes well dividing up the data to be analysed between myself and colleague. We make plans on when to complete our sections and bring it all together. Start to identify journals and conferences where we can publish as well as potential funding opportunities to continue the work.

Next tonight is to deliver a talk as an invited speaker. Feel quite concerned to pitch at the right level as am unsure of exactly who the audience is. Still not quite sure why anybody would want to listen to me.

Evening goes well, talk apparently enjoyed, lots of interesting and stimulating discussion. Wend my way to the hotel - crummy place. Some friends are envious of my travel around the country - and to the most part I enjoy it - but when I stay in crummy places like this it isn't very nice!

Uid 75

6:40am As I wrote my reflections about yesterday, I realised that today is when I participate in this share project. Yesterday's reflections are reasonably significant so I will share them here.

Date 14 December 2010 - Exercise Solutions

I went fairly early to work and endeavoured to work on exercise solutions. Project inspections, a lecture, and an advisory meeting took four hours out of the working day. As the exercises have become more difficult, I have been giving more dialogue on my thinking. In some ways, writing these journals of code development are becoming easier the more that I focus on doing it. My first effort for this set of exercises was written as comments in the test class after the completion of the code. For the current exercise, I am writing my reflections as I go. The nature of the development log has changed as I am now including more thinking about how I might approach the problem or breakdown the problem. Even though this is taking a lot of time, I am enjoying doing it.

I have been working on these for the last three weeks to not only provide sample solutions but also to show the sequence of development. Sample solutions don't provide the reasoning that a programmer goes through in order to produce a solution. For larger exercises, I have been looking at sequences of solutions that show revisions based on improving the architecture of the software or removing duplication. The current exercises don't have much scope for this although the next two should (game of life and Sokoban).

8:30am While waiting for the computer to boot (takes about 15 minutes), I observed a very red sun rising over Birmingham. A little frustrated that I don't have one of my trusty cameras with me. My usual compact has lens focus problems and the iPhone doesn't allow for manual exposure setting. This is frustrating when I would prefer to be a little more creative.

A quick check of the emails and I see the student that missed Monday's project inspection has emailed asking whether he can see me this afternoon at 2pm. I have time then so I have put it in my diary.

10:30am Distracted for a while with emails but uncovered some interesting references on games. But I have put some time into trying to complete the current exercise solution.

However, I did achieve these steps in the exercise solution log.

"13) The toString() skeleton has won out. This will be in minimal for but define the basic layout. Will possibly come back to this later if I get a chance to look at the formatting issues. The formatting isn't something that was expected but being an experienced programmer, I like to make things look right.

The initial test will just check for an empty string. This will be changed to the expected format but I want to force the writing of toString() in the Bill class and using an empty string will achieve this. Yes, that failed so now add the toString() method to the Bill class.

14) First part of the bill is the name of the bill payer. Nothing fancy but will still give it a label and place the new line at the end.

15) At this point, I have no calls in the bill so I am really looking at the total cost line. As well as the total cost I will output the number of calls. Place some spaces in front to make it readable and roughly align.

I didn't fudge the string but called the getCallCount and getTotalBill methods simply so the formatting was correct. But really this test is only setting up the basics.

16) Now to make the bill class really fulfill its function. Need to add a call and repeat the tests for one call. I will use a different payer name simply to ensure that I didn't fudge holding the payer's name.

Started writing this test before committing the previous work to the source control done now but have to interrupt my process for some project marking and visits by others to my office."

Decided it was a good idea to record the interruptions as it shows that we have to take breaks as well and sometimes this may cause us to change direction when we return to the task.

The interruptions have been interesting. One was from a Ph.D. student who is looking for employment and not finding it easy. He talked about an interview that he had yesterday. I have sent him some links for the job sites that I have been using and will possibly need to use again in June. I love teaching and would like to continue my research but when you are on one year contracts, it is difficult to raise research funds. I am on one research proposal now but I am conscious that if my contract isn't extended, I won't be employed here when the work is supposed to be done. I am trusting that the current negotiations will see the contract extended.

Everyone assumes that graduates will walk out of university into well paying jobs that will last a lifetime and set them up for retirement. As someone closing in on retirement age, my career in the computing industry and teaching hasn't given me that confidence. I started out on mainframes and was told when they were being phased out my skills weren't transferable. I transferred to teaching students the skills that were supposedly not transferable for the new platforms. That looked like being a good job until polytechnics began to offer degrees and want staff with Ph.Ds and research records and the polytechnic that I was at got taken over by a university. To satisfy their requirements, I completed my Ph.D but computing education isn't seen as a string research field for funding so I am sitting in a temporary role just trying to get money to survive never mind save for the upcoming retirement.

So will these graduates get jobs for life? Not likely. Will governments plan on the basis that people will struggle to find jobs? Not likely. We have a major problem looming if we want to believe that current economic thinking is going to satisfy the environment that the policies are causing to come into existence.

How does this relate to teaching? I stand in front of first year classes and students ask about the future of the industry. I used to promote life long learning and being adaptable but I think it is more important to play the status game and not the ability to do the job. You have to compete and I am not a competitor even though I try to maintain the publication record.

Have to leave this reflection now while I go to a project inspection. As I said to one of my Ph.D student visitors, I am a lecturer by name and not by salary. You could say I am a cheap lecturer who has not research expected of me but has to do it if I want to stay lecturing. Not really a good situation.

12:45pm Supposedly two project inspections completed and meeting with one of my own students. One of the inspections didn't happen because the students machine had crashed and there was no backup. I wouldn't regard myself as the best example of regularly backing up but I didn't lose everything when my desktop machine failed earlier in the year. I was able to recover all the data without too much difficulty.

The second student simply didn't have anything to show. There seems to be a problem in understanding what having something working means. I would have expected some portion of the system to be there to illustrate progress but he didn't even seem to have anything that demonstrated the problems he claimed he was having. We did see some code but it took quite a lot of pressure for that to be shown to us and that was really just a data object. None of the core of the system was there and he had been working on this for two months and has another month to go.

One of my final year project students that I am supervising came to see me following his inspection. His main concern was about what he should focus on next. So we talked about was essential for his project and what was peripheral. He went away with a clearer understanding of what needs to be done and hopefully won't get distracted by nice to do items.

Even thought theses students have done project management papers, they are not applying the concepts and principles to their own projects. Even agile projects have to prioritise work based on the importance to the project. They talk about focusing on show stoppers (i.e. those things that if not done means the project wouldn't be completed). They do spikes or proof of concepts simply to know whether they can get past the major hurdles and they do these as early as possible in the project. We need to be doing more to help students recognise the importance of doing this.

Back to my programming exercise solutions before the next inspection.

2:33pm Completed the exercise solution. Could do some additional work but have other tasks that need to be done and this illustrates the key points.

Final inspection also completed. This student looks like he is exceeding the expectations. A little concerned about the amount of time these good students spend on these projects but not sure how you can hold them back. I just hope they don't burn out.

Will go to a teaching committee meeting now.

4:45pm Meeting over and although some was a little frustrating, I did learn a couple of things that are helpful. All I will do now is package up my exercise solution so it can be placed on the course website, pack up and go home. I might even take tonight off although there is a Ph.D sitting to be read and assessed. Strange how I was asked to be one of the external readers when I don't have a permanent lecturing position but then the thesis does touch on a lot of research that I have been involved with over the last five years.

Uid 77

Share December 2010

Well it was such a mad day yesterday, I completely forgot about this, although even if I had remembered, it wouldn’t have gotten posted earlier!

Normal early morning mayhem at home, and discussion as to whether we were going in one or two cars, and if one, whose resulted in taking one car (mine) and as usual dropping daughter at bus stop. Due to drainage work the University is operating a one way system through the car park which means the barrier isn’t in operation, parking is free and that it fills up even earlier than usual, so my first panic of the day is will be find a parking space? I park in the first one I see, and feel more relaxed.

After making my first cup of tea of the day, I sat down at my desk to sort myself out. At 10.45 I have an interview with the Dean of the Faculty and others for the post of Associate Dean (admissions). Having only been here for 4 months, and having the admission tutor role for the same period of time, it would not have crossed my mind to consider myself for this role. However, about a month ago, I was asked to see the Dean, who told me the post was

about to be advertised, and would I consider applying? On the basis that if I did a bad job or didn’t like it, I could go back under my stone, and if I am interested in climbing higher up the administrative tree, this would be a good place to start (I’ve actually had about 8 years

experience in admissions), I decided to throw my hat (and my CV) into the ring. The interview is to comprise a 10 minute presentation and a 15 interview.

So back to the present: Sitting at my desk, I search through my bag to discover I’ve left my USB stick (and presentation) on my desk at home. Never mind, I also had the presence of mind to email it to myself at both my email addresses (University one and a private, internet

accessible address). But horrors, the computer system won’t let me access the email! I am faced with the prospect of driving home to collect it, only a 10 minute drive, but the thought of not being able to find a car parking place on my return makes my heart sink, and the stress of searching for a space with the time pressure of the interview makes me anxious already.

A solution is proposed by Carole, secretary to about 4 of us, including the current and ex head of school, the course director and me. [Don’t start me on the clerical support we (don’t) get]. Phone the Clinical Skills department; as they are based in the hospital (a 10 minute walk away), perhaps they aren’t affected by the computer problems. But, as I soon discover, the phone system, linked to the computer system is also down! So we have no computers and no phones....And even though we can get local access to our computers, the university’s insistence that everything is stored centrally means that we can’t access any of our work either. In a last ditch attempt before driving home, I try my other internet-based email

account, and to my amazement am able to access it, and with it, my presentation (which I quickly download). I have been lucky enough to access the occasional windows of access that occur from time to time over the day.

So I review and revise my presentation, and, as I now have no computer access, catch up on a reviewing the files of 10 students who haven’t been successful in the application process for Foundation posts.

I attend the interview: 3 interviewers, all familiar faces a very relaxed affair, I suppose in part because I don’t have that much tied up in it: if I get it, I’ll give it a go, but if I don’t it doesn’t matter. On leaving, I am relieved to see someone else waiting, so I am not the only person being interviewed. On return to the office, the lack of electrons are becoming extremely problematic: we can’t access the student files (so I can’t complete the growing pile of requests for elective forms) and with the clinical exams tomorrow, the students can’t download their log books, and we can’t let the students know that this won’t be a problem, although the assessment will go ahead as planned because we have not means of contacting them. The telephone system is intermittent, so they can’t phone in either! The few that do make it through on the phones are reporting that the rumour mill is rife with suggestions ranging from the exams are cancelled to failing if they don’t turn up with their log books!

Students who do get though are put right and asked to relay the correct information to any and all students with whom they have contact. It will be interesting to see what happens tomorrow.

With the end of term in 3 days, many programmes have assessment deadlines, all of which will need to make allowance for this, and everyone has the same issue of not being able to communicate. Paper notices are appearing on every door, notice board etc, but it is unclear when the problem will be resolved. Apparently it has nothing to do with the drains work going on, but some sort of major IT catastrophe.

Back to the office and I continue the Z tasks that are the only things I can do with no access to my work in progress, my emails or the telephone. A [mobile] phone all from the Dean summons me back to his office and I am offered the role, with a suggestion that the ‘runner

up’ (a member of staff junior to me) be my deputy (if she agrees), something I am more than happy with.

To make things even less productive today, the office is being packed away around me. We have the builders coming in on Friday to rearrange some wall, so everything has to be sorted and packed. As the newcomer, I don’t have years of rubbish/files etc to sort through and pack, (I did that earlier in the year, when I moved here).

Just after lunch I have a meeting with a student. Apart from those in my tutorial sets, as the deputy course director and year lead, I only see the mad/bad/ill ones mostly; this one falls into the ill category, and actually seems to have insight into her problems, and is soon sorted.

Back to the chaos of my desk and my mobile rings again (my only contact with the outside world). Two messages: one from the ‘runner up’ saying she is very happy with the outcome, and happy to be my deputy, and the other from the Dean, saying the same thing (in that order!). By 2pm I am twiddling my thumbs: a very unusual situation, so decide to go home where at least I will have computer access, and a copy of my current work in progress. I am trying to sort out the [different] school-faculty-university guidance, regulations and procedures with respect to disciplinary and fitness to practise issues and how to apply them in an

appropriate, robust fair and consistent fashion for our students. Ah, but what about the husband? (we shared the car today!) Well, by some strange quirk of fate he appears at my desk (his office is in another building). We agree I’ll go home and collect him later if he can’t find a bus home, and off I toddle....

Even at home I find it difficult to concentrate; I guess the impact of my new role is beginning to hit, particularly the expectations and responsibilities I have acquired. Then I go back to collect the husband, picking up the daughter on the way home (she is involved arranging a fundraising fashion show tonight.) By now it is 4pm, and ‘home’ issues are beginning to take over; I’ve not yet written any Christmas cards, although I’ve my Christmas epistle written, and strangely most of the presents bought and wrapped. But the taxi service is needed again:

daughter to return to school (via the supermarket to pick up a drink and snack for her friends who haven’t been able to get home). My sister rings: I suppose it is a sign of our busy modern lifestyles that we have this conversation while I am in the supermarket!. We sort out what we

are getting our mum for xmas, and I tell her about the new role. She is very supportive, and builds my confidence. I tell my daughter about the phone call, and mention that I new role. My astute almost-18-year old points out that I had clearly failed in my resolved not to collect

any more ‘hats’!

Back home, to take my husband to catch a bus into the city: it is the faculty executive Christmas dinner. I guess next year, we’ll be going together as my new role includes membership of this august body! Then back to my daughter’s school in role of supportive mum; a nice opportunity to sit and relax for an hour or two, watching the teenagers having fun. Fish and chips on the way home, and then onto the computer to order the present for my

mum (agreed earlier with my sister). The wonderful thing about computers and the internet (when it works) is that things like Christmas shopping can be done at 11pm at night!

Uid 78

Another heavy day of meetings. This morning I chaired the team which is producing a major new Department course. We made great progress. Several people were missing, away on research trips or in other meetings. That inevitably makes decision making easier and we managed to make decisions! They can be unpicked later if really necessary but it's always great to get decisions into the minutes.

I'm not yet a convert to having people in attendance at meetings by phone link but it worked well today when a useful colleague had to wait in unexpectedly for the gas man to reconnect his supply (it's very cold). He's young so could hear us well and though not set up with a speaker phone or a headset, he said his ear didn't go numb.

This afternoon the Dean adressed a sub set of academic colleagues about an enforced change in line management arrangements. Having been a Head of Department under this Dean I understand what he means by management and was taken aback to find that some colleagues think it means doling out detailed tasks and checking they've been done. It was never more evident that a bunch of academics have a range of skills and that an instinct for good management of people and workload can't be taken for granted.

The pair to that meeting this afternoon was some discussion with the Associate Dean for research. There's talk of REFable research being just one version of the scholarship we have time built into our contracts to do. It doesn't matter what anyone says we all know that success in the REF is what carries the prestige - and the promotion prospects.

Several of us are staying overnight tonight for more meetings tomorrow so I rushed into town early evening to meet my son. I won't see him at Christmas. The shopping centre was purgatorial.

Very genial and unChristmassy Indian meal this evening with pleasant colleagues for company. These all too rare opportunities for informal wide-ranging discussion remind me how lucky I am to work with such interesting and good people. I've made a pact with a historian that we'll take our 22 days study leave in 2011.

Uid 81

It's cold. Below the legal minimum in the lecture room and the committee meeting room, but my office is warm. Flitting from one temperature to another all day. At least the worst of the snow has gone.

The bad weather ran a steamroller through the first week of exams. Some were rescheduled for the second week, this week, but we have a lot of overseas students so they'd booked flights home after their last scheduled exam. Some UK-based students have even more expensive transport options if they change their tickets!

So we have a large number of acceptable mitigating circumstances in the pipeline and a need for an early re-assessment opportunity. We have the summer resit exams ready if needs be (means more work creating new set of exams for the summer), but we can't tell the students yet when the resits will be. Obviously if we say now, there will be some (many?) who won't turn up for the rescheduled ones. But I can't say MitCircs is the best way to handle this - too bureaucratic and too open to value judgments. last week you could live half a mile away and not have a safe walking route to campus, but at the weekend I drove 100 miles north on main roads without problems (after an hour digging my car out from 50 yards from the main road!).

Disturbed that the violence of the students in London now normalised by a certain cadre of academics and starting to spread. A body of militant opinion is vocal on Facebook that all our exams should be cancelled until the new year and vowed to pressurise us to kowtow. Yesterday someone deliberately set off a fire alarm 10 minutes before the first exam of the day. 2000 students and 200 staff out in the cold for 45 minutes, three firetrucks pulled away from real emergencies.

Why dow we have exams the two weeks before the Xmas holidays anyway - such a hostage to fortune. 5-10 mild winters lulled us into complacency. This is the fourth winter in a row that started with snow in early December. Normal service has been restored, and contingency measures needed once more.

Uid 82

Today was my last real teaching day for several months, as I'm on sabbatical next term. I have a couple of guest lectures I'm doing - and there will be no escape from marking and moderating, sooner or perhaps later if there is a strike - but otherwise that's it.

Today was a rough day on a number of levels. I had to deal with a couple of disciplinary issues, from a mass failure to prepare for class the previous week to a series of plagiarised essays. This really disappointed me. What was most annoying was that the students who I was \*least worried about\* were the ones who turned up to class having sorted themselves out prep-wise and who also came to see me, ashen-faced, about (relatively minor) dodgy referencing as picked up by Turnitin. The ones who \*really had problems\* were the ones who supposedly hadn't read my email asking them to meet me, and who were then expecting me to drop other commitments - some of which were to see my dissertation students who had been working hard, others to students with personal problems - so that they could come to see me at their convenience. Rant over. This behaviour is the sort of thing I won't miss on sabbatical - the grind of dealing with pointless problems - but on the other hand, I really will miss teaching. I am very sorry that I won't see some students now until they graduate in the summer, whilst I'm hoping others will turn up in my module classes next year. Teaching them thus far has been a joy, in terms of watching their learning journey as much as I've felt intellectually challenged and stimulated by working with them. This is why I became a lecturer....

Uid 90

Arrived at my desk to find that the whole computer system is down throughout the University. Unable to access emails or even my documents. Attended a meeting to review reflective writing within MBBS programme. Ideas for next years questions were generated during the meeting.

Due to the computer system being down had a long coffee break with a colleague and a long lunch break with two other colleagues. During these discussion able to review the year and considered how to manage things for the new year. Made me realise how one role of mine is titled 'deputy' but in fact I am often left with the bulk of the work and my discussion gave me impetus to raise this with my manager in a way that allows him to either clarify that there will not be a option for 'joint lead' within my title without me putting myself in a position of chucking my toys out the pram if they do say this. However, also covers the 'if you dont ask ...' Another discussion clarified a few ideas for some research projects for the undergraduates. Really useful discussions and a very valuable opportunity to reflect and review on my role. In addition it has bee nice to offer support to my colleagues and i feel built on our friendship. Often we are all so busy that although you are surrounded by colleagues it can still be a job that feels quite isolated.

Uid 95

Since it is no longer term time, it's a bit more relaxing today.

I spend the morning marking Professional Skills folders. We have endless debates about whether these should be assessed at all. Personally I feel that it is necessary at Level 1 because a) Students wpn't take them seriously unless we asses, and b) they really do need the feedback. The first batch are pretty dire and I atke about 20 minutes per folder. With 150 folders, you can do the maths. My aim is to finish before Christmas and with no distractions like Christmas dinners (economies) I feel I should make the target. The reflective reviews are terrible (exceptions are students who have done these PDPs in a work environment). Written feedback has to be detailed. I do this in Access with lots of cut and paste but even then I find after about ten folders I am bored.

From 2pm it's interviews for prospective students. I think that we are unusual as we still interview the majority of applicants. Becuase of CRB issues staff interview in one big room with a layout that looks like a speed-dating session is about to take place. I read the personal statements over lunch and make notes about key questions to ask. In reality most of MY notes will be positive, as I rarely advise against a candidate. In practice all applicants are accepted subject to A-Level scores.

Because we are in the early stages of interviews, the candiates are all fairly good academically. They have toured the school and had a briefinf from the admissions tutor. I probe on any issues arising from their school's reference, check that they really understand what a civil engineer does, and talk about soft skills. It's surprising how many have talk to friends or relatives about the subject. About half will have done some sort of work experience of other event that has given them an understanding of their career possibilities. Today all are out-going and I have a relatively easy session. I worry about the girl whose boy friend hovers near the door throughout (he has been accepted already at our university) - I think that she is not really committed but a good report and a positive attitude mean I cannot comment on this on her form.

Uid 96

15 December 2010

Woke at 5am, debated getting up to complete some simple, comforting work task, decided I didn’t have any I could face at this hour and went back to sleep, only to sleep through my alarm at 7am and not wake until eight.

We moved campus on Monday – an entire Faculty moving out to a new-build – and now it takes twice as long to get to work so I’ll be late. I check my emails before i leave the house, by bicycle, at about nine.

Teaching is finished for the semester and exams are on. Until more marking comes in, I’m occupied with preparing and pre-panicking for next semester. The morning I spend getting to grips with a new module that I will lead. A professor is leaving so her teaching must be passed on to other staff. I can’t get hold of the professor by email and though (I think) her new office is next to mine, she’s not in it. Several times yesterday and this morning I’ve nipped across to check. From the WebCT for last year, I try to figure out how long each session would have taken to deliver, who taught it, and in what order they happen. There's no timetable of sessions on the webCT, or in any shared place. I need to decide which sessions I can handle teaching myself, which can be taught by others in the department and which need an external lecturer to be brought in. This module is not within my expertise but I am ‘being re-deployed’ after the programme that is my expertise was closed. I like redeployment but it’s not easy. It’s a juggling act using spreadsheets. How many WAM units did I have last semester? How many will I have to get next semester to meet the target for full-time employment? A WAM unit is supposed to be an hour of work within the Workload Allocation Model. The magic figure is 1300 units per year. For every hour of class contact there are two units allocated – one for being in front of the class and one for preparation. I can’t do preparation of a two-hour lecture in a new subject area in two hours, and I know I can’t. Nobody realistically fits their stuff into the time allocated and we all know it. So it’s a juggle – how can I redeploy myself enough to fill the WAM (and my weekends and evenings and some late nights) without having a nervous breakdown towards the end of next semester? How much should I take on, and which bits? I spend most of the morning juggling this, negotiating with other staff and their subject group leaders (the bosses, who allocate the WAM) and trying to be as strategic as possible with choosing the easy lectures for myself and allocating the ones I really haven’t a snowball’s chance of preparing and delivering to external guest lecturers. I feel like a fraud for taking on any of these lectures at all. This module was run last year by a subject expert. A professor, very active in research in exactly this area and who knows the subject like the back of her hand. I am ‘extending’ my area of expertise even to take on the few lectures I’m taking on. It’s a trade-off between doing myself out of a job and cheating the students by assigning them an inexperienced and ignorant lecturer. I want to teach every single one of these lectures because they interest me, but I can’t acquire the necessary knowledge overnight and I can’t do it in a semester where I lead three other modules, one of them brand new to me and another running for only the second time under my leadership.

I haven’t seen the inside of my comfort zone for a very long time. All day I agonise over this, and it keeps coming back as I cycle between campuses, and through the evening.

At 12.30 the list of topics for external speakers to cover goes to my subject group leader. I grab a quick lunch and turn my attention to other modules, deciding which lecture/practical/tutorial to put in which slot. We can’t be sure that the labs will have moved to the new campus in time for the start of term, and I’ll be missing a demonstrator for three weeks in the middle of term, so I shuffle some practicals around. First I rearrange a module that I taught for the first time last year. I did the whole thing myself, teaching every lecture and practical and writing everything from scratch. I haven’t looked over it since I finished teaching it last time and now I do, I think; “it was alright, actually. I did well, considering”. I would like to improve each of the sessions for this time and maybe replace some of the practicals with new ones but I know there won’t be time. This semester it’ll have to run exactly as before with minimal changes and I’ll develop it when I get the chance.

I send a quick few emails asking people to contribute again to next term’s modules; spend an inordinate amount of time registering on publisher’s websites and ordering inspection copies of books for my new modules, then at 4pm I call Student Affairs to find out which campus has the worked exam scripts for an exam my students sat yesterday. I bicycle to that campus (up very steep hill) to be told that they’re at another campus. Unsurprised, I bike down the hill and up another one. Sweaty, and very fortunate that they don’t close at 5pm as I was told, I get my scripts and head home. I had intended to mark this evening but I’m tired. “Shouldn’t give up so easy!” I tell myself. “Maybe this is one of the differences between you and the people who successfully juggle teaching AND research?”. I am not research active and i don’t know where to start. I don’t even know what my subject area is, because it changes every trimester. I feel paralysed by lack of confidence, contacts, knowledge and direction. I’m hoping that being on the same campus as other people in my school will help me gain some of those. Too early to say, but so far I feel intimidated by my office mates, friendly though they are, all three know what their expertise is, are working in that area, have honours students and masters students and PhD students. I don’t even have a PhD. I’ve missed so many opportunities to initiate research projects in this area or that. The fact that I could start in any area gives me too much choice. I am like the worst of my own honours students, who find that the most difficult task is choosing a topic. Once I get stuck into something I tend to make a good job of it, but getting stuck in is difficult with many competing commitments. I’m good at getting my head down to something like a literature review or data analysis, but I’m not good at making external contacts, picking up the phone to people, getting funded. This swirls around in my head for a couple of hours.

I go to bed at 8.30 and I’m asleep by 9.30

Uid 98

As I bring my wife to work (also in the University), I'm in early enough to go across campus for my first lecture but preceed it with tea and emails. Still chasing the computer support system which should have allowed me to do marking, electronically, from home over the weekend. Temporary glitch in an improved system (rather than bunches of paperwork) but 'temporary' has now lasted four days.

Students arrive at 9 (on the last day of term but two). Well 12 arrive. Out of 74. Good to understand how vital my lectures are.

11 o'clock and off for coffee and then a Stage Three Ug project student. Great topic - with field data, initial analysis, likely new results, wider context and opportunity to feed into the subject. Very satisfying.

Emails (the never-ending driver, day-in day-out, weekends, evenings), including offering around a dissertation idea I came across yesterday afternoon. However, with the coming bad-weather, raised a concern about not being able to go out on project work next Friday.

Another (MSc) project student and then a support session for a group of 10 students following half my programme. With two apologies and 1 firm attendance I guessed poor turnout but not 'Billy no mates' Well, I shall remove the next offer of support until they ask directly.

But next a PhD student, who is making valuable progress. Good and bad today, but this is OK.

The computerised marking system comes back online.

Last email, 2245

Uid 102

We were out last night for a pre Christmas meal with a group we have just joined. My husband is due to retire on Friday. Lots of talk about what he does for a living. No one asked what I did - even his prompt about where I worked did not have the desired effect. The evening was much better than the quality of the meal and service. Really nice people - I look forward to getting to know them better in the new year.

New Year - where has the old one gone. I have been in post a year on the 18th - I have learned so much in the last 12 months. How is it going to feel on the 4th Jan when I am the only one going out to work? I hope I enjoy my job as much as I do now. I need to have an excape route planned just in case the whole thing goes pear shaped.

This morning went off at 6am. I have had a 2 hour journey along the M42, M6 and M1. I arrived with 15 mins to spare and no where to park. There are times I reallly feel like just turning round and going home. At last there is a space. Must be my lucky day.

I am writing this during a presntation about the use of computers for teaching and learning in Africa. The sight of graduates sits uncomfortably with the knowledge that many girls do not attend school beyond puberty because they do not have underwear. The whole Christmas consumption makes me even more aware of the increasing gaps between rich and poor - here the issue is about cultural capital rather than just money.

Two emails about donations this morning - how do you handle the situation where 60 staff have a lot of different ideas about which charities we should support. I will go with Oxfam and donate all my spare money to them. Sending a card to each of 60 people coud cost a lot of my time on top of the cost of the cards. I think I could aford a lot.

I talk has now moved onto a discussion of virtual classrooms. Why did I travel 75 miles to attend a virtual world? I think the technology is moving ahead of the pedagogy. Why can't we be honest and just admit that we are trying to cut down on cost and travel.

I am beginning to think about some study leave and getting on with the research project we have been talking about for a while now. I am next door to the library and I am iching to get hold of some books. The bigger question will be when I have time to read them. Roll on Christmas - I need a break. New year resolution to take study leave and READ.

Visit the library before I leave the campus. A wonderful resource - so well stocked and quiet. I leave with a stash of 18 treasures chosen for a variety of differnt reasons. I am particularly interested in the one about creative writing in professional development. I plan to read a bit tonight.

I got home to a stack of emails about student wanting additional support. When does additional become the norm? A complaint about anothe tutor - this is more difficult especially as my colleague usually deals with these issues but is off sick. HELP! it was hard enougt doing my own job but now I am also covering for someone else. Thius will improve in Jan when the temp joins us. Does maaging her work mean more work for me or less?

Another meal out thi time with my husbands work colleagues. We leave with arms full of bottles and cards - what a relief he asked that they did NOT make a fuss. We won't need to buy whisky or wine this side of the new year.

Christmas next week and the familiar round of staff panto and raising money for various charities. It only seems a few weeks since last Christmas. I am clearly getting old.

Will try to clear desk tomorrow but will be working up and including Christmas Eve.

Uid 103

Woke up 5am. Classes at 8am. Last week of classes. Today we go through a model exam. I checked it out and it has a number of conceptual problems. I will have to deal with them in class.

Class over. Had to deal with quite a few conceptual problems in the model exam. Discussed strategies for solving the exam. All questions were overviewed. Some time was spent actually developing a set of integers class in Java, starting with a discussion of its interface.

Back home for more work. I do work from home much more often, these days. No interruptions, good food nearby, students and colleagues easily available using messenger, etc.

Spent some time finishing my solution for one of the problems given as exercise. Most of my team thinks that we should not provide the solutions to the students, or at least not all of them. I think this is paternalistic, naïve, and counterproductive. Naïve because solutions for most problems are readily available on the Web, and each day more so. Paternalistic because it assumes the students are not able to make an honest attempt at solving the problems before looking at the provided solution. Counterproductive because students are in touch and thus will share their own solutions, which are often low quality.

Quick but good lunch (I'm at home :-) ). Back to the preparation of the problem solutions and then to sharing them on the Web.

Interruption (sigh...) from the communications office. I've been given them a hand. Now they plan to create a second Facebook page for our university. The existing one would have contents in our own language, the new one would have contents in English. I tried to explain how bad this idea is: quite a few of foreign students and academics interested in our institution are native speakers, a lot of our students do not speak Portuguese, the correlation between the preferred language and whether people are insiders or outsiders is quickly being blurred, that multiple pages create a terrible mess, that duplicated events are basically unmanageable, etc. No luck. Pointy-haired bosses want it this way. I ought to know. I had to deal often with them, unfortunately. Not exactly bright.

Back to productive work. Producing code for student consumption is very time-consuming, at least if you insist, as I do, that the code should contain only good practices, that it should be simple, but not simplistic.

Administrative tasks: record the attendance of students to classes, scan student attendance sheets and send them to central quality control office, etc. Multiply this time by the total number of classes, the number of teachers and the average cost of teachers per hour and you will get an idea of the money wasted in this stuff. It would be trivial to streamline the process with a couple of well designed tools. Pointy-haired bosses.

Back to school.

E-mail processing. More administrative tasks. Scheduling of exams. After all these years we still have not learned that teaching staff should not spend time going to meetings and exchanging emails just to schedule a dozen of exams...

Classes from 6pm til 09:30pm. Only a handful of students in my open lab session. I developed and discussed an Java enumeration for the days of the week with a bunch of useful extra methods. It was a good pretext to return to a lot of important subjects (equality vs. identity, etc.).

Finishing the day reading e-mails. The saga of the scheduling of exams continues. A total waste of time.

Uid 105

7:30 - Arrived at the University. Today's a full day because we're doing the oral discussions with the students.

7:45 - At the classroom to start preparing the computers for the oral discussions. This semester we decided to have a different approach on the evaluation process. Students have 4 tests during the semester and then we have individual oral discussions to assess if each student is actually at the level of his/her average of the 4 tests. Basically the outcome of the oral discussion is a percentage between 80%-120% of their 4 tests' average and that's half of their grade. The other half is given by the exam at the end of the semester (in January).

8:00 - The discussions take place. Each student is asked to solve a specific programming problem (adapted to his/her skill level) on the computer and then we have an oral discussion about the solution.

12:00 - One must eat, right?

13:00 - Preparing the second batch of oral discussions

14:30 - The discussions take place.

17:30 - What a busy day. Time to go home.

Uid 111

Morning

woke up this morning and felt like it should be Friday, don't know why because I'm looking forward to meeting a group of Student Enterprise Pioneers today.

Was supposed to meet a group of 6 students (at their request) but only two turned up! Wonderful meeting though, they want to create a means to spread the word about enterprising events, activities and support on offer to fellow students, targeting them by faculty/study discipline.

Interesting note to self - do not assume students know about the power of social media. Discovered that these particular students (Business Management)only use Facebook to communicate with friends ............ they were blown away by my demo of how it can be used for marketing, events, promotions, communities, academic and student groups and so on. I hope I didn't overload them with too much information.

Found myself telling the students how important it is to take a good break at Christmas ready for their final semester. (I wonder if I'll take my own advice!)

Afternoon

Got a phone call inviting me along for interview for a lecturing position that I really really really want! Why is it that every holiday I get is spent either applying for jobs or preparing presentations of one kind or another! I guess that's the nature of research roles and the current funding crisis.

Back to the office to work through the emails and prioritise what I can finish before breaking up on Friday for 2 weeks. All the jobs seem too big ... I'm tempted not to make a start on any.

Uid 114

Yipeeee - it's christmas lunch day :-)

But the day started on a more sombre note as I had to drive past the scene of a RTC which I had witnessed last night - Two teenage boy in a corsa had hit a telegraph pole at about 50mph. The car is still parked in the ditch. They were wearing seatbelts and very lucky to have hit it dead central, a little to either side and I am certain one of them would have been killed.

The relevance of this to my job is that I am currently a first aider - that has given me access to training so having witnessed the incident I knew what I needed to do. I remember going through the process - check for own safety, get to casualties, talk to casualties, get help. Thankfully when I opened the car door both lads asked me what happened, they were shaken and I expect a bit bruised but it wasn't the blood bath I'd been fearing. To cut a long story short I did my best to direct traffic whilst waiting for the police and we avoided anyone driving into the fallen telegraph pole.

This morning as I drive past I suddenly realised how lucky I was not to have been hit, either by the spinning car or the falling telegraph pole. I'm also angry that I was the only person who stopped to help. I had stopped one car and asked the driver if he had a red triangle, he'd just said no and driven off!

I am so grateful for the first aid training that I've had. I've treated very few people at work but yesterday I did something important for our community and would have given them whatever first aid they had needed if they were hurt.

Unfortunately one of the cut backs at our institution is not to fund as much first aid training. Whilst I see that this can easily be identified as an unnecessary expense, I feel that we are loosing something valuable. If all companies cut back on their first aiders who will be there to help me when I need them?

Anyway, back to work...

Today a dear colleague is retiring. He gives a very touching speech on his career and there are a few teary eyes at the though of him leaving. Thankfully he ends on a happy note.... no replacement has been appointed so he'll be back in the new year to "help out" until an appointment is made. This is typical that the insititution can't manage to recruit in time despite several years notice!

I spend the morning doing some interviewing for jobs that probabally don't exist. It's always lovely to talk to people and hear there enthuiasm for teaching, but a bit disheartening that student numbers are looking much lower than forecast.

Eventually lunchtime arrive and off we go to enjoy our christmas dinner... alas I am on a table with vegetarians who complain about the veggie option. As Chair of the staff club I get to formally thank the organiser for her many years organising the christmas meal and announce that she is stepping down from the role - I resist the temptation to add that it is due to the complaints from vegetarians that she resigned!

I'm slightly frustrated that some of my colleagues are still talking shop at the dinner table but there are important decisions to be made and they might not see eachother again for a while.

I win a bottle of wine in the raffle and a magician does some impresive tricks. This is a slight problem for me as I used to be a magicians assistant and my colleagues think it is unfair that I won't tell them how it is done. Life was so much more simple when my job was to climb into a box and get sawn into three!

After lunch we have to head back to the office and get on with some admin tasks. I have a long conversation with one of my colleagues about promotion. She's been approached about putting a case together this year and is surprised that I haven't. My problem is that I am very good at and enjoy the management side of my role but these aspects don't score any points in promotions cases. I'm left with the dilemma to either accept that I won't ever get promoted, or I have to neglect the student facing side of my role to be able to spend time on the point scoring activities. I have been struggling wiht this tension for quite a while and recognise that it may be time to move on - square peg in a round hole and all that.

I check the Guardian jobs page when I get home and dust off my CV. I've now moved from complaining mode to planning. The buracracy and the lack of recognition for the hands on work with students has finally worn me down.

My partner buys me a beer and we start planning my exit strategy!

Uid 116

Dec 15, 2010

Today was a crazy day in a crazy week. I'm not scheduled to teach on Wednesdays, so I try to set aside at least the mornings for professional development work. Not so today...

I'm team teaching a course this term. A colleague and I are both teaching our own sections, but we're sharing all of our materials (slides, assignment descriptions, course schedule, grade book). This generally works well. Our preparation styles are very similar and we get better materials by virtue of extra review. My colleagues took the lead on preparations for tomorrow, so I was reviewing his work this morning. We're building on materials from a previous term, but moving several topics around to make room for additional material. Unfortunately, for this day my colleague failed to notice that we had made significant changes to the schedule for tomorrow and the subsequent week. So, the materials that he prepped contain several errors and omitted half the material that we needed. Compounding the issue, he teaches for five hours on Wednesday for different courses. Thus, my day began with having three hours of unexpected course prep dumped in my lap.

The craziness of the week stems from volunteering to cover class for two different colleagues with medical issues. So my usual 12 contact hours for the week became 16. My spouse is coming home from grad. school out of state tomorrow night, so I'm stressing about having the house in some semblance of order. It would be nice to have groceries bought as well--don't want her to think I'm a helpless man with the domestic situation--but time just isn't going to permit that.

I finished the course prep by late morning. Next up was a meeting of a Faculty Affairs Committee subcommittee on Information Technology. Our Faculty Affairs Committee functions somewhat like a faculty senate, though with far less power. We're a small institution, so official faculty representation for shared governance is through a committee of the whole. That's useful for major decisions, but committees are responsible for doing the work of shared governance. The Faculty Affairs Committee is elected by the faculty, one representative from each department, and is essentially charged with reviewing all concerns raised by faculty members and either sending them to the appropriate standing committee or addressing them itself if there is no appropriate committee.

The committee has been dealing with widespread faculty concern about the institution's IT department. Part of the concern stems from a transition to Windows 7 as the operating system on all institute-maintained computers. Part of the concern is a perception by the faculty that the IT department prioritizes administrative computing and ignores academic computing. As the CS department rep. to the Faculty Affairs Committee, I was tagged for a subcommittee to discuss faculty concerns with the head honchos in the IT department. The meeting today was just our subcommittee. We were planning our strategy and message for the meeting with the IT folks. This will be a challenging service assignment; the IT staff is really solid, but the leadership has a reputation for bullying.

After lunch at my desk, I met with some students in my CS1 class to help them through some challenges with their homework. Then it was a quick trip home to meet with a contractor about an estimate to fix a mold problem in my crawl space. Homeownership has some benefits, but it is also a massive pain in the backside sometimes.

Back at the office, I spent the late afternoon working on grad. school recommendation letters for a student that did some research work with me. These were hard letters to write. He was an outstanding student, but ran into some personal issues at the time he was working on the project with me. Those issues derailed the project work, so I can't say anything about the results. I tried to write the letters honestly and directly, but I worry that other writers might spin their recommendations, shutting my student out even though he may be just as strong a candidate.

Letters written, I spent the rest of the afternoon catching up on email and planning for the rest of the week in my other class, CS1. This is the week before holiday break, and the break falls in the middle of our term. So I'm trying to find an assignment that they can begin in class and resume after break. I drafted my solution to the planned assignment before heading home for dinner.

A quick microwave dinner at home, then upstairs to my computer to actually write the assignment description, prepare slides, and an in-class quiz. I got the OK from my colleague in the other course on my revisions to the material for the other course from earlier in the day. Set a 5am alarm so I have time to print handouts and posted materials to the web before that 8am class. To bed around midnight. I'll be grumpy on Friday; it always gets me the second day after a short night.

Uid 120

Teaching is officially over for this term. Hurrah! But this has led me to confront all the other work I have been studiously neglecting over the last twelve weeks. The list is ridiculous - two conferences to organise and advertise before May, 70 essays and dissertations to mark, a big bunch of (probably nonexistent) poems to find for an outreach project in March and a box of materials to create for the same, an article which is currently in a heck of a state to sort out and send off by January, a book review, a peer-review of an article for a journal, essays to write for my Certificate in Higher Education, and next term's teaching to prepare for. I did not do a good enough job of preparing in advance last term, meaning that I couldn't set good preparatory work for my students, so this is something I want to rectify next term. Oh well, at least I can do it eating mince pies and cream.

But what actually happened on the 15th, apart from endless list-making of this kind? The campus network crashed on the 13th and remained offline until the 16th. The university website was down, as was intranet, anything saved to the network, and email. I had students frantically knocking on my door asking if they could have extensions because all their work - saved on network computers and backed up on email - was lost. I couldn't do any of the work I had set myself. So I went for lunch with colleagues and got into the Christmas spirit. Despite all the chaos I am now so thoroughly relaxed that I can see that list of work remaining the exact same length until the New Year. Must be disciplined!

Finally I was able to tell work that I am pregnant this week. My scan was on the 16th December but I told HR and my boss on the 13th, so it is now beginning to be common knowledge. I am very excited about this - the baby is due on June 26th, so I can work until the end of the academic year and will return in January 2012. But of course it means I really have to get all my work finished by June. Then again, it's another reason to spend Christmas celebrating and not working ...

Uid 123

8.30-9.00 Copying documents for School committee

9.00-9.30 Coffee and general discussion with colleagues on new School appointments and structure

9.30-12.30 School Committee - last committee of the semester

12.30-1.15 Lunch with discussion on dialogic feedback processes

1.15-2.00 Student progress tutorial

2.00-5.00 Review and amendment of 8 short videos commissioned on assessment and feedback.

5.00-5.30 Informal discussion with new Associate Dean

5.30 - left for home

Uid 126

Wednesday 15th December 2010

Oh my goodness – how did I get through this day – or even arrive at this day? I have been marking, heavy teaching load and attempting to put together a file of evidence to support a promotion application. The whole university network has been down for a reason that is stretching ICT support services to the limit. Amongst other things it has meant that I have not been able to print feedback sheets or send them to the course secretary. Neither have I been able to print evidence for my teaching file. The university expectation for anonymous marking is quite tricky. It means that it is hard to track individual records and it certainly means that it is almost impossible to use the marking of assignments as a strong teaching tool. I understand the value of anonymous marking – and the need for it in some cases – but I don’t like not being able to make a connection between what the assignment tells me and the person who has written the assignment. In the past it has been easy to make informal comments and developmental observations and to really engage with students who show particular promise or particular difficulties. On a professional course I think that that is quite important.

Anyway, I handed in an incomplete file, at the very last moment, and with rather bad grace –I dislike not getting things done. I then had an hour to talk with colleagues about various concerns, mostly related to students and to put together the materials for my teaching sessions. We also had to rearrange a Christmas dinner that was to have been at a colleague’s house but which was prevented by a family bereavement and to make sure we were prepared for the retirement of our course secretary. That is going to be such a loss. I do just see a yawning hole. She has been with us for eight years and has a fantastic knack of knowing not only what is required in a practical way but a real appreciation of the principles and ethos which make our course successful.

So three teaching sessions – one on teaching narrative and two, for students training to teach the early years, on ‘Becoming a writer’. Rather frustrated by the lack of internet connection and instructions to have no computers switched on. I have some great examples of children’s early writing and will have to use these later. I like students to see what children are able to do beyond copying sentences. I love the energy and inventiveness of children’s early writing and the way that writing, mark making and drawing all work together to make engaging texts.

In one session, I leave students writing and when I return a student is leaving, visibly upset. She does return to the session later but something has hit a nerve. This is one of the real difficulties of teaching both writing and drama. They can prompt unexpected responses, even with the most innocuous of prompts. I really believe that it is important to engage with these things, though it is not always easy. There is more to teaching than learning facts and skills.

The students are very tired and so I find myself spending more time on making and writing than more serious theoretical approaches. In fact, students made wonderful pop up story books, nonsense stories and books that are cut up and interchangeable. I had wanted to have students write something more personal but maybe there will be time for that later on. I think that it is important for students to have a sense of how writing can be pleasurable and worthwhile from a personal point of view.

At lunch time there is a meeting with our speech and language therapy colleagues but I shall be teaching so other [people went n my place. We are planning for a joint professional session in January which was very well received last year, especially by the speech and language students.

I go straight from the last teaching session to the Teachers Writing group. I am mightily relieved to have invited the student writers to the session because in the end only three teachers arrive – it is the week of Christmas concerts and nativity plays so I imagine teachers are tied up elsewhere. With the loss of internet connection [my computer crashed this week also] I have no idea if people have let me know. However, the session goes well. M has brought mince pies and we write Christmassy things: ‘if it could be wrapped..’; a Child’s Calendar, based on the George Mackay Brown poem; a collection of words for a found poem/ concrete poem; and one other. It is great that A has got here despite his lack of a car. He has brought examples of his latest work with children’s writing and others in the group love what he and they have done. Everyone reads back at least one piece of writing. Just at the end of the session K reads a small extract of one piece of writing which we liked so much that we asked for it to be read again. What is fantastic about this is that the student wrote more on the way home and posted both pieces on the Writing website. So hurrah!

Some snow on the way home and the latch to the back gate frozen solid. Glad to get to bed!

Uid 127

Share Project

Wednesday 15th December, 2010

I was thinking about this diary entry a few weeks in advance, wondering what I would be writing about, and then I looked at my diary a little more carefully for the day. It occurred to me then that this would be the third diary day when I would be in the lab teaching a practical class from 10am until 5pm. It also occurred to me that it would be the third time when I would be piecing the diary entry together after the fact, because I wouldn’t have time to breath during the day itself, let alone sit and think about a diary entry. So here I am, several days later, thinking about the 15th and putting my thoughts onto paper.

Term has now actually ended, and what a term it’s been. The 15th was in the middle of another very busy week of teaching, with a total of 28 hours of taught lab sessions that week. Every year, when we break for Christmas, I sit back and think, gosh, that was so much harder than last year, and I wonder whether it really has been, or whether I’m just remembering badly, or whether I’m starting to get older and notice the lack of sleep more! My marking stack sits at home, at least 15cm tall, reminding me that although I can pretend I’m having a break, there will always be work to do.

Back to the 15th itself – there is little to be said. An early morning with an interrupted night before thanks to my 1-year old son. A full day in the lab, with questions from my second year students about final year projects, summer lab work experience, and the rules and regulations about Masters courses and PhDs. I am always amazed at how much misinformation there seems to be about postgraduate study – about this assumption that students pay to complete a PhD, that you have to do a Masters course before a PhD, that there is only one type of Masters programme – a taught one. I seem to spend a lot of time with my tutees explaining how it all works. That is the nice thing about this all day practical though – it is a molecular biology practical, so there are plenty of gaps where students can ask me about the work, or other issues that are concerning them. I really do feel it gives me a chance to get to know some of the students really well, much more so than I ever can during lectures, or packed three-hour practical classes.

The evening itself I took off and played a new computer game that I had bought. With that end of term feeling, any motivation for me to do any extra work in the evening is completely lost – I try and fool myself into thinking that there’s plenty of time over the holiday for me to catch up. Of course there wont be, and before I know it, January will be here, and that stack of marking won’t have got any smaller, and I’ll be starting a New Year with underlying guilt and unease because I don’t have a clean slate to start from. Here’s to 2011??

Uid 128

Unexpectedly at home today - our lodger (who is also a nurse) came down with norovirus (winter vomiting bug) on Sunday so have put myself into quarantine for 72 hours until I am sure I haven't caught it (don't want to give it to colleagues, the nurses get blamed for enough already!)

I thought this would be a good chance to catch up with e-mails - where do they all come from? However (typical) my IT account has been locked for some reason. 3 phone calls to IT HelpDesk and over an hour later it is finally fixed (although there was no clear reason for this to have happened, apparently 'it happens to some people'!) and I can attack the 65 e-mails that have arrived since 9pm last night when I last looked

Most of the e-mails are from students in their last week of clinical placement with concerns regarding their practice assessment documents - particularly the first years on their first placement. Not sure who prepared them for practice this year, but there seems to be far more confusion than usual and I seem to be their first port of call.

One e-mail is a little concerning - a 3rd year Mental Health student whose partner has borderline personality disorder and has been self-harming and attacking the student. Think I need to see this student as soon as I get back to work as she is clearly in need of additional support at present

My mobile refuses to stop this morning - loads of texts (my preferred method of communication with students) about practice documents, assignments, an exam is that is happening today . . . .

One call makes me laugh - the first question is 'How did Palace do?!!' and I know straight away who it is. I respond with 'Better than Horsham!!' - fortunately I know that his team had 3 players sent off and 3 fans evicted from the ground on Saturday, eventually losing 3-1. Sometimes knowing about the students lives really helps with building relationships. This call is about an assignment so I ask him to send his work by e-mail so I can look at it and feedback. Feedback takes about half an hour

Now for some prep for my CPPD module - until I hear my lodger moving around and he appears downstairs. He still looks really unwell and is quite distressed so I get the chance to brush off my nursing skills and look after him for about an hour. I had forgotten how difficult it can be to persuade people to drink when they don't want to!

Now he's awake it's a good opportunity to work on the new curriculum - with his input. I come from a child-focussed background, his is adult, so working on generic modules together is beneficial. He is fairly new to the profession and so remembers his student days a lot better than I do and it is refreshing to work with someone like him. He challenges me as to why things have to be done in a certain way - annoyingly, he is absolutely right and this results in a re-write of my student support section which needs e-mailing to the curriculum leads straight away. And he feels better with something to focus on!

That takes up most of the afternoon - still no time to even glance at the most recent edition of Paediatric Nursing which arrived in the post this morning. Cheek of it - while I am writing the curriculum bits, my lodger gets to it first and is grumbling away about a flawed research project published in it.

Uid 136

My day on 'family duty' so my husband left home on the early bus (7.20) and I see my son off to school, in the cold, up a rather slippery hill. We are lucky in that school is only 10 minutes walk away, some of his frinds there have journeys of over 90 minutes and even longer in this weather. I catch the 8.20 bus and find the 8.51 train is running late, but despite this and the slippery pavements I get into work at 9.45 - time to unpack my bag (thank God for the designer of bags-on-wheels, to transport the weight of paper I am carrying around!) and print some papers for a 10am meeting.

In the print room I meet the person who has organised the meeting and we have a chat on the way to the meeting room. This is useful becasue as a relatively new member of staff he has had trouble engaging with some of the processes required to write a new module for a programme review, and as learning and teaching co-ordinator I have to correct some errors, which I am glad not to have to spring on him in public. The meeting is lively and engaging; several relatively new members of staff are present and we have good discussions on the difference between what might be desireable practice, as taught on the PGCertHE course, and what is pragmatically possible if they want to stay sane. Staff student contact hours, peer marking,assessment load, teaching methods, staff workloads, research, types of assessment and many other topics feature in the discussion, and I leave after 90 minutes with a feeling that we might actually have moved forward on some issues, in this particular module and in others. However I am concerned that the time it is taking to write these new modules well, and get staff really engaged, is in conflict with the University schedules for the review. Why is it that everything at the moment seems to expect academics to be able to produce anything at the drop of a hat, with ever more structured and prescriptive methods for doing things? I do appreciate that we need a clear paper trail in these days of audit, value-for-money, national student surveys and league tables, but just sometimes I feel as though burocracy gets in the way of effective teaching and learning practice.

Back in my office I answer e mails from students (now that lectures are over for the semester they are starting to ask questions for the January exams), drop a few appointments into my diary, write and send a reference and write and send some comments on a draft project report from a research student. She is working in a local clinincal laboratory and I am hopeful that if all goes well we might get a research paper from this project, so it is important to get the analysis right at this stage.

What next? - two conflicting high priorities, writing my own documents for the review, and clearing my office for a move in early January. Neither appeals, so I do the puzzles in Metro over an ealy lunch! After lunch I get stuck inot sorting for the move. It is difficult to throw away books but at least they are going to a good home abroad and I keep only the ones I actually use rather than ones that sit on the shelf looking good. Even harder is disposing of jouranls I have paid out thousands of pounds to buy over the years, but 'Current Opinion in...' and 'Trends in ...'which are 5 years or more old are of no real use either to support research or teaching, so they are just wasting space on my shelves. However it proves a lot easier to dispose of paperwork from days gone by where we had paper copies rather than the current electronic records for all kinds of meetings. An industrial shredder has been hired to dispose of confidential waste, so this has to be separated from material which can go to the normal recycling centre. Reading through some of this is nostalgic, remembering people and activities from 20 years ago. I wonder what has happened to some of these graduates? - so few of them keep in touch. I fear as M-day (moving) draws closer I will send more paper to the shredder than is actually required just to speed up the sorting.

Given the weather I decide to leave early - I tend to walk a slightly longer route to the station than normal when it is slippery underfoot, and I don't want to miss my train. I spend half the journey home writing up my notes for the Bible study I am to lead tonight and half marking first year essays. The train is sufficiently on time to meet up with the bus, and I get home to find husband and son have prepared a delicious meal. After tea I have to shirk off housework to finish preparing the Bible study, promising to do the washing up when I get home. A friend picks me up at 8pm, and in the Bible study I have the second good discussion of the day, this time on the meaning of 'goodness'. One definition is clear when I get home again at 10.30, my husband has done the washing up so we can sit down to catch up on some TV we taped a while ago and never got round to watching.

Uid 138

8.30am. My students sit their exam this morning: and I am nervous. This is not only the first time that I have taught this course, but the first time it has been run in my department at all – so the preparation of all the materials, from scratch, fell to me. A Very Big Task – and now, with no previous exam experience for this course to go on, I am worried … will the exam be too hard, too easy, too long, too short? Are any questions ambiguous? Even though the paper has been through the scrutiny of both an internal vetter (two comments) and an external examiner (correction of one typo), I am still very concerned that it may be a disaster. I used to feel like this before every exam when I was a less-experienced lecturer: perhaps I am more aware now that most mistakes can usually be fixed (more or less) after the fact if necessary.

One thing I do like about going to the exam hall is seeing the students, and being nice to them when they are feeling a bit stressed themselves. I am particularly looking forward to seeing this bunch again. Having spent 6 hours a week with them for 11 weeks, I have kind of missed them in the past fortnight!

We are told that this is the last exam diet when academics have to invigilate their own exams. I worked out once that the time spent invigilating exams by the academics in just our department was equivalent to two months’ full-time work – plenty of time to write a really good grant proposal. We are told by the powers-that-be that starting from the next diet of exams in May, invigilation will be organised (and paid for) centrally – but they have made that promise twice before in the nine years I have been here (and I am not sure how many times before my arrival!)

11.30am. Two didn’t turn up. One arrived late. No one left early. Most finished with 5-10mins to spare (a good sign?). Only one still writing at “time’s up” (another good sign?). Off to mark the scripts now – I will find myself an out-of-the-way empty office where no-one can find me, and hope to get them done by the end of the day. I always try to mark exams in one sitting – it gets it out of the way and ensures some measure of consistency.

4.30pm. Whew, a bit of a slog, but they are all done – it’s a small class, which means (a) not too difficult to get all the scripts marked today, and (b) I am not really surprised at the results – I know the students so well that I could have predicted each result: the students who turned up to lectures and tutorials and labs did well; the students who did not turn up did poorly. A clear bi-modal distribution. But with a high-proportion of A’s, was the exam too easy after all? I like to think that there were lots of A’s because the course was so amazingly interesting that lots of students attended – and attendance is a good predictor of performance. I wish students would figure this out: attendance is a good predictor of performance. How can they expect to pass if they don’t turn up?

Still got all the admin to do now: having lost so many administrative staff recently in ‘restructuring’, we each have to maintain the marks spreadsheets for our own courses. My guess is that as soon as one academic makes a big blunder with their spreadsheet, they will all be passed back for admin staff to maintain again! It’s all a big circle.

5.00pm. The day finishes with a wee party held by a research group to celebrate their new office premises. Don’t much feel like socialising, I’m afraid. Looking forward to an early night.

Uid 139

Forgot about this one too until afterwards.

There was no teaching today. I was debating on whether I should catch up with the research - I need to get a paper written - but the requirement to move offices next week loomed larger than life.

I managed to getin on the early train and arrived at about 8am with a list from my wife about things I wasn't supposed to forget about during the day. But I couldn't start doing those extras until after 9am when the world decides to wake up and at least one of the things had to be put off until after 10am as it involved buying a printer cartridge for the home printe and this couldn't be done until afterwards.

Why do we get insufficient notice about things like staff moves? Is it because it's relatively easy to ask someone to move but quitedifficult ot do it in practice? Is this the same as asking students to do particular pieces of work? It's easy to ask them but much harder for them to do it...

a few other jobs needed to be done: setting up arrangements for Friday's MSc presentations, which involved sorting out a running order with time slots and ensuring that all the summaries were loaded onto my computer so I could pass them on to S at the company and he could see what they were doing before arriving on Friday: sorting out and telling final year students what they could expect for Friday's morning class: sorting out buy-in from the Subject Area Leaders for some Staff Training I wasnt to organise.

At 11am I was interrupted from the tidy-up job by D from next door asking if I was going to the University meeting looking at how students might develop written skills. No. I thought that was why I'd nominated her for the job. It isn't that I'm not interested, I simply thought she was more interested (correct). So I wasn't intending to go. She did give me a brief outline of the meeting at lunchtime before she headed off for a research meeting.

By the end of the day I can see the desk again and the throw-out pile is looking remarkably healthy.

I head off for the train realising that at least something has been done, even if it might not have got the paper much closer to being written...

Uid 140

It always seems the 15th is not a typical day. No students around - they finished on the 3rd. Everybody seems to think we did as well.

I spent the day at a UCU away day, in a shiny new building. Pity they plan to close all the courses there. Lots of issues facing us both nationally and locally. Pensions under threat. UCEA tell us a pay rise will threaten job security.

"Give us job security then."

"Sorry we can't do that."

Locally course closures, more admin work coming our way, our VC may not retire after all. Same old same old.

Took the responsibility of setting up local UCU group on Facebook.

Back to my office. Still only one lift working (seem to remember that in my November post).

Go to the pub with a colleague who is retiring this week. Think about retiring myself in a few years, if we still have a pension

Uid 141

So my wife gave birth two days ago - Monday 13th. It's just great for us. Little boy who is doing just fine. And that means of course I am on paternity leave. My diary? Nothing at all to do with work. Which is not to say I wasn't busy...

Up at 6:40 thanks to daughter (who is 4) coming in and bothering me. Out of bed (despite my reluctance) at 7am because I forgot to put the bins out and the bin lorry was coming. Breakfast and getting ready went more smoothly than that.

Then off to the hospital around 9:30 with daughter. Hung out with the new one for a while whilst also entertaining daughter. Back home just before lunch to walk the dog and leave daughter with grandparents for me to go back to hospital and await Deb being discharged. Which did eventually happen and we all came home at 4. Then into a whirl of sorting things out, feeding the baby, feeding the rest of us, dashing to the shops to get some more sheets having realised we haven't enough if baby is going to be sick on a regular basis. Finally a bit of peace once daughter has gone to bed and baby settles down for a good long nap.

And now to bed (c. 11:30pm) . No work in sight. Don't miss it - I worked jolly hard this term to get the new course out - as I have so much more important things to think about that somehow turn into a chaos of mundanity. The devil may be in the detail but sometimes I think heaven is too.

Uid 142

Interesting day - started off having stayed over with friends who work on very similar courses to me - had merely dropped in as I was passing, having been visiting placement students. They had some of their MSc students giving presentations - and wanted to show them off (and then to put the educational world to rights over recent acquisitions to the cellar!)

Luckily I'd not got a 9am class, so was able to get back home, dump the car & bike into work in plenty of time for the first (and only) class on a Wednesday. Which had the grand total of 4 students; 12 weeks is a long time - staff and students alike are exhausted!

Next it was our weekly staff development meeting; I'm not sure that discussing the new curriculum and the changes it will involve is perhaps the best thing to talk about when we're all so tired (on the other hand, it meant that everyone was keen on the idea of a reading week part way through the term ... )

Ended up leaving early - as there was something I wanted to buy for my holiday next week - but had to go to the next town to get it.

Naturally, due to a rather disrupted day, didn't get the marking finished until nearly midnight - but hey - it's done! (And, miraculously for me, over two weeks before it has to be! )

Uid 152

6.30-8am Getting my children & I ready for work / childminder

8-9am Dropping off children at childminders and travelling to work

9-10am Checking and responding to emails

10-11am Meeting with colleague re clinical placement hours for second & third year students.

11am-12.30pm Preparing teaching materials for next term

12.30-3pm Team Christmas Lunch

3-3.30pm Meeting with Subject Head to dicsuss Masters options.

3.30-4.30pm Finish off last few outstanding tasks and emails and tidy up office

4.30-5.15pm Pick up children and drive home

5.15-6.15pm Teatime

6.15-7pm Bath & bedtime for children

7-9pm Emails, social media etc for my own business

9pm TV - Apprentice night!

10pm Bedtime

Uid 154

I’m up and making tea at 10 past 6. I went to bed last night at 8 o-clock, three quarters of an hour after getting in from work. On Monday evening it became clear that I’d succumbed to the lurgy that’s been working through the School and which manifested itself in aching limbs and heads and streaming, sneezing noses. There was no chance of taking sick leave on Tuesday because I was internal examiner for a PhD in the morning and one of my own students was having her viva in the afternoon so I struggled through the day. This morning I wonder about taking the day off but decide against it because it’s a working at home day and I don’t have to drive.

At my desk by 6.30. I spend the next four hours working on editing a paper for a collection I’m involved in and which has to be with the publisher by Friday. It’s a last minute job and the author had gallantly stood in for a reneging contributor but unfortunately the rush shows and there’s a lot to do. When I think I’ve more or less got it to an acceptable standard I email it to its writer and go and make a pot of strong coffee and decide to have a truffle log as a reward. My daughter was home at the weekend and the first thing she did was go to a branch of a local chain of bakers and buy a pack of their Christmas Truffle logs, declaring that ‘these are the only thing I miss about this town’. They are good, probably contain 1,000 calories a go but they sure hit the spot. Fortified by caffeine and chocolate, I phone the author and talk through what I’ve done and am pleased that they are comfortable with the changes. If that person had not stepped in to the beach I’d be in trouble now. Ironically, when I come off the phone and check my email there’s one from an editor of a text that I’d contributed to asking if I can suggest substitutes for a couple of authors who have let her down at the very last minute. When I see the names of the defaulters I’m not surprised. These folk have track records. It’s ever thus I suppose.

The next task is to write up the joint report for the viva I was internal for yesterday. Normally I’d do this straight away but there was no time because immediately the viva finished my own student came and needed an hour of pre-viva calming. Then by the time we’d gone through her (successful) viva, cracked the champagne and chatted and I’d cleared up one or two odds and ends on my desk, it was time to go home and to bed. I certainly wasn’t in any state to write up the detailed recommendations then. Looking at my notes this morning I can see how bad I’d felt: my writing was not clear and it took a while to decipher what we’d said. This had been a difficult exam. I had some awareness of the challenges the supervisor had had during the years of working with this particular student. That the outcome of the viva was major amendments was not the supervisor’s ‘fault’ and s/he told me afterwards that every point the examiners raised had been something that s/he had identified and that the student had chosen to ignore advice. The recommendations I now had to craft were detailed and extensive and the vagaries of the ‘locked’ form that I had to put them onto didn’t make things any easier. In the end I had to phone a secretary and ask for advice. She told me that the form had been badly constructed and there was nothing I could do but persevere. I sent the form to the external for their verification and whilst I was doing so did emails. One was sad. It was from an overseas doctoral student who had just learned that her husband’s recent weight loss was due to cancer which had spread and spread, leaving him without much hope of recovery. Most of my students are middle-aged – partly because a lot of my work is on a professional doctorate aimed at mid-career professionals. How some of them manage to complete is beyond me. They have full time, often very senior, jobs, they have kids and sometimes parents who make demands – and they push themselves to do academic work. I spend a fair bit of time doing counselling type listening.

I’m starting to flag a bit, not only has this email depressed me but the sneezing has come on in a big way – so I go and make a bowl of porridge which I bring back to my desk and eat as I write a personal note to my student.

I now settle down to work on a couple of draft assignments submitted by professional doctoral students. The deadline for these drafts is Dec 24 but in the last week a few of the 30 odd I’m expecting have arrived. Ironically the early birds do tend to be the ’best’ students whose work need minimal attention.

My son phones to complain that his lecturer who was ill last week has rescheduled his session to Friday 4 – 5. This is the last day of term. How many of the kids will go? Maybe most of them to be fair. My boy says, ‘it’s a good job you’re coming for me mum, cus if I’d bought a train ticket I’d have got one for lunchtime and I’d’ve lost some money’. Hmmm I think. I’ve taken an annual leave day to go and fetch him and now I’ll be trogging up and down the A1 in the dark on one of the busiest days of the year. I don’t feel that pleased with my fellow academic.

By now it’s 4.30 and I’m feeling really poorly so I decide to give in and go to bed – feeling very guilty – so I take a journal I need to read with me. Illness and academia do not mix.

Uid 155

Wednesdays are teaching free for me, but that doesn't mean that they are quiet. However, there is a general end of term feeling which means it is a little less rushed and a little more jovial. Day started in the office at 8.15 checking emails, reading documents etc before going to the ethics committee at 10. Rather depleted turn out - mixture of people teaching and busy with other committees. Checked student dissertation proposals for ethic concerns - some interesting work being done, but why do so many students want to bring Harry Potter into everything?! Straight from this meeting to a research paper followed by a rather lovely festive lunch. Team meeting in the afternoon, where we bemoaned the student obsession with Blackberries (they use them to 'take notes on'), followed by tutorials with students. Left at 5 because I was feeling rotten with a nasty cold, and have spent the evening watching old editions of the Culture Show and University Challenge that I'd taped. Going to head for bed before 9 - Thursday is a busy day and I need to feel much better than I do now to face it.

Uid 157

Last week of the semester and the entire university IT network goes down for nearly 48 hours. No e-mail, VLE (virtual learning environment), internet or telephones. The students complain as they can't access material for coursework and course test revision purposes. In many ways I like it because it means there are little in the way of interuptions and I can get a substantial amount of marking completed.

The day ended with the School's Christmas Party in the Student Union building. Staff and students letting their hair down - great fun.

Uid 158

Today has been unusual in many respects. First, I did not have any teaching timetabled, nor did I have any meetings scheduled and I managed to reserve the whole day to get some work done. This meant that I was able to spend some quality time with my graduate student which made a pleasant change. We now have the next experiment set up and ready to run. Second, the entire network infrastructure collapsed so there was no email, no internet, no student records, no phones in some cases and, for colleagues that only have a logon to the central system, no computer either. I thought that the catastrophe would enable me to concentrate on chipping away at my “to do” list. Unfortunately this was not to be the case as lack of communications meant that there was a steady stream of students to my door with questions about deadlines, coursework and the like.

Third, my self-confessed (and obsessed) “admirer” from the student ranks decided to visit again today. Fortunately this is the first visit since October and I am now able to treat them with something more approaching equanimity. It is obviously not the case for the student in question though.

After helping with some video recording to do with a coming admissions trip and a tea break with friends I returned to my office to continue working on some editing. That kept me occupied into the evening when I was finally able to strike that particular task from the list. Left work at about nine to cycle home.

Uid 165

Had a bit of a sleep in before heading into town in the car to get processed for my indefinite leave to remain in the UK. it was a long and boring wait in a very busy waiting room full of other anxious folks doing their utmost to stay here. Despite being able to easily afford it, putting the pin number into the machine to hand over £1250 stung a bit and I felt like giving David Cameron a piece of my mind. I work bloody hard educating this country's young folk and in the process am doing my little bit to make this country a better place - but every morning it seems there's another item on the news saying to me: 'you're not wanted here'. Anyhow - he's stuck with me now! It was nice to have so many messages from friends and colleagues congratulating me - clearly they want me to stick around.

I headed back home and got stuck into some marking. There's always a sense of anticipation when I open up the first few of a new set of assessment. I like the design of this assessment task. I like how much choice and agency it gives the students and allows them to really explore some of the ideas that they've worked with to that point. Not many of them have taken much of a challenge in terms of how they've put their work together: mostly powerpoint files without any kind of narration. I think it's really easy now to mark them reliably and transparently which feels good and means that all the hard research and design work I've done is paying off. Of the four I marked, one was pretty good - the other three mediocre. But I was able to give them all detailed feedback and give them all some further reading to do.

Downed tools and dashed into town to meet up with my partner for dinner before going to Me and My Girl at the Crucible. It was a great night - and we even managed a glass of bubbly to celebrate my new residency status. The show was fantastic and it was good to have a laugh. Met up with some of the cast afterwards for a drink and then headed home exhausted after a big day.

Uid 168

The day began inauspiciously; as the teenager sat looking at his cereal my enquiry whether he was using the milk or could I have it was met with demands that I “stop moaning” and an accompanying huff. There was an apology later in the day but how much this was sincere rather than to stave off the threat of lost privileges we may never know.

Once into work I began by short-listing candidate for a temporary assistant role that I have available. The post is only for three months and must start straight after the New Year bank holiday, so the process needs to be reasonably quick. There were a total of five applicants but several made no reference at all to the role in their covering letter and their CVs were not up to date so I suspect they have applied to anything available at present. In the end I sent e-mails to two candidates inviting them to come for interview next week and set a short preparatory task for them to do.

Mid-morning I went to the dentist – I’ve only been four times in three years but two of those have been on the first four “diary days” of this project. I had a crown fitted – this was much less painful than expected (the previous visit appeared to have all the nasty drilling) although the damage on the pocket was severe (I declined to pay a monthly retainer 10 years ago and so I had to go privately. I think I’m still ‘in pocket’ compared with 120 months at the rate they offered previously).

Back into work, I set about a range of additional administrative tasks. As I sat in my office with the door open (as usual) a group of women that I did not recognise passed by. Upon looking in, one of them offered up the most transparently condescending facial expression I have seen in a long time. Granted my office has a distinct “lived in” look and a free-style filing system but I suspect she has OCD (obsessive condescension disorder).

I had an unexpected visit from a colleague. Not a native English speaker, my friend was asking if I’d read through a paper he has recently had rejected for poor use of language. Despite the fact that I’m awash with urgent tasks to complete before the end of term I agreed to have a look and see if there was any advice I might offer. As it transpired there were a couple of places where the phrasing might have been improved and one incomplete sentence but on balance I thought the criticism was rather harsh.

I returned to the other admin tasks by taking a first look at the timetable for a module I convene in second semester. Unusually, the timetabling office has given me identical time slots to the previous year and so I hope it will prove a relatively straightforward task to transpose the sessions onto new dates.

A significant tranche of the afternoon was spent collating work for return the following day – I needed to get the marks into a spreadsheet and pair up two pieces of work for each student to save time in the session. This is the sort of job that the rest of the world assumes we pass on to secretarial support staff but the reality is that assistance of that type is in short supply and it is easier to do the job yourself.

After reading through the protocol for a laboratory session for which I am demonstrating tomorrow, I belatedly uploaded some slides for a lecture course I have completed onto our VLE and headed for home.

Once home, the principal tasks were addition of my contribution to our family “round robin” Christmas letter and watching the semi-final of the Apprentice. I’ve not bothered with most of the current series (partly because it has clashed with Grand Designs) but I do especially keep an eye out for the Interviews episode. In fact over the last couple of years I’ve been recording it – there is some great material for inclusion in a “how not to” section of a student lecture on CVs and interviews!

Uid 171

I spent this day en route to the US with my partner and almost-3-year-old, to spend 3 weeks at my parents' for the holidays. I realized on the way to Heathrow that we hadn't brought our pushchair and then set about worrying about how we were going to deal with the 5-hour layover and getting a sleepy child between gates at what would be the middle of the night for her. But I needed not worry, as she was brilliant, even though we were delayed by an hour on the final flight.

I'd tried to get a book manuscript off before we left, so that I'd have nothing to do over the holidays--but I've got three co-authors and it takes too long to finalize anything--never again will I do such a big project with so many co-authors. Then I discovered that a paper that I thought was due at the end of January is really due at the beginning--so I'll be staying up after others have gone to bed, trying to start the new year with a clean slate.

Uid 172

Two student teacher observations today, stayed in both for an hour and a half, half an hour longer than allowed from a timetable viewpoint.

First session the teacher was tired and had just returned for being off sick. Was last session before her students Christmas holidays, rather a restless unsettled group of students.

Second session, a group of 14 year olds who are experiencing FE because they have issues at school. An unusual situation with FE 'solving' secondary sectors 'problems'.

Spent part of the rest of the day reading the first draft of a student's BA dissertation. Not a bad effort, some presentation issues but a very good start.

Rest of the day the usual stuff, emails, completion of a part of my programmes annual monitoring report. Thought about what needs to be done to recruit a new external examiner ... and so on.

Uid 179

'Revision week' so no seminars this week, thank God, and have been able to get on with odds and ends (a research proposal, two conference paper abstracts) that had been put aside for a spare moment. Spent the morning at home working mainly on the research proposal, but stopped at lunchtime for prearranged phone conversations with colleagues, dealing with emails ... and lunch (what luxury!).

Back at my desk now (4pm) after picking up the younger boy from school. Sleet and snow forecast for tonight so wondering If I'll be able to get to Seaside University for a 9am meeting tomorrow morning, before going up to Inner City University for another meeting and a last seminar in the evening. At home again on Friday so should be able to get the research proposal finished ... before a Christmas delivery of marking arrives on Monday.

8pm - just doing minimal changes to slides for tomorrow evening's seminar. Childminding this evening: youngest boy doing his piano, violin and trumpet practice; eldest practising to be a teenager.

12.30am - Reading for the rest of the evening (yet more luxury!).

Uid 182

My father is in hospital for pneumonia so I rescheduled 3 lectures from this morning to be able to visit him. This is the last week of lectures so everything's very busy to wrap up the semester. There's a lot of snow at the moment where I work and I had a bad fall last week on ice so I can't drive since I can't move my neck and also can't sit in the same position for more than 20 minutes at a time. To add to losing a lot of time relying on public transport, it's been extra difficult getting to and from the hospital so I've also had to cancel or reschedule lectures and meetings in the last week so this has added to my stress levels. By this Friday, I am supposed to have two year-group assignments marked, a MA student who's experiencing high anxiety to handhold and a conference paper to finalise to present this weekend. I am expecting an extremely busy December and Janauary to try to catch up with everything as well as start work on co-editing a new collection of essays and induct a new group of incoming postgraduate students.

Uid 184

The semester ended last week. Grades are due this Friday. My lack of grading diligence during the last few weeks has come back to bite me: I have hundreds of assignments to go through. Luckily, since few students will ever want to collect these long-ago turned in assignments, I can just quickly grade them and assign a mark based on "gut instinct." Statistically, I'll be within 90% of the "real" mark every time. At this point for most students, it doesn't even matter what mark I give them; their overall grade won't change.

I aim to be done by late tonight.

I wish I could assign final grades on the fourth week of the semester. By that time I can pretty accurately predict their grades. You can see it in their faces and the way they behave in the classroom.

Once my grades are completed my winter break begins. Four weeks off, here I come!

My break won't be all rest and relaxation. I have to start prep for the upcoming semester, including:

Writing an easy-to-use Java graphics library for my CS1 class. It'll be something like an updated ACM Java Task Force library, but utilizing the more modern Graphics2D classes and, if all goes well, be able to generate simple Android apps.

Converting my discrete structures class to use Python instead of Scheme/Racket.

Writing the remaining chapters of my own CS1 textbook.

See you next year!

Uid 186

If it snows today, I'll cry. They now seem to have put it off. At least till next week. That has to help.

Today I'm writing our new curriculum document. I've put this off for who-knows-how-long. But it has to be done this week. OK, so it isn't just me who is writing it, and it isn't starting from scratch, but there have just been so many urgent and important things that hae filled up my weeks, that I haven't given it the priority that it should have. Still, if I spend most of today on it, that will get my bit out of the way. Not much of a way to write visionary curriculum, but it is the only way. And it puts of having to mark 56 first year essays, which, no matter how much I tell them that I don't want to hear about it, will tell me all about Florence Nightingale!

Just had a meeting with a lecturer who was concerned that admin didn't prioritise the distribution of her module's marking (6 scripts), over the 500 other scripts they have. She had a solution to problems caused by the snow, and was miffed that it wasn't agreed to by the admin staff. We get 99% right in a crisis, and it is the 1% that is the problem.

Information servies committee meeting now. 1200-1400 - why over lunch time????

That was about as exciting as it sounded. Oh well, done my bit. I suppose it helps to keep things on track, but not sure about another meeting.

Just heard that one of my programmes is potentially being cut by 50% next year - well, the goverment is reducing the numbers by 50% across the country, and we have to decide what we want to do about it - fight for every place we can get (if we lose more than 20% then it is likely not to be viable), or say we won't run it at all. I'm for the fighting, and hoping that geography will be on our side.

1700. Still writing the curriculum document.

1730. Module leader emails to say that a staff member hasn't done any of their marking throughout the semester. Why do these things get noticed at the last minute????

1740. Printed off 150 pages of the new curriculum to read tonight before The Apprentice.

Uid 187

7:15 AM - Got out of bed after 2 hours sleep. The CS0 final exam took a lot longer to write and format than I expected! This "being a new instructor" thing keeps surprising me about how much time it takes to "prep"!

7:45 - Arrived at office. Checked email.

8:05 - Grqduate Assistant dropped by to get some papers to grade and to talk.

8:30 - Took a final look at the CS0 final exam in the "light of day". Decided it was too long

and cut out some of the questuons.

9:45 - Declared CS0 Exam ready - Made copies

10:00 - Grading CS0 Final projects

10:30 - Met with student so they could make up a missed assignment

10:45 - Back to grading

Noon - Lunch! (and e-mail)

12:15 PM - CS0 Final Project grading

2:00 - Head to the class room for CS0 final exam.

2:25 - Grading Final Projects while protoring Final Exam. Looks like the length of the exam was about right. Haven't reviewed their answers, so clue how they did, though.

3:45 - CS0 Group Project demos after Final Exam - Good experience for those who chose to stick around.

4:15 - Took exam bubble sheets from yesterday's final exam to be scanned.

4:25 - e-mail

4:30 - Student quiz makeup

4:45 - e-mail

5:05 - Exercise!

6:25 - Back in office - check e-mail

6:40 - Headed home

6:55 - Dinner

7:15 - e-mail

7:35 - (unintential) nap!

8:10 - e-mail

8:15 - Wife arrived home from meeting - visited with her

8:35 - e-mail

8:40 - Grading "Intro to Computers" lab exams

11:00 - Snack/wake-up break

11:15 - Back to grading

2:30 AM - Giving up and going to bed; I hope I'm more productive after some sleep!

Uid 189

7.45 arrive at work and attend to emails

9.00 profiling 3rd year students

11.00 coffee

11.20 working with colleague on moderating assessments

12.20 working with colleague on maths session for January

1.00 collegial carol service

2.00 staff meeting

3.00 marking

4.00 staff meeting

5.00 doctoral lecture by collegaue

6.30 departed work for home

Uid 191

This project is in some ways a microcosm of what is wrong with my working life. I do all the things I have to, but skimpily and in the most slapdash way.

What happened on Wednesday? I took 4 group project tutorials. Three of the groups are doing OK but the third cannot get organised. The most technical person has now effectively taken over the leadership too. This is a mistake in some ways because he is already overloaded, but he couldnt stand the chaos.

This is all I have time to write. See what I mean?

Uid 200

Got up late today (7:30), but still managed to get ready and be at work at about 9:00, really like 9:10, but it's okay because it's exam week (or as I like to call it "the whining season"). It is always the time period when students come forward with complaints and issues that should have been taken care of weeks ago. Further, it is the time they decide to have righteous indignation about several course policies or grading procedures that have been employed all semester. However, it is only at the end of the semester that they realize that their lack of performance lead to point deductions that are actually hurting their grade because of the policies.

I met with a woman from industry looking to come back to school to take a class to improve her skills in enterprise computing. Luckily for her, we have an undergrad elective in that area that is being offered in the spring semester, so I believe she will take it. I hope she gets out of the course what she is looking for.

I then needed to listen to a makeup presentation (5 minutes) from the end of the semester. Some of my students missed the last two weeks of recitations and did not complete the assignment, so they are doing makeups with me.

Spent a lot of the rest of the morning dealing with student issues and grades. I am in the process of the final transfer of grades from Web-CAT to the gradebook now that all assignments are officially closed. During that process, I needed to deal with the small handful of students who had problems submitting on the last day the system took assignment submissions.

Left at 10:45 to go me some former students for a late breakfast/early lunch. All of them work in the area and we meet about once a month for a lunch. It is nice to see them and how their careers are progressing. They were all former undergraduate teaching assistants for our intro course. They were excellent TAs and have turned into excellent software developers and architects in their own right. We broke lunch shortly after noon and I returned to my office.

The rest of the day was peppered with students picking up papers that they did not pick up on the last day of lecture and filling in more grades from Web-CAT.

A student I was expecting on Friday showed up early to give the last of the "makeup" presentations I discussed earlier. His presentation was good, but he also discussed with me about his personal situation and a close friend that tragically died in an auto accident a few weeks ago. She had just found out that she was pregnant, but her husband did not know and he is struggling with her loss and what to do in the situation. I advised him that he should perhaps speak to someone about the entire situation. He is already seeing a counselor about other issues and I encouraged him to talk about this loss as well. Sometimes we aren't just teachers, we are also substitute parents and confidants. Most often, I prefer to encourage my students to discuss any of these types of issues with a counselor or other professional better educated to deal with these issues. However, I lend an ear and support when I can.

The work day ended with a continuation of grading and getting reports ready to email to my students about their last practical exam that occurred on Monday and Tuesday of this week. I left around 5:30 to venture home.

When I got home, I didn't do any work, but I worked hard to get items ready so I can start writing Christmas cards and sent a final batch of pictures off for printing in the hopes that they arrive before December 24th. I have my fingers crossed. After tucking two little people to bed, I think I feel asleep around 10:30, hoping to catch a good night's sleep to start again the next day.

Uid 204

On the opposite side of the world from what appears to be the majority of respondents, we're gradually winding down for the Christmas and summer break.

The office carpets had their annual steam clean this morning, so I worked at home until lunchtime. Spent most of the time writing letters to students winding up their academic dishonesty cases, typically awarding them marks of zero for the assignment in question for plagiarism, unauthorised collaboration, or other forms of cheating.

At the office after lunch, continued working on the revision of a couple of core courses I'm running next year. My offerings don't start until March, but one of the courses starts in the first week of January at our overseas campus, so I really have very little time to get everything rewritten for the lecturer there. My Christmas break isn't going to be much of a break. We have this notion that we get four weeks' holiday each year, but with courses running from early January until late December over there (I'm still awaiting the latest batch of exam scripts so that I can vet the marking), and of course at various other time frames here, there really is no decent slab of time to actually stop work for even a week or two. The closest I come to holiday is working at home instead of on campus over Christmas and New Year and a few weeks into January.

Went out to dinner with my wife, something we try to do at least once a week. Then got back to work, spending a couple of hours going over the online Performance Management folios of the people I supervise, signing off when possible and giving feedback for those that aren't yet ready to sign off. I'm pleased to say the process isn't fully online; it does include a face-to-face meeting, but the online bit is our record of the meeting's outcomes, and even though the online folios are seen by nobody but the staff member and supervisor, alarm bells ring in central administration if they're not all signed off by the end of February.

Teaching? Yes, I'm sure I remember what that is. Some of it's bound to crop up again on a survey day before the year's out.

Uid 206

A rubbish day. It started with trying to go for a swim, forgetting that the pool doesn’t open early this morning. Got to work early. A committee meeting, where two arseholes (sorry, there’s no other word for it) constantly tried to pull the discussions in every direction and appeared to believe they were experts on everything. Their comments on the REF clearly revealed the fallacy. Professors…I think the title must go to their heads or something.

After that ‘constructive’ discussion it was Christmas dinner time…Christmas dinner for a bunch of people who have only just started ‘working together’ (i.e. we’re in the same building) and are not entirely sure why. But it’s interesting to hear more of the work the others do. The gender ‘balance’ of this (entirely female) new unit disturbs me though.

Returned to the PC to find an email follow-up from the morning’s meeting. Oh joy. Curiously, or perhaps revealingly, the author has picked up on the one tiny part of one proposal (in a paper containing several) that might mean work for him. I’m all for debate, reasoned argument etc., but I do expect there to be some constructive element; otherwise it’s all just a waste of everyone’s time.

Dissertation tutorials in the afternoon: students; sanity. I sense my dissertation supervision style is subtly changing this year, in that I’m more proactively ‘project managing’. All of the students have agreed that after Christmas they would benefit from a clear timetable, agreed deadlines for chapters, and regular meetings. The timetable and deadlines will be negotiated between us, of course, but this feels more prescriptive than I’ve been in the past. At least two of the students are, I suspect, under-performers. Both have come up with projects that they’re really interested in, that connect to their identities and futures, so I’d love to see them do well. Obviously, I want them all to do the best they can, but when you sense that students haven’t yet discovered their own academic capabilities, I suppose it’s natural to hope that they do. Why is my supervisory style changing? With the closure of my ‘home’ discipline here, this is the first year that all of my teaching (and hence all of my dissertation supervision) is within a degree programme that I’m fairly peripheral to. I don’t get to know the students as well, although I do see some of them in both their first & second years. So it may be something to do with a different body of students having different needs: the nature of their degree tends to prioritise practical elements (and reflective practice), whereas the degree I used to teach on (in my own discipline) had a strong research component throughout, right from Year 1, which may have enabled greater independence – wrong word, perhaps ‘confidence’ is better – for the dissertation. Or could it because I have more demands on my time these days, and need to be more prescriptive to keep track of them? I hope it’s the former, rather than the latter. But I’ll see how the rest of the year goes for these students, and consider it over the summer before the next lot start.

Evening, having spent 10 hours at work. Wrapping family Christmas presents, knowing that I’ve already missed the deadline for ‘standard’ posting of parcels. I’ve only written a third of the Christmas cards so far. Christmas always seems to arrive too fast. Wine. Bed. Sleep, but not enough of it.

Uid 207

I am writing this diary late and probably briefly. That is a sure sign that our 12 week term finished last Friday and that I have slightly lost the plot. I’m not sure who was more exhausted - students or staff? But as a result I felt as though last week stretched out with endless opportunities to finish projects, tidy office, take coffee with colleagues. It worked to some extent.

So Wednesday I made it into the office abut 8pm – an hour later than on a teaching day. Working in an experimental department with profoundly sub zero temperatures over the previous week has meant many many burst mains pipes and flooded offices and labs. It also means that each evening the water is switched off to the building at 6pm and on again at 9am. The idea is that at least someone the building to see any leaks. I’ve been lucky and it hasn’t affected my work directly apart from having to rapidly reorganised some teaching rooms and take slightly circuitous routes during UCAS tours but it has left me with the profound conviction that if my office were flooded I would have trouble working out what was worth saving and not from piles of sodden paper. So first job to fill a few black bun liners with material to be dumped or shredded from this terms teaching. Then look at e-mails coming in as a result if a regional meeting held on Monday – and try to write a case for funding in two hours – responding to someone else’s conviction that the 15th is the end of the working period of 2010.

11.00 Wait for outreach officer to come and see me for an appointment. 11.30 – assume this is not going to happen. Get a phone call from her 30 mins later saying sorry but was running around moving room bookings to make sure that school coming in this afternoon for workshop wouldn’t be paddling for any part of it.

12.30. Luxury of lunch with colleagues – the first time in 2 weeks.

14.00 -15.30. First year undergraduates go home as soon as term ends; 2nd, 3rd and 4th years push the envelope a bit and stay around to catch up on course work after the end of term. Deal with one 2nd year who was trying to do coursework set 6 weeks ago, one 4th year who wanted advice on trying to find a PhD position abroad. He assumes that the funding cuts here will make it too competitive for him obtain a studentship here. Not sure – we expected to see that last year and it wasn’t the case. Take him through some of the different options and e-mail him the relevant urls. Encourage him to do as well as possible in his courses this year and to research his options well. Then a 3rd year student who waves a number at me for a piece of coursework on a module I have never taught, steel myself not to plunge into a quick recap of a 10 lecture module on the spot and send him off to find the lecturer concerned – who I was sure I saw in at some time this morning.

16.00 Post-doc comes to see me – she had e-mailed me earlier to give me sad news for her, probably too sad to even allude to in the most confidential of blogs. Take her for a cup of coffee surreptitiously stashing tissue packs in my pockets before we leave my office. As much for me as for her I think.

17.00 Home, build a fire and set to deal with e-mails from students who are taking a year abroad. Need to make sure they are OK before they head off to ski or surf for their Xmas breaks.

19.00 Postgraduate student who I have worked with but not supervised directly turns up and we share a glass of prosecco (Italian student) before we go down to the Thai café at the end of the road . This is her last week here before she goes away to finish writing up where she has family support and then comes back to submit and take her viva. The Thai café is a real find – can see the quality of my culinary life improving hugely. Good to talk to the student. You spend 3 or 4 years with these students and work very intensely with them – it is always a wrench when the relationship has gone well and they then leave. We talk about her future and my past and a little about my future. I promise to accept an invitation to visit whatever sunny southern European city she ends up n (on that point about her future she is very clear!) when she is past her viva.

22.00 Home – sleep – downpipe form bathroom is frozen. Realise I will have to shower in work tomorrow (but after 9 am and when the water is switched back on).

Uid 213

I bought cookies for my students this week for Christmas - ok, Oreos, which aren't Christmasy in the slightest, but they were in seminar-sized packs and reasonable priced. My Wednesday morning students refused - very politely - but refused the cookies. I don't know if they were too shy to open the packet, all on diets, or maybe 10 am is too early for American cookies. A colleague said I should have provided rich tea biscuits and cups of tea, but cups of tea for a seminar are beyond my carrying capacity down three flights of stairs, particularly as I was also returning bulky logbooks to them. I had 92 logbooks to mark this week. They record their engagement with the course, so I'm not assessing them on quality, but rather on quantity, literally whether or not they have put in all the required pieces of homework, in class writing and reading notes. Because they live with these notebooks all semester, the books are inevitably very grubby. I tell them to leave them in rough form as I would much rather they spend time editing their coursework assessed on quality rather than typing up rough notes. I get to see a lot of their doodles and rough ideas, which is interesting, but it worries me how much some of them must smoke, based on the fact that the notebooks reek after a week in my non-smoking office.

I came out of my office this afternoon after marking the 92nd logbook, triumphantly ready to go home. A administrator was also heading home and asked how I was. I told the administrator how thrilled I was to have finished my huge pile of marking. They asked how the students did, and I said they all passed, except for one who had turned it in too late (the University has strict requirements about coursework submitted past a certain point). The administrator said 'Oh, so that was the student's fault, not yours.' I was really angry by this person's casual belief that a student failing could be my fault as a teacher (particularly as all the rest passed), but as this administrator has absolutely \*no\* student contact in their role and is shortly due to retire, I just smiled and gritted my teeth and went home. I do feel this is part of the commericialisation of academia though - we exist only to serve the students, which doesn't mean teaching them or helping them to expand their minds or horizons, but merely to pass them.

But I was happy to have finished the marking, although I read student work for the next day's class all the way home on the train. It never finishes!

Uid 214

The last week of term: let's call this Wednesday 'Four Meetings and a Party' (there was no funeral, except perhaps a small one for my flagging spirit). The end of term was in sight but teaching was not - quite - finished, and planning for term 2 was also in full spring. So today, starting at 9am and finishing at 5pm, I had four separate meetings at the different levels of my faculty, department, team and finally my own little group of me and my teaching assistants for our term 2 teaching. Frankly, while all these meetings were important, only the last was all that positive - focusing in on plans for our teaching next term, it meant working with two fantastically intelligent and ferociously driven postgraduate teaching assistants to come up with good ideas for our teaching next term. The energy of the TA's was infectious and it left me proud and yet scared - proud that I am part of an organisation that has such incredible postgraduates and scared for their future as soon-to-be-completed arts PhDs looking for work in the current economic climate. The other meetings of the day made clear that the outlook for the foreseeable future is shockingly bleak, with everyone expecting - but no one, \*yet\*, admitting - redundancies, departmental closures and other 'austerity' measures on the cards. Still, overall a positive day (the meetings were not unrelenting sombre, we \*are\* still planning, albeit carefully, all sorts of good things, initiatives, projects, grants and so on) - and it did end with a party, for staff and students, with mulled wine (yuk) and mince pies (yay!). There are worse ways to make a living, and the one thing I took out of all the ups and downs of the day was that we have incredible talent in my little corner of the arts world, a talent shared I know in everyone else's little corners. The energy, enthusiasm and sheer guts of the staff and especially students I work with is electrifying. If only some senior politicians currently culling the arts in their insane ideological fervor could see this...

Uid 217

Not a very varied day to report, really. Up later than planned due to not getting to sleep till half one or so, having stood on the platform at half eleven for nigh on an hour, waiting for a blasted train home.

Meeting at 11 to discuss move of the research centre I belong to from the department to a School-level conglomeration of such centres: this means administrative assistance and a bit of a budget, so is v welcome.

The rest of the day - 12-4.30 was spent doing ten-minute student essay consultations, one after the other, with a sandwich shoved in when one of them failed to show up. Then an hour-and-a-half of e-mail catch-up; also reading a BA dissertation student's chapter and faxing a letter in respect of a French habilitation I'm examining. Also, I e-mailed with the newly appointed Research Associate attached to an overseas grant I got (it has taken the combined forces of Grants & Contracts and HR a mere eight months to allow me to appoint the RA, while my overseas co-investigator started work with his RA back in March...): she is really excellent and has started work on the project with real oomph.

Then from 6-7.30 my Beginners' German class (I'm speaking at two conferences in Germany in the coming year and decided I should learn a bit of the language).

Home 8.30 or so (public transport permitting).

Uid 221

9.00 - 9.30 checked email, prepared for workshop at 10.00

9.30-10.00 online meeting via web-conference, about producting resources to support the introduction of web-conferencing

10.00-11.00 scheduled workshop

11.00-12.00 meeting with individual student about his progress with project. Advised him on applying for an extension to the hand-in date, gave feedback on his previous submission and discussed tackling the next assignment.

12.00-12.30 moderation meeting with fellow tutor

12.30-1.30 lunch in refectory with colleagues - discussing work issues

1.30-5.30 working in my office, dealing with email, reading a student essay, learning how to use Turnitin. Also spoke with Student Liaison Officer about how staff are informed about students with disabilities and about what the University has agreed in terms of Reasonable Adjustments and Exam Contracts. Tried to complete TRAC return but failed.

Uid 223

The first time the 15th has fallen on a teaching day.

First class 8-9.30: preliminary General Education writing course. APA references using imaginary books that students/their friends might write. Student gives a short presentation about her future: wants to start a women-only disco > discussion about gender segregation traditionally and now. Looked at a website on the environment by National Geographic/Shell Oil, discussed the interests of these organizations, the topics on the site, some of the data on carbon emissions. A more encouraging lesson than sometimes: students involved.

Went to office to work on editing online journal, then a new colleague passed with exasperation about the third and final writing course (COL-240) and I shared some materials I'd made last semester and one I'm thinking of for this afternoon.

Nearly 10.00, now working on the online journal: finding reviewers, writing covering letters for print copy, starting to get addressee list together.

The rest of the day I was too busy to log: taught two more 80-min classes. The afternoon class (final writing course) were beginning to write up the findings of their own data-gathering. I gave them prompts to organize this; they were able to ask intelligent clarifying questions about these, and I was able to give answers which helped them to structure their write-ups without telling them exactly what to write: satisfying for both sides, I think!

Uid 224

The end of the year, summer holidays are just a week away, exams are all done, yet things seem as busy as ever. I've been getting by with very little sleep to try to meet all the deadlines for proposals, budgets, and courses that need to be sorted out before everyone who sets the deadlines goes on holiday for the summer! But today is graduation day and it's nearly Christmas, so most of the day is spent socialising.

8am Go into town and hire my gown for graduation, then grab a cup of coffee and hang around talking to other academics, waiting for graduation to start, and clearing the most urgent emails from my iPhone. There was supposed to be a parade, but it's raining, so we have even more time to hang around talking instead. Graduation is a great chance to spend time with academics that I wouldn't normally meet - departments that we don't interact with, administrators who are normally only recognisable by email addresses, and general staff who today are fussing about whether or not my hood is the right way around instead of whether or not I've filled out the right forms. It's great having the university united for once, even if it mainly involves wearing silly clothes and sitting on a hot stage clapping for a few hours. It's also great to see the students and families proud of the outcome of their hard work.

1:30pm Graduation is over, and I hastily deal with some of the admin that piled up this morning while I was offline.

4pm I head over to the Maths department's end of year barbeque, where our humble Engineering college choir of about 10 people are going to sing Christmas carols. The choir is conducted by the PVC of Engineering, who happens to be a trained singer. Another enjoyable time of hanging out with people from different departments, united by our interest in singing.

The backlog of emails and urgent requests will have to wait until tomorrow - it was nice that I was paid for a whole day mainly to sit around, drink coffee and wine, and sing. I must see about getting those added to my job description.

Uid 226

Meetings today. I moved over the weekend. I am now within 5 minutes' walk to the office. Still arriving at the same time, but that extra hour of sleep is greatly appreciated. At the office I started the day by reading email and cleaning out the junk. Had a few more minutes before my first meeting so reviewed and approved an annual report. System had the slows so only managed to look at one annual report. Caught a phone call on my way to my first meeting and stopped to listen to an explanation for a minor mistake. Met for two hours with tax expert who addressed the complexities of having permanent residence and being paid in one state and yet actually living and performing work in another. Fortunately there is an easy solution - paying a tax consultant to do my taxes for me. However, the session was useful for the entire group. Grabbed lunch during the break and ate during the meeting since today is back-to-back meetings. I'm really past the age of enjoying grab-and-go food. My standards are higher now. In my next meeting, we reviewed budgets available for awarding grants, discussed collaborating with other internal groups, recapped the post-analysis of our first ever virtual job fair, discussed recruiting and had a chance to look at the results of a year-long analysis of the projects we've been funding for the past 10 years. Very interesting. I bailed out of that meeting to take a pre-arranged phone call from two rejected grant applicants who wanted feedback, followed by yet another meeting. The last meeting of the day was a planning session for a workshop on evaluation/assessment we will be doing in January.

It's a bit early yet but I may call it a day. I'm meeting'd out. My nephew and his son are visiting and we plan to meet and see the big Christmas tree downtown tonight. Tomorrow I fly home for Christmas. The office is emptying out rapidly. Hard to stay motivated and on task.

Uid 231

Just arrived back from teaching in Hong Kong on Monday morning and then straight to a conference in Sydney on Tuesday. Back home in Newcastle last night and feeling exhausted, very little sleep for the past few days. Not only am I back at work today but am acting head of school so had to chair three meetings, including the School Assessment Board meeting. Before going into work, I had to collate my students marks and do all the bureaucratic things associated with submitting grades. I like to give my teaching duties first preference but without internet access for the past few days, I had to collate the results in a rush, hoping I hadn't made too many mistakes. I start the day feeling guilty! The meetings ran back to back from 10am to 4.30pm. The meetings are really important as they are the only opportunities to share and review our teaching and this is very close to my heart. However, we were racing aginst time and not able to spend the time exploring problems and ideas in a way I would have preferred. Haven't had a chance to check emails since Saturday morning and they hang on my conscience like a dead weight throughout the day. Also hanging over the day was the Enterprise Agreement Ballot. All university staff are being asked to vote on the proposed agreements, however a lower pay offer is being made to the general staff supported by another union. As President of the Branch of the union that covers academic and general staff, I am helping direct campaigns that say YES to the academic agreement and NO to the general staff agreement so news and updates are coming in throughout the day which makes it all very tense. But the good news is that the day concluded with the Faculty Xmas party held at City campus where I work. Not only good food and wine, but the friendship and laughter of colleagues with bits of gossip thrown in between. Left about 10pm feeling no guilt about the untended emails and collapsed into bed.

Uid 232

Early start today to travel to Edinburgh for a collaborative EPSRC project start up meeting with partners from Bristol and Aston. Delayed by accident on the way to station so missed train - late for meeting.

Meeting involved presentations from all of the project team about themselves and their previous work and planning discussions for the next phase of the project and a summer school that we are planning for June 2011.

Home at 7.30pm and catch up with email after dinner. A productive day.

Uid 234

Overnight a student had sent me an email ask about why something hadn’t been posted on WebCT yet. The honest answer to this is because, “I hate WebCT, & try to avoid it”. The student ended her email by saying, “Hope UR cool”. I don’t really know the etiquette for responding to this, so I finished my reply “Fond regards”.

I then tried to post the missing piece of work on WebCT, but as per normal I couldn’t get the damn thing to work.

As a school we are currently being reviewed, which is hideously stressful. To me there is a large unanswered question which I believe we have never had comprehensively answered, mainly why have we as a school been designated as needing to be reviewed? Ultimately, I think the answer is a business one, we are a small unit and although we are financially viable we do not bring in large amounts of research bids. As such we are vulnerable. We had an informal question and answer session with the head of school. Sometimes I have huge respect for her; when she is decisive, clear and opinionated. However, on days like today, she was waffling and being woolly - apparently "It’s not an option not to change." She was displaying an odd management strategy – she clearly has a vision in her head of where she wants to take the school post-review. Part of the review process is that we make suggestions of how we think the school should evolve. But instead of publically saying, “This is how I believe the school should develop….” She was throwing it open to the group to discuss but then becoming frustrated that the group weren’t feeding back to her what she wanted to hear.

I did the Admissions Talk to today’s applicants. I enjoy this task, and I find my admission role one of the most rewarding of my job.

I then invested a couple of hours in admin jobs, getting ready for next term. Part of this was (trying to) recruit outside speakers for a learning initiative that I run with colleagues in other schools. This learning initiative is well regarded within the University, nationwide & has international recognition, so there is a strong incentive for it to continue and grow. I invest an awful lot of work into this, but usually don’t mind as it carries a lot of kudos. However, we had a gentleman’s agreement that anything published regarding the initiative would be published in the three names of the three academics involved, regardless of writing input, in recognition of the combined effort put in. Last week two of us became aware that the third person is about to publish a paper in a very respected journal without crediting the other two. There has been an email exchange but on Friday the colleague confirmed he would continue to publish without adding our names to the paper. So, when I was doing this work today I became very angry at what I see as the deception/ duplicity of my colleague.

Finally, I put in a couple of hours towards the “Introduction & Background” chapter of my PhD. Optimistically, I have done a lot. Pessimistically, there is still a lot more to be done. But at least I can articulate what it is that needs to be done.

Uid 237

Diary entry 4

Wednesday 15th December

Context

Wednesday was my last day of teaching for semester 1 and it was down at Institution B (I have supervisions tomorrow at Institution A, one of which a 3-way meeting with co-supervisor, but these are my two most able students so always a pleasure to sit and talk through progress/ideas).

Content

I woke up at 7.30ish and it was a mad rush to get ready to leave the house so that I would be in time to make teaching. After a brief panic on the M62 when I joined a queue and realised I probably wasn't going to make my first student, the traffic eased up and I actually made it in time (grabbing a large takeaway tea on my way to the teaching space).

Not all of the students turned up who were meant to, so I contacted them and asked them to try and make it in to see me (as I am not in at Institution B regularly). My two masters dissertation students agreed to meet me later on during the day, one just before and one just after a research seminar. I went to the research seminar (4.30-6pm) which was followed by lively debate and questions (I really enjoy the research seminars in Institution B, there's a genuine interest in and enthusiasm for hearing about research which is lacking most of the time in the department at Institution A), then met the student.

I was very annoyed with my student at 6pm who turned up having been drinking, with no notes, and asked me what the next step in his research was (!) - a complete opposite to the student I'd supervised before the research seminar. Raising an eyebrow in disbelief I said 'have you not brought any notes with you?' to which he lept up and before I had chance to sit him down again he was on his way to the library to "print off" some notes. He did not return for nearly 15 minutes, and then empty handed. I let him take nearly an hour of my time, which was over-generous considering there hadn't been much progress since the last time I had seen him. I gave clear instructions about what he was to produce before the next meeting and I shall be withdrawing time/energy if he fails to do so.

After this rather frustrating meeting, I had a very positive evening. I went out with colleagues for drinks and a meal (it was drinks with the visiting speaker which turned into several drinks and then dinner, as these things do sometimes). For me, being relatively new to Institution B, this was the first time I'd spoken to some of my colleagues properly, so I found that very constructive. It was also good to feel a sense of being part of the department research culture and team - something which is more difficult when you are flying in for the odd day here and there. I am starting off next semester's research seminar series and I intend to make it a good one!

Uid 239

I hate Wednesday as that is the day for various staff meetings. I ought to try and keep Wednesdays as clear from trouble as possible so that serenity might rule. As it is, I arrive at around 7am anxious to ensure I've planned for all the meetings taking place before the afternoon's meetings, and soon find out that key admin staff are down with flu, OK might need a quick re-think around who admins the Boards this afternoon. Meanwhile have to meet up at 8.0am with X to discuss what we do about coures Y&Z due to new funding regime and cuts. Plus need a coffee with A to keep me a bit sane and talk about the outcome of the visit up North last week. Meeting booked with B- don't know what about- must make sure I ask first. I hate surprises as they are always difficult ones. Early meeting and coffee goes fine and feel more relaxed and postive until meeting with B and as usual difficult issues to deal with around lack of teamwork-problems with balance of workloads-future of the curriculum etc. too big to deal with in one hour!! That means rush to meeting about the new validation- not ready-thinking on the hoof. member of staff being sticky about it- me wondering if it's going to happen at all with all the false starts-

thus rush to staff meetings-first one- awfully poor turn out- what did I do wrong??- decide we will re-convene at later date- next one- big turn out- I've carefully planned the agenda-- some of the meeting want to spend all the time discussing agenda item 1; keep returning to it like dogs with a bone; meeting over-ran because of this and impacted on the next one. lesson learned again- quick look into the Christmas Dance- great idea but not many turned up- we're all too busy coping with the Christmas 'cram' (typically a gathering of deadlines all falling in midddle of December- happens every year-why do we do it!!!) stagger off to do a bit of exercise at class and then back to the grind of working late into the night to meet deadlines for Thursday- - Christmas cram rules OK!

Uid 241

My grandmother passed away the day before Thanksgiving. Final exams are going on this week. I have those to grade and one more set of programs. Hopefully I will get everything done by the deadline and not have to give too many bad grades.

Uid 244

Up late, overslept, panic to get the kids to school in time, made worse by the unseasonal cold, it was -13 C this morning.

After dropping the kids I headed off to town to meet up with colleagues and listen to project presentations that conclude the university science education course that we are running for staff in the faculty of science and techonology here.

Really good presentations, and nice examples of scholarship of teaching and learning in practice, and the application of research results in disciplinary specific educational research to classroom innovation. A high point of the day.

11am I head off to get my hair cut for Christmas, and then am back at work about 11:45 in my office.

Good news in the e-mail, my project application for funds to support development and evaluation of an extionsion to Jeliot which allows clicker like prediction of parameters and return values in methods using a small android phone application was approved. Yay!

After lunch I have a meeting with the MSc student who is working on the application and Jeliot extensions. He is done with the prototype, we are on track to clean up the code, port the mobile application to a real phone from the simulation environment, and do some classroom evaluation in spring of 2011.

The rest of the afternoon is eaten up with writing a course evaluation report for the course I taught in the autumn, providing a perspective on the student course evaluation is important, but it also takes quite a lot of time.

At 4pm it is time to head off to school and look at the kids Christmas show, they have all made Christmas decorations and small "Jultomtar". We stood in the snow in the school yard eating pepparkakor and drinking glögg. Current temperature -12 C.

About 5pm my wife heads off to a work Christmas dinner, and I head home to make Pizza with the kids.

9pm, kids are in bed, and the last thing on my list for today is to finalise the Systems Engineering Body of Knowledge document review that I volunteered for, not realising that the document is over 600 pages. Well, I have read a few chapters over the last few weeks, and I light a fire in the library and sit down to read some more and write the review.

12:30, I wake up with the laptop on my knee, and realise that I will have to complete the review tomorrow, time for bed.

Uid 245

Wednesdays were traditionally reserved in the afternoon for sports etc. Therefore all important meetings and lots of more marginal (eg pgt or specialist) teaching gets crammed into Wednesdays. As a result its one of the busiest days.

7.30- 9 Revising teaching

9-12.00 Teaching first part of my usual double (2\*2 hour) session. Small class so relatively painless.

12.00-13.00 Guest lecturer. Arrived late, but that allowed us to continue with previous stuff.

13.00-14.00 Student-staff committee

14.00-14.30 Short meeting with research student

14.30-15.00 UG student with query on course work and discussing him looking for work (as also personal tutor).

15.00- Meeting with potential research student planned, but he didnt turn up till about 4.15; creating a gap in which I got various questions from students about some PGT coursework

16.10-16.40 Short meeting with research student

16.40-17.10 Discussion with colleague about extra-curricular academic work for second years

17.30-19.00 Xmas shopping. (Managed to do it for entire family ;-) Oh I love Christmas)

19.15-22.00 Kate Rusby concert. Drifted in and out of this.

Uid 246

This is final examination week, so I spent most of my morning preparing a final exam and most of my afternoon proctoring one. Overall my students seem to be doing fine. Looks like I'll only have to flunk 2 students, but many are getting A's.

I had one student today who somewhat surprised me by showing up for the final. He hasn't come to class in over a week, he failed to turn in his final project, and he's ignored my emails. After the final I asked him what was going on, and he confessed he was in a serious funk and couldn't get motivated to do anything. He's married with a small child, so at least I know there is someone at home who is looking out for him. He assured me he was getting help for the problem. I sure hope he means it.

I get a little down at the end of the semester, perhaps because I miss teaching and I miss interacting with the students. On the other hand, I can get so much done if I just get up the will-power to do so. There's nothing more motivating though than knowing you will be standing in front of a classroom the next day and will be expected to "perform". My wife and boys surprised me by coming by the office to join me for lunch... that always cheers me up.

I better get back to grading. I'd be done with it except that I keep taking little breaks to play WordFeud on my Droid X phone. Argh... I hate grading. :-)

Uid 250

Wednesday of exam week - the term is nearly done. Most of the day was spent on administrative activities, but there was some teaching activity and quite a bit of thinking about next term.

MS students have a non-thesis option that requires an 'exit exam'. Students attempt four sections. Two of the required sections are Computer Architecture and Operating Systems.

Prior to this semester one faculty member handled both of these topics. This semester, with that faculty member on sabbatical, I handled these sections. That means writing and grading them.

Writing happened in November. Students took the exam on the Tues. before Thanksgiving. I'm still grading the exams. I need to be done before the 12:30p meeting today.

Got it done with 20 minutes to spare. Everyone passed the OS section. Two students failed Arch.

The committee meeting tabulating results from the exit exam took about one hour.

My one an only final exam (for a course) is tomorrow. I've not finished writing the exam. Though I planned to finish the exam today, it seems the time to finish the exam evaporated. I'll work on it some this evening, but finishing will happen tomorrow. I've got to leave campus early to avoid the coming snow (or will it be ice?). I'm wondering if the University will be closed tomorrow. Maybe I'll get an extra day to finish that exam.

Next semester I'll only have one course. I am very tempted to overhaul the order of topics and activities. I would like to load the first half of the semester with more than half of the topics allowing more time at the end for project using the topics. I know I can start off with a revised course, will I have the time to follow through with the revision?

Today marks one month since I dropped my laptop. It slipped out of my unzipped backpack as I slung it over my shoulder, unprotected, and landed on a concrete floor. It seems to have survived with only cosmetic damage. I'm typing on it now.

Uid 256

December 15th

06.45: A typical multi-tasking day looms ahead as I rise to get coffee and toast for myself and my wife, after a quick browse over incoming e-mails from abroad (because of the time difference, not from night owls). As at yesterday evening, I had cleared my in-tray of significant tasks, so to speak, which reassures me. As a part-timer, I like to try to keep the festive season, like holidays, clear of commitments. So the in-tray is clear, apart from a promised book chapter to be written for February, and a paper which is a gleam in my eye, arising from reviewing a book on evaluating academic development. However I anticipate one or two draft WBL reports coming in any time now for formative comment, and perhaps a few postings from Taiwan, where a new task looks like being tabled by my Taiwanese collaborator. So let’s see what’s in the mail before the coffee boils. Just one festive season message from a student in Taiwan, and a “keeping up” message from a former student of 30 years ago, who has been working and marrying in Rumania, and usually keeps in touch at Christmas with his news. Replied to both, apologised to Scotland’s Futures Forum tonight in the Scottish Parliament building; pavements up here too icy and frozen for this old man to risk. Now let’s get coffee! (10 mins)

8.30: Breakfast eaten, paper read, time to work on the topping and tailing of this paper on impact analysis. While I respect what the New Zealanders have written in LS’s book, I cannot accept that it is impossible to inform judgments about impact with data which is objective, yet un-manageable in statistical analyses! I wonder how LM will feel when I show him what I am writing on our behalves, from three years ago. Is it possible to make a sufficiently reasoned case that it will be considered by Evaluation and Assessment in HE? (70 mins)

9.40: Problems with my visiting prof password. One of the problems of pt work. Trying to sort it out, then messaging postmaster from another location. (10 mins). Plan B for trip north. Packaging Secret Santa presents lest we cannot travel, given the present weather forecasts, and getting ready to post a “Montrose” parcel to my grand-daughter.

Well, I am part-time! (40 mins)

10.30: Multiple invitations from N on lifewide learning involvements. Looks most attractive, but I need time to think before Skype or phone call this pm, which is what he wants. Read attachments and decided I could do what he seeks. (40 mins).

11.10 Technician arrived with new TV, and agreed to inspect defective HiFi system. I undertook a brief training course in the new zappers. Then lunch. (2 hrs 05 mins)

13.15 Now back to work. Trying to access video on Taiwan website, which they want me to watch. No joy!

Back to the analysis of impact paper. Reading/noting editing points on hard copy. Sometimes I cannot manage this kind of task on screen.(45 mins)

14.00: Awaiting phone call from N. Re-read what he is asking. Spent half an hour discussing what he wants me to do, keynote, foreword and so on. Seems to be within my capabilities. Agreed on that. (30 mins)

14.30: Break to arrange grandchildren’s Christmas presents (Well, once again, I am part-time). (90 mins)

16.00: Now getting to grips with this impact paper. Not sure journals will wear it, but still feel it is an argument and example worth advancing. Working on the paper copy at the moment. For some editing and revising, I find that easier; although for most first writing, I find online better. (45 mins)

16.45: Assorted e-mails need ing attention, including one from last year’s Taiwanese group. Great when they want to keep in contact. How do I register that with evaluation of my tutorial support? (10 mins)

16.55: Back to that paper. Worked on it until tea-time (17.50) (55 mins)

19.30: Phone call with J at Trinity. Discussing Engineering philosophy, or philosophy in engineering. Not really my territory. (30 mins)

Tutorial podcast for Taiwan on critical thinking. (30 mins) Nearly time for “The Apprentice” End of the working day.

Uid 257

I am at the Society for Research into Higher Education annual conference, at the Celtic Manor resort, Newport. 0000-0100hrs in my hotel room I am still working on my paper for my conference presentation: ‘Fragmented academic identity: lessons from defining academic practice’. Up at 0730, the first conference session starts at 0845, a keynote by Nick Maxwell, ‘The urgent need for an academic revolution: from knowledge to wisdom’, followed by the organised smaller discussion group of about 20 people to examine issues raised, until 1015. My presentation at 1030-1100, a session in parallel with 11 others, goes all right - perhaps my audience of 10 people are too kind to me! 1100-1130, a refreshments break, a chance to chat with people I know and those I do not. Then two more parallel sessions, on threshold concepts and on conceptions of research and on intellectually stimulating leadership, the latter one I chair, really two sessions of 15 minutes, two speakers on the first topic, one on the second. Lunch at 1245, where I do some planning of the Network session I and my co-convenor are running later, and the Society AGM 1330-1400. The conference Big Name, Etienne Wenger, presents the keynote, ‘Knowledgeability in landscapes of practice: from curriculum to identity’, followed by another smaller group discussion (the same people), until 1530 - is he amending his theory so much that it is hardly worth clinging on to the notion of community of practice? I chair another session next, on the topic of social networking media for students and their learning (not very convincing). After the tea break 1615-1645, I attend a more philosophical paper on the nature of practice in relation to the provision of work based learning in HE, the argument being that the ‘problem’ of the theory-practice divide is artificial, because all practice is imbued with theoretical understanding, it is just that explanation to students needs to be grounded to be effective. I chair the 1730-1800 session, on getting research students engaged with Roberts-funded resources in the form of videos accessed via the web, the Graduate Virtual Research Environment, led by a researcher at Hull University Business School, which had historically found itself providing the university-wide service. The final session of the conference schedule continued on, until 1845 - I and my co-convenor organise the Postgraduate Issues Network of the Society, a special interest group. It is not any more than a list of names of people who have attended a seminar of the Network (three or four organised throughout the year) and so get emailed about the upcoming ones. This is the first time the annual conference had put such a session in its schedule and it provided a chance to reach new people, who happened to be there, but who variously expressed keenness to contribute and also to make the Network more substantive, hopefully involving an online interaction facility to be instigated yet by the Society. A short time then to get ready for the reception and conference dinner, where I chat with my Network co-convenor and the current QAA officer leading the doctorateness project, ending with the Society’s presentations to worthy people and the necessary dance for those of us needing some exercise! going on after midnight - the third and final day of the conference tomorrow (starting off at 0845hrs again).

Uid 258

Today didn't get off to the perfect start I'd aimed for. Husband is working away, and my ambition to get an early train (get to the office and do lots of work) was thwarted by a toddler who refused to put on her coat, have her hair brushed, etc. So I took her to the childminders too late to catch my train, and worked from home for a couple of hours writing a document explaining how I'd spent £300 research funding earlier in the year.

Took train to work, wrote module handbook on train as a later train means the luxury of a seat and table.

A couple of students were meant to be coming to see me at 11:00am but arrived 40 minutes late. It's the end of term so I didn't even raise an eyebrow. Also, while I was waiting I had other things to do ...these included writing a module change form (which I should have done six months ago but forgot), nagging students by email to tell me about their work placement hosts so that I could inform our health and safety people in order that they can bombard the hosts with forms, and sorting out the aforementioned module handbook's readings.

Husband rang to say he'd be home from his business trip earlier than planned, which was good news as I'd expected that he'd be away for another night. After I'd seen my students I carried on with thenever ceasing admin mountain (which seems to be the story of my life at the moment) before going to a meeting to discuss a new Masters programme that our faculty is hoping to run. This ended up being a gloomy discussion about university politics, funding cuts, whether the VCs view of the University's bright future included our faculty ...and whether the Masters under discussion would ever get off the ground 'in the current climate.'

Went home and spent a couple of hours with husband and daughter before goint to my running club to run 13 miles across the fields in the dark, mud and mire. Didn't give work a second thought while I was doing this.

Uid 260

This week should be the last week of teaching but I am on compassionate leave of absence. My university's compassion is not so tender-hearted that I am excused teaching for the week - rather I had to cram this week's classes into last week so that the decks could be cleared.

My wife had a hip replacement operation last week and I collected her from hospital on Monday - today I have to perform various tasks for her that she cannot otherwise do for herself. The fact that my wife is recuperating does not mean that she is not working - and I see a side of her life that I do not often see. She is the Director of a major Division of a nationallty reknowned organization - and the moment she turns on her BlackBerry it goes ballistic with a non-stop stream of e-mails and phone calls. Since her organization's staff are posted all over the world there is no hour of the day or night too early or too late for someone somewhere to just pick up a phone and call her. Since her life is fuelled by coffee and since she cannot carry a cup while on crutches, I am kept busy running to and fro and recharging the filter machine and topping up her caffeine levels.

Once she is installed at a desk, I take our dogs out and do a top-up shop. I return to find that the postman has brought me goodies. Our Dean e-mailed us a couple of weeks ago urging us to vote for her daughter's performing arts academy which had entered into a kind of Glee club competition. My colleague Dr Bluestocking had snorted and thought this an insufficiently "academic" communication as to be worthy of her attention. I had gamely gone along, registered at the site and voted. Last week I received a message from the promoters saying that by registering to vote I had been entered into a draw and had won a Â£200 Sanyo Xacti digital sound recorder. I had nearly deleted their e-mail asking for details of the address to which the prize should be sent mistaking it for some kind of scam. It's an impressive piece of kit that delivers CD quality sound recording from a tiny recorder that weighs about 40g. I'm very pleased with it.

My other postal goody is a book on knowledge engineering techniques - more about which later. Eventually, around noon, I get down to work. Tomorrow I am to be cast in the role of a judge of the mythical tribunal which will be sitting at a northern University to put to the test the administrative law knowledge of its students. This is the sixth year I have filled this role and it is something of a labour of love since I am an alumnus of the School. The course is run by a Visiting Professor who is a former Administrative Law judge.

He has devised a fiendishly well-balanced moot problem. He has provided me with a caselaw brief that is is a dense read requiring careful attention so that I can question the student advocates tomorrow. American appellate judges are much more confrontational than their British counterparts and I will be expected to play my part in giving the students an experience that they won't forget in a hurry. Students have been preparing for this assessed confrontation all term and although some will give a passable imitation of a deer caught in the headlights, others will rise to the occasion and prove themselves to be quick-witted and masters of their case.

After three hours of reading I am satisfied that I am sufficiently familiar with the legal issues to be able to grill the advocates tomorrow.

After refuelling my wife with coffee I move on to my main task for the day. In the New Year I am embarking on a project with an American partner to build an expert system that will enable practitioners to determine whether their clients' ability to apply for a writ of habeas corpus in federal courts is barred by the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA). This Byzantine piece of legislation has vexed federal courts for more than a decade and has generated a substantial body of caselaw that is difficult to understand in its application. I am probably not doing most American attorneys a great disservice if I say that it is a problem most practitioners hope is so complex that the local prosecutor or US District Court judge will not try to raise the issue.

Expert systems raised a lot of excitement in the 1980s with the promise of capturing high level expertise in traditional professional knowledge domains. However that promise was not fulfilled in medicine or law despite some early attempts. Law is a domain that superficially looks attractive for knowledge capture. However at a very early stage an Oxford DPhil candidate was able to show that few areas of law are likely to be suitable candidates for this treatment - and his demonstrator of the use of an expert system to determine questions of the applicability of the Latent Damage Act is still the only publicly available one in the UK.

There is no publicly available expert system in the United States but I believe that AEDPA is a suitable vehicle to build the first American law expert system. I have armed myself with two massive treatises on habeas corpus law from our library and have begun designing the precise knowledge domains that are to be represented in the system. I will begin work embedding some of that knowledge in the expert system shell next term with the help of four students at my university. My American colleague at Harvard will also engage the services of some volunteers in their law school.

I have not built an expert system for 15 years and I decided that I needed to review the state of the

art in knowledge engineering. The arrival of the book on knowledge engineering this morning is my key to doing that and I need to have read it by the weekend. I spend the rest of the afternoon and most of the evening reading the book - happily I find Information technology literature a much easier read than legal commentary so I make good progress.

I check my e-mails late in the evening. My colleague Dr Bluestocking is away at a conference in Melbourne where she would have delivered a paper today. Dr B had done a small amount of crowing about how her paper would earn her a little winter sunshine break. My wife is a seasoned world traveller who once flew out straight to New Zealand with only fuelling stops, stayed in Auckland for 36 hours to give a keynote speech and flew back to the UK. She got into Manchester at 10pm and caught a 6:15 train to London the following morning. By way of contrast Dr B needed to make the great trek with stopovers - 2 days in Singapore on the way out and 2 days in Abu Dhabi on the way back. Our Head of School was happy to pay for one night stopovers but Dr B had to pay for the second nights.

Alas, all did not go to plan. Somehow she contracted a stomach viral infection that took hold almost just after she had taken off from Birmingham - by the time she had got to Singapore she had spent most of the flight in the toilet. My wife's only comment on her plight was to say "A toilet blocker! I'll bet she was popular on that flight!" I received a plaintive email asking for details of the university's travel medical insurance policy. Her illness has proved persistent - a subsequent email showed that she was existing at the conference on the Australian equivalent of toast and water. I received a short email saying that the conference went well but that she is still not really better.

I round off my night by finishing reading Gustav Meyrink's "The Golem" - a very curious novel that has been described as "Frankenstein meets Kafka" - not a bad description of it really.

Uid 264

Dec 15th

My final grades are due today. The exam was last week right in the middle of CS Education Week and I had 5 business days to mark 132 papers and submit final

grades for 154 students. I marked most of the weekend and so by this morning

only had to write scripts to merge the grades from the university-mandated

course-management system with the spreadsheet of exam grades I had typed in

yesterday.

Then I spent 4 hours (4!!!!) doing the final grade calculations and adjustments.We are required to read and sign the front cover of the final exam booklet of

every student who fails the course. I am always amazed at how long this takes --

and just when you think you are almost done. At least after 20 years I knew to

plan for an extra half day to do this. I made very good use of Python scripting

skills (one of things I actually teach in this course) to efficiently calculate

grades like (the best 10 of 11 labs) etc. The course-management software is

unbelievably slow. I could barely find a work-around that

would give me what I wanted and I could go get a coffee while I waited for

it to calculate each set. I don't know my colleagues without programming

skills can even stand to computer their grades. If it weren't for being able

to download the raw data and write my own throw-away script, I would be pulling

my hair out.

Submitted my grades just at noon and it was sunny out. I hadn't seen the

sun much in the last few days. Starting too early and it gets dark at 5. So I

celebrated submitting grades by going for a nice walk. Had to put on snow pants

because it is below freezing (-7 C but then worse with wind chill.)

Spent an hour+ in the afternoon cleaning up email messages about odds and

ends. Had a rather large backlog after ignoring the whole world to focus on

grading exams.

Finally time to start preparing for next term. Ack! I'm in trouble here. Only 3 weeks to go until classes start again and 2 of those are supposedly holidays.

Ha! I haven't got lectures or assignments or really anything worked out.

For one of the courses, I know most of the technical content extremely well

but the other one will be a challenge.

Uid 266

(Writing this on 20th Dec, not having had time since 15th, so memory may be a little hazy!)

A red letter day: finished the last of my very large number of contact hours at 6pm last night, then celebrated with a pint and a visit to the campus chippie (this is the north, after all, none of that southern wine-drinking nonsense here, thankyou), and a catch-up on a big backlog of emails (by the end, my fingers were writing "sorry to take a while to get back to you" on auto-pilot, while my brain was free to think about other stuff). Given that I've been writing an entirely new module - and extensively re-writing two others - as I've been going along, and had eight separate major coursework assignemnts spanning 1st yr UG to masters "live" (at one point all at the same time), not to mention one PhD student taking it right up to the maximum time limit and needing emergency feedback on chapters and another needing to mobilise papers at various stages of readiness, it's been a torrid time. The low point was definitely lying on the floor of the departmental disabled toilet, sobbing with exhaustion and self-pity one afternoon. But by the end of the term, I have had three papers go from "under review" to "in press", and have been invited just the other day to a by-invitation-only workshop/conference/colloquium in Italy in July, so I'm apparently not completely useless.

Anyroad, given the above, Wednesday morning is spent in a bit of a surreal haze, at last not having to either go and do some teaching or prepare the next bit. So I start by re-discovering my desk under a mountain of paper (I love being able to throw away documents that were once The Most Important Piece of Paper in the World), and brushing off the crumbs and wiping away the foodstains of ten weeks' worth of lunches-sat-at-the-computer. Even have time to go and make myself a mug of tea, where time and the filter coffee drinkers have wrought terrible damage on the dishcloths and tea towels I put in there as my good deed for the term a few weeks back.

Then settle down to review the pile of masters dissertations from the course in another place for which I am external examiner. The course is top notch, and several of the dissertations are excellent, fully justifying their rather grand hard-binding and gold lettering on the spine. Others are weak, and seem rather comical dressed in this slightly anachronistic grandeur that is so typical of universities. Work through these through the day, punctuated by several visits from students. One interested in doing a dissertation in my neck of the woods next year, so we chat about possibilities and I give him some of my work. Others come for mentoring meetings, or for discussions about ongoing dissertations (due in shortly after Christmas, so this involves giving them final instructions about how to squeeze as much as possible out of their data), or with questions about coursework that will be completed over Christmas (sometimes betraying disturbingly miscontrued ideas about what it's all about, other times showing proimse that they've taken a lot on board and have the potential to produce something really nice).

Had intended to go and listen to a colleague's research seminar at 4, but it's rather distant in terms of topic from my area, and whilst there might have been strands of collaboration potential, it would likely have been an exercise in dilletantism, so stick to getting the (long overdue) masters theses reviews finished.

Go home slightly early (5.30) as my wife is going out with some friends for a meal tonight, so I get home in order to burn some sausages for my daughters' tea. It's also my wife's birthday the following day, so serendipitously we have time to wrap presents, write cards and conspiritorially bake a birthday cake, which is a lot of fun. Am delighted to get girls to bed and lights off, and all sign of bakery and icing-cakery washed, dried and put away before wife returns home, but the smell of just-cooked sponge gives the game away.

So, a year after Mandelson made his first foray into higher education cuts, and I started worrying about the huge, gaping chasm I have to carry my family across between now and retirement, I still have my job, though my self-confidence, particularly in relation to my career, feels like it has gone 12 rounds with Marvin Hagler (if that draws a blank, look him up on you tube, preferably from a hiding place behind the sofa) and I have a recurring waking nightmare of being accosted by a journalist from the Daily Mail asking me to justify my receipt of umpteen thousand pounds of taxpayers' money in salary and research funds, and being unable to come up with anything coherent in reply. My view of the human race has also rather crashed through the floor - 7 billion is just too many (and preparing for 9 billion, as some of the crop biology projects my colleagues are working on and getting heaped with praise for, seems to me to be greasing the axles of the handcart that we're going to hell in), and the fact that all the things humans tend to think of as being good or virtuous - having babies, saving lives, living longer, higher living standards - are things that increase our impact on this increasingly battered world, seems to me the height of hubris and self-importance. So it's been a funny old year.

Sorry, end of self-indulgent (and doubtless pompous and hypocritical) rant. Happy Christmas.

Uid 267

3 year old came in about 4ish demanding magic juice (calpol) which shows how bad he was because normally he fights like the devil to avoid it. Wife snuck off to his bed and I had him in our bed with me for the rest of the night. managed to sleep quite well until just after 8. Funny morning because 14 year old is also off school ill and I myself didn't feel good with sore throat, cold etc. so there was no real hurry.

3 year old flopped out in front of ceebeebies while I looked at email, sorted out various things and added to my latest to-do list. Also rang up council about current council tax complications.

Afternoon preceded in similar manner, punctuated by brief visit to our worldly goods which are piled up in a storgae facility ten miles away. I send an email to MA students detailing what would be covered in first sessions of next term. I'll resend this again about a week and a half before the start (19 jan) - this way I figure I maximise the chance of them coming prepared. Then i checked our online blackboard system, which we call 'u-link', to see what was up for the undergraduate modules I am leading after christmas. This was slightly unnerving as the first thing that came up was a message explaining that our university had been under unprecedented denial of service attackes recently and was struggling! What I wondered had we to do with Wikileaks - or is the internet just entirely plungeing into chaos. But in the end I decided it was all for the best because whatever IT services response had been, the whole system worked much better than it had ever done before. Or maybe I was the only person stupid enough to go on trying to use it after the warning but whatever the case, I managed to do some things: put up a module guide that should have been there and add some scans of articles (I'd got the library to do for me with proper copyright). Then I made a list of remaining things that have to be dione before new term - but actually I am in quite a good place. One thing I do want to do is et up a facebook page/group for my level 3 module and use it to post relevant links once or twice a week. I hope to write more about this in following months. It's actually part of a project I'm doing involving thye relationship between teaching and research - and specifically going back to English studies of the 20s and 30s for ideas that can be employed in today's research-led teaching. Such as , for example, turning to the example of Mass Observation as this project does. Therefore, I keep meaning to get around to inviting someone from the Share project to come to a day event I'm planning to run at Brunel next June-ish which will be about using such ideas to think about teaching today.

But back to the present, and I was dead on my feet by tea -time (although the 3 year old was by tyhis time happy as larry and running riot). So i restricted my evening to writing this up before collapsing gratefully into bed.

Uid 268

The day began with a meeting with the Associate Dean in order to discuss my taking up the role of Director of Education next year. I think this is ok, though can't help thinking about the book and whether it will get pushed into the background. Also, it will mean less teaching and I am really liking teaching here.

I went from this meeting to the last in my lecture marathon. I was up till 3 am writing it, but partly because I was enjoying myself (in a caffeined up sort of way). I decided to give the students some historical background to the practitioners we'd been studying and in writing a 'chronology', frequently found myself sidetracked with fascinating articles about the planning of Paris, or by Walter Benjamin's vivid descriptions of Mosow, etc.

I also knew it was going to be fun. Divided the students into groups, each representing a European city. Each time that city was named, they had to sing or call out a relevant, if stereotypical phrase (e.g. Vive la France! (Paris), Gor Blimey Guv'nor (London), We'll Keep the Red Flag Flying Here (Moscow)). And the cities were named a LOT. And more at the end. It was a riot in a good way, I think, with lots of information along the way. I was pleased with it. So were they.

I was struck by the number of times I needed to mention revolutions and clashes between young people and police, which seemed to me directly relevant to some of them (the occupation of campus buildings is still going on). Threw in a mention of the student marches of 1988 and we ended in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and end of the Cold War, freedom of Nelson Mandela and invasion of Panama.

Hopefully the next batch of essays will not be so woefully unaware of the effect of two world wars, the dominance of Paris till the 1930s or the significance of Communism, and the fact that it wasn't entirely Brecht's idea.

As the lecture theatre microphone wasn't working and it was quite an energetic lecture, I felt totally winded afterwards, breathlessly answering a few queries from students.

From there almost immediately to a meeting where we had advice on marking students with learning disabilities and was happy to double check our process on the essays and find all was definitely well. Then a long staff meeting, during which I mentioned the difficulty of combining a tight essay turnaround time with graduate tutors, who need a lot of support. Some useful suggestions were made for improving this by involving a second permanent staff member.

Then a further meeting with the current Director of Education to talk about the role. It didn't allay my fears, but I didn't really expect it to, and it seems that I can prepare for it this year, which will be a good thing.

I then had a quick look at the student occupation websites and saw that our VC was about to talk to the protestors. Considered going up there to hear what he had to say, but was completely exhausted by this time and so went home instead, for a rather blissful evening of doing nothing very useful.

Uid 274

I went to visit friends for the weekend and didn't do any university work - wondering whether the change of scenery was worth the additional pressure I feel under today!

Working my way through a list of documents to complete for a new teaching unit, a research project and a paper for publication - trying to juggle my time with the deadlines my colleagues are working to and feeling very frazzled.

Wondering how to juggle getting ready for Christmas as well as all this teaching, writing, admin and research - and when will I fit in buying a real Christmas tree that doesn't look as bedraggled as I feel!

I need an assistant! Colleagues at other unis are posting messages on facebook that are adding to my stress levels - they might have finished their Christmas shopping, finished that paper/book/PhD but I haven't! Maybe they're living in a parallel virtual universe and/or are making it up!

Uid 276

My second day at home ill, curled up on the sofa dosed up with ibuprofen. The shivery shakes have abated but I feel as if I have been kicked all over and all I want to do is sleep but this wretched cough is keeping me awake. My mind keeps wandering to the meetings that I am missing and the tutorials I have to cancel but worse than that, I’m even missing the end of term meal we arranged at the best restaurant in town. How’s that for real bad luck? Hope I will be sorted for Christmas…

Uid 279

I spent last night creating a social network group for the students to join, so that they can communicate together and upload their animations. I had to choose the free option with only 1GB of space, this means there will not be a lot of space for animation downloads, but we will have to compress them because I cannot afford to pay the monthly amount for larger amounts of space! I spoke to some of the FdA Animation students and they were very excited about having their own social network site - this made the time I put into creating it really worthwhile :). Our HE Co-ordinator popped into the staffroom today and I grabbed the opportunity to tell him about the online animation network to find out if he would consider supporting the group and helping out with the monthy fee, and he suggested that I contact the providers to ask if they would consider an education price for more space, and if they agree, he would consider paying the monthly subscription. I will get onto this as soon as I have a minute, because this will enhance the whole process as there will be no limits on video downloads.

Uid 282

4:30am

The alarm went off bright and early. I have surgery today. The pre-surgical interview was on the 14th. They took blood, and EKG, and a chest X-ray. Pretty thorough work up. And, everyone, all the attendants were so friendly and professional.

6:00am

Left for the Outpatient clinic, husband drove and stayed the entire time. After surgery you are not allowed to drive yourself. Good thing, I was in pain and very tired.

6:30am

Arrived to check in and was told that I was supposed to be there at 6:00am. There had obviously been a miscommunication between the doctor's office and surgery. Anyway, as a consequence, they rushed me in right away. The nurse said the doctor had a Type A personality and was ready for me. We both agreed that it was better to have this kind of personality to do surgery. His attention to detail was very important taking instruments into my body. This doctor has a stellar reputation for his excellent skills in the US and in emergency situations around the world. He will be going to Haiti soon to help there.

7:00am

All scrubbed with antibacterial wash, lovely surgical gown on, socks on my feet that don't fit and a plastic cap on my head. The anethesthecist injected something into my IV to start the process for surgery. The attendant wheeled me through hallways leaving my husband and youngest but pregnant daughter in the waiting room. She had taken her son to child care and was going to work late after she made sure I was alright.

Apparently, the surgery lasted 45 minutes. I remember arriving into surgery and then waking up in recovery parched. Another nurse sat at the end of my bed keeping watch over me as I woke up in stages. She kindly gave me ice chips to wet my cotton mouth. Once she deemed me recovered safely from the surgery, she wheeled me in to see my husband. Before we left, though we made small conversation and found out she had been born and raised where my grandfather had in Missouri, a very small town. What are the chances of meeting someone like that from a very tiny place? Amazing!

The hardest part about the recovery room was listening to children on either side of me as they woke from surgery screaming and crying. On the right, an 11 year old boy finally calmed down with tough love from his attendant. They didn't want to bring in the parents until he had calmed down they explained. On the left, a six year old girl crying and her mom in attendance. I asked my nurse about them being so upset. She told me that children often wake up like that as a side effect of the anethesia. Even though I have been an elementary teacher and elementary principal before a professor, I don't think I could deal with that on a daily basis.

10:00

Anesthesia makes a person emotional. I felt that. As I lay there with my husband standing by the bed in that next room, I lost control crying and told him about the children in the recovery. When the nurse came in she asked why I was crying. He explained to her that I was crying because of the children. I just couldn't talk and it didn't make sense, but she patted my shoulder and said I was a kind soul. It will be awhile before I forget the pain and confusion I heard in the voices of those children.

This same nurse left and reappeared asking about my pain from 1-10. I said 2 because the pain that brought me to the operation was now gone but I had not begun to feel the incisions yet. Thank goodness for laparoscopic surgery. Four tiny incisions and then, no more gall bladder. They said if I could urinate, I could get the IV out. Take me to the bathroom. Five minutes later, had that needle out.

Two pain pills later, they tell me I have to wait one more hour to go home. They also explained that the more mobile I am, the quicker I will recover. I was asked if I wanted a wheelchair to the car, so I told her no, I wanted to walk -starting then. I devised a plan and told my husband in the car. I would walk on the hour all day. I think it worked because even though I was very tired, the idea of the gas they had inserted to raise my abdomen, catching in my shoulder area, that accompanying pain, was not something I wanted, so walk I did - a little hunched over, but I still did it.

Liquid diet all day: water, juice, and beef bullion. M-m-m-m-m.

Texted my daughters first and then colleagues, who I knew would be concerned.

Basically, the rest of the day was spent maintaining my mobility so I could recover best. My middle daugthe came by after work before going home and stayed visiting me for about 2 hours. Got calls and texts from the other two daughters.

Unfortunately, I would be missing graduation this Friday. I really like to take that journey with my graduating students. Shucks! I know I will be glad I had this surgery once I am over the discomfort I continue to feel. Sleeping in the reclining part of a couch is not a fun way to spend the night.

Uid 289

Drove in. I'd normally cycle, but two wheels are a bit hazardous in this weather. I do not want an injury.

09.15-11.30 Standing in for a colleague who's on paternity leave. It's the final practical of his first-year module, which is an assessment. Students have had to design and prototype an iPhone app. This is the second session; first was yesterday. Two graduate teaching assistants are also marking.

It was a good session. I have been very impressed with the students' work (which must be a reflection of the quality of the teaching!) This is the fist time we have run this module on human-centred topics in the first year, and I think it bodes well, that future graduates will be much better equipped.

Twelve groups were meant to give a 5-minute presentation to each of us, but it was difficult to keep to time, and I ran over.

Also collected feedback forms from the students. I didn't look at them in detail, as it's not my module, but the ones I saw looked very positive - more good feedback to pass on to my colleague.

We've just gone back to paper feedback forms from on-line ones, as we seem to get a higher response. Certainly it's worked in this instance.

11.30-12.15 Desperate for coffee - so bought one from a machine. Back to my office. I was away at a Programme Committee meeting at the end of last week so am still catching up on emails.

12.15-13.30 End-of-term individual meetings with MSc students. I should have seen them on Monday but (a) they had not picked up the forms that they should have done and (b) I was straight off a flight from the States, and so not very creative. So we had postponed. Each reviewed their personal progress in the term. Two were concerned about the difficulty of a programming assessment. Wonder whether we are publicizing the programme correctly in terms of expected (programming) experience?

13.30-14.00 Lunch. Sandwich in the common room.

14.00-15.30 Preparation for teaching next term. It's a module about web design and all the materials are on the web. I have plans to teach it somewhat differently and so I have to update the web pages accordingly. Nearly finished, but more to do

15.30-16.30 Departmental finance briefing. A bit depressing. We're probably not in as difficult a situation as many - but it seems bad enough. The bean-counters don't really understand what we do.

17.00 Home

Uid 290

It's the final week of term and all my teaching is finished, but I still have some assignments active. I am awake early and get on the laptop while still in bed. Today's first assignment question is answered at 7.30am.

No more teaching for the next few weeks means I can spend some quality time on research. I have a meeting for this with colleagues from another department at 11.30 so I try to put the finishing touches to some software we are building, but I am thwarted by my lack of familiarity with the subtleties of the Python GUI libraries we are using. That doesn't matter too much because the bulk of the work is done. Our meeting lasts for one and a half hours and we make tentative plans for a paper and future grant application. It is amazing what cross-disciplinary collaboration can actually achieve while standing on such thin ice of understanding of each other's subject area. After the meeting, a bit of creative query formulation in a web search yields a fix for the software through a function to chain event handlers.

I spend a considerable amount of time in the afternoon researching flights for a conference in the new year. I struggle to understand why academics are all expected to be experts in finding the best travel deals before handing the details for booking over to admin staff. Surely the University engages in enough travel to employ staff centrally who could do this? I bet the ones who made the policy decisions that created this situation don't arrange their own travel.

I have been running a support group in the second half of term for students who are struggling with one of my courses. After initial expressions of interest from around 20, we are down to 4 who have stuck it out. We go through a past exam paper for an hour and then afterwards discuss individual questions about the current assignment. I must admit that I had assumed that these sessions would appear like driftwood to shipwreck survivors, to which they would cling with all their might, but commitment has been patchy, despite obvious need. I need to think about the value of repeating it in future years.

Uid 291

Got up at 06:30 after what was a disturbed night for no particular

reason; only thing I can think of is the unrelenting term.

After the usual initial cup of coffee and reading of e-mails (why am I

always at least a day behind)? Anyway I down-load the templates for

the conference paper(s) I need to write by mid January, and start the

structure of a paper. Somewhat distracted by the continuing tennis

elbow pain in my left arm.

Take tea to my wife at 8. After a period of more email, and thinking

about the current USS pension proposals got to breakfast at 10am. I

know I should not, but while eating baguette I look at the lecture

notes for the 12:15 lecture. The material is not totally clear to me,

but I can manage.

Thinking of leaving when I remember that I promised the final year

some sound samples which are on my tapeless recorder, and for reasons

i never understand my laptop has difficulty reading the device. The

overall effect is success, but a delay in leaving. Finally got away

at 11:30. I enjoyed the cycle ride and actually arrived at the

department in the morning (which is not that common for me...)

Rush to get changed to day clothes and get to the lecture. Yet again

there were no students, second lecture in a row. I waited about 15

mins before quickly running through the lecture to the empty room, so

I can say it was delivered. They complained last week that they had a

number of coursework deadlines coming up, so I know why they are not

there, even if I am rather annoyed. Back to my office where I was

intercepted by a PhD student I second-supervise. Lent him a book to

assist him in chapter xx of his thesis. We worry as he has a hard

deadline of the end of the year and still has many pages to write, and

it would be a shame for such a bright researcher to miss out.

A good result of the lack of students was that I was on time for the

local UCU Branch AGM at 13:15. Better attended than some times, but

given the current problems -- pensions, REF, being lied to by the VC

and more -- I was surprised there were not more. We accepted the new

constitution, and elected a full collection of officers. Not sure

where this leaves me as a departmental rep on the committee, a role

that is abolished in the new constitution.

My eastern European research student comes for yet more advice on her

dissertation; this is becoming a daily feature. Work on updating

information for final year, the new samples and examples on last year's

student works. Got to eat some part of lunch at 14;30 while doing this.

At 15:15 had our regular coffee meeting with the part-time PhD

student, who is also a university systems programmer. I am second

supervisor, and R. is an assessor. The supervisor is at degree

ceremony this afternoon so I guess I am in charge! Actually I always

enjoy these informal meetings. The people are fun and the

conversations often wide-spread. Research-wise it has been a quiet

week in this project.

16:00 split for another meeting with a research student -- Arabic this

time. Again I am second supervisor but originally the student came to

work with me, but I will retire before she finishes. The supervision

team as still not sure she is getting anywhere. Is this going to be

a time-costly mistake?

After a further request from my eastern European research student for

feedback on her dissertation i get to continue the web-site for the

final years. And finally I finish lunch at 16:45

Suddenly remember that I have not resolved the problem with an

examination paper. It is an odd paper, based entirely on directed

reading, and I have not told the student what they are expected to

read! Even worse for "security" I did not keep a copy of the paper,

and I simply cannot remember what I set. E-mail exchange with the

examination officer and I am redirected to a secretary (why can I

never remember the mapping of names to people?) who I manage to catch

as they were leaving, and we arrange that she will provide a copy

tomorrow, greatly to my relief.

Had a quick look in the lab for final year students but they seem to

have gone. A colleague came to say that he had an extra ticket for

the wine society tasting this late-afternoon and as I had totally

failed to get organised I had assumed I would miss it. So at 17:40

went to the event with colleague and his Dutch visitor. Interesting

time; mainly to back Christmas sales. Most of the wines were not to

my taste but educational; the port was excellent but expensive.

Late home at nearly 20:00. Actually being on time (19:30) is

sufficiently rare to warrant comment. And I did not have to cook as a

biriyani had been prepared.

After supper there was little time before I felt the need to sleep. I

had the feeling that the day had been bitty and rather unproductive.

Uid 294

Spent the morning running a drop in session for year 1 students to provide support for their upcoming assignment. Enough students attended to keep me busy for the 3 hour period, and try not to be frustrated by those who haven't bothered to read the assignment brief before they ask for help. Working with the more prepared students to draw out their reflections was much more rewarding. It is great to see the flickers of realisation as we look at what they have learned.

Afternoon spent facilitating an open day for prospective UG students. The usual chaotic administration provided by different bits of the institution added an unnecessary layer of complexity. Individually, people are working hard and doing what they can to make things run smoothly, but the system as a whole fails. Event is of course overshadowed by the future of tuition fees. Today's students are keenly aware that they need to get a place to start in 2011 if they are to avoid the new higher fees. Many of the students in my institution come from non-traditional backgrounds, with many being the first in their family to attend University. It is depressing to think that this group is bound to be less likely to apply in the face of such enormous fees. It will be a loss both for those individuals, but also for society as a whole if they fail to reach their potential.

Spent the evening catching up on the inevitable email mountain which had been building all day.

Uid 297

After spending some time marking this morning I spent most of the day at a course run by the university on Peer and Self Assessment for students. Listened to some good ideas about implementing this and then had a good discussion with colleagues about how and whether we could implement this in the department. Not sure how the students will like to mark their own work though when they are paying £9000 per year!

Not looking forward to tomorrow - the Dean is due to speak to all staff about college finances. Not good - looks like we are for some hard times and will probably be losing posts.

Got home and did a some more marking before spending time with the kids.

Uid 298

Wednesday 15 December

There is a staff student committee meeting scheduled for lunch time today and this afternoon is the last chance to meet with my PhD student before he returns home to Greece for Christmas and the new year. Apart from that it is just tackling the "in tray" and keeping tabs on progress. The Department is taking part in several European research consortia targeting the EU FP7 Call 7 in January. In three we will coordinate the project - one of these I am leading as scientific coordinator and I am assisting colleagues leading the other two. Quiet as it sounds the "in tray" is getting busy with just over a month to the deadline and Christmas in the way. It is also last week of term and I am due to give twice my usual lecture load this week. I feel like I am juggling rather a lot of balls today and begin with review of what needs to be achieved today:

1) Plan tomorrow's 2 hour lecture and get the slides organised (at a pinch the detail can be done tomorrow morning)

2) In my own project a key partner has dropped out emailing me only yesterday afternoon with "I am sorry to have to write this, but I am afraid we won't be able to participate in the consortium after all. We're a bit over-extended and as such fear not being able to contribute our fair share and in time". I have been muttering choice words about multi-nationals!

3) This project also has open issues about some of the field trials with another partner deciding they can't handle them. I also need to discuss these with one of the UK partners on the phone. In another partner the key contact has gone sick and a new contact is taking over but not yet up to speed. None of these are as serious as the above but they are all fiddling problems to deal with.

4) One of the other consortia where I am assisting as software architect has just recruited a new partner to fill a gap in the skills profile and the coordinator needs some planning input from me.

[9:30 - 10:45] Can't get my contact on the phone (no 3) so I tackle no 4 because it gets it off my desk and on to someone else. I redraft the system integration and architecture work package to include the new partner. Fortunately I have worked with them before and get the revision off to my colleague by email without to much difficulty.

[10:50 - 11:20] Tackle today's other email. It includes one from colleague saying he has double booked tomorrow and can we reschedule. This is a critical meeting to get his input to one of the bids and it keeps slipping. My schedule for Thursday and Friday is pretty much full. He has never worked on an EU bid before and I will have to write an email with chapter and verse on what needs to be done. Earmark this as no 5 to do today and take a break!

Get a brunch at home, top up with coffee and drive to campus while I mull over how to handle partner changes in my own project and what I will teach tomorrow.

My informal chat with level 2 reps last week was very amicable with no issues on the table so I decide the Staff-Student committee can take a back seat this time round - I don't need to be there for all of them.

[12:45 - 14:30] Turn to the problem of partners playing musical chairs in my own project. Fortunately another partner thinks they know some one who would fill the gap and is interested so I give them the go ahead to make contact. Various bits of draft documentation need updating. I also update my project mailing lists for changes in partners and contacts and I send emails to the leaving partner and others to update those that remain. Also update Skype for the new contact where one has gone sick and touch base with the new person.

[14:30 - 15:20] Informal meetings with various colleagues:

\* The one running third project is forging ahead with no problems.

\* I speak briefly to one where I am the architect to check my earlier document was what they needed.

\* Conversation with research centre director about my role there and my application for promotion to a chair. I feel a bit guilty about spending time on this when both projects and teaching issues are pressing.

[15:20 - 15:30] back in my office, check email and again try to phone the partner on my consortium where I need to resolve trials problems but I can't reach him.

[15:30 - 17:00] Meeting with PhD student. We work through a chapter of his thesis and discuss plans for conference papers in the new year. We have some accepted papers already and analysis of the fieldwork is progressing well towards completion of the thesis this summer. The session takes away some of the tension that project planning has brought along today.

[22:00 - 23:59] I pick up on the double booked meeting (no5) and write a detailed email to my colleague explaining the issues that need to be addressed before starting to working on my lecture slides for tomorrow.

Uid 301

Went to the university early to beat the traffic, so arrived at 7am and started work.

I rashly promised students feedback on draft assignments before the final submissions at the end of this term, which means I'm now wading through ~450 drafts. It is always a dynamic pull between wanting to provide the best learning experience for the students and being overwhelmed with work.

I have tried some new approaches this term with group work assignments rather than exams, as an attempt to both improve the student learning experience and reduce my personal workload to a manageable level. The result has been my workload has gone up, as there are constant enquiries from the students about the assignments, which take 1-2 hours each day to answer, either as office interruptions (visits?) or e-mails. I need to think this through more carefully next time.

I had a session planned to support students on a project, but that was gazumped by a request for me to invigilate an exam - The original academic invigilator having failed to turn up. I accept administrative work as part of the job, but it gets frustrating when it is unplanned and throws out my schedule. As no one like the admin, it is often haphazard, which just creates more work.

The afternoon was spent working through more of those draft assignments and about two hours working on my own research, formulating some new ideas on the direction to take on a particular project. It is useful to have a personal office to do mixed work on thinking, writing and allowing students to drop in for consultations. The school is moving more over to open plan offices. If this is extended to academic staff it will have a negative impact on my ability to perform a variety of quiet work and personal interaction, as I do today.

I stopped working at 5:30pm and when to the university cinema club to watch a foreign language movie. One of the joys of university work is being able to connect to different cultures and world perspectives and take advantage of cultural initiatives. It's easy to get lost in your own discipline and narrow world view, so taking part in some of the wider university campus activities keeps me more balanced.

I got home about 9pm and spent an hour answering e-mails as I ate dinner, whilst simultaneously trying to interact with the family. I was having mixed success (what a surprise), so dropped the -mail and became a human for a while.

Uid 309

A highly unusual Wednesday with no meetings!

Uid 310

15.12.10

Have you ever heard of epicurean wild birds? Those in our garden seem to have discriminating tastes. Went out to fill up the bird feeders as it was the first day I could get anywhere near them after all the snow, only to find a minor mountain of seeds on the ground. All the same sort, so some small creatures had been spitting them out. I guess in the spring we will find a lot of weeds or exotic plants??

The last couple of weeks have been dominated by weather, transport difficulties, and end-of-term-it is.

Weather: The snow has been the worst I have seen since living in Scotland, with over 4 feet falling in two major storms and staying and staying. It took my husband 9 hours to do the one hour journey home last Monday night, and today the Council staff are out with JCBs and big lorries trying to transport away the piles left everywhere by the snow ploughs. Brrrrrr.

Transport: The trains have been off for 10 days and the first bus was seen on Friday, so thank goodness for 4 wheel drives.

End-of-term-itis. Got 7 Honours projects in my bag to mark, plus a heap of external examining and a big project which is behind schedule. And it will all have to wait as I am not doing any work today.

Set off to go for a swim after feeding the birds. The local pool was closed (did I mention the snow?) so I had to go to the next nearest, and once there, had the pool to myself, which was quite a luxury. We then set off on the great Christmas tree hunt. For some reason (I did mention the snow, didn’t I?) it had been very difficult for people to harvest the trees, but we eventually got one, although much smaller than out usual OTT version. Not putting it up till next week so it will stay outside semi-frozen till then.

Did the ironing, mended some clothes, finished a sewing project then packed the bag for next week. Manchester, Kent, Yorkshire and Newcastle, travelling as light as possible (Honours projects aside). As the trains are back on again, got a lift to the station and off I went. Managed to write 4 long, handwritten (and probably illegible) letters to accompany Christmas cards. All focussed on family goings on – and snow. Finally reached Manchester, and collected by my nephew, in order to deliver Christmas gifts. Ho Ho Ho.

Uid 314

midnight-1am futz around, listen to album rough mixes. answer some emails.

1am - sleep. listen to the archers. sleep

7am wake up

8am get daughter up, feed breakfast from packets, shave

8.40 walk daughter to school with spongebob squarecake spongecake

9-9.40 very slow run

9.40-10.30 recover, eat breakfast

10.30-12 read email, get up properly

12-1 "festive tables" lunch at daughters' school

1-1.30 commute into work

1.30-4.40 futz around. answer more email, make no real achievements

4.40-6.00 vice-chancellors christmas party

6.00-9.00 family friend christmas party

9.00-10.00 home, put daughter to bed

10-11.00 watch junk tv

11-12.30 muck around. attempting to send yet more emails

12.30 listen to archers. crash.

Uid 319

Hmm, end of term approaching. Marking to do, lots of it and then exams coming up and exam marking. I hate marking and assessment in general. Need to prepare for modules next semester too.

Lots of unhappiness about fees - bound to have an entirely negative effect on everything. You really cannot put a price on education and research done in a profit independent way. It is so fundamental to development, though clearly it cant work that well or all the idiots who supported the motion would have been shown that during their stints of free education.

Much too annoyed about everything to make coherent or sensible post!

Uid 325

Working on PDCP (Personal Development and Career Planning) documents - a beaurocratic process of making sure we produce sufficient number of A rated publications every year etc etc - I need these ready today for my Friday meating with HoD. Meeting with a student to discuss the plans during the 3 week Christmas break. Catching up on emails.

Uid 326

Day off for babysitting duty (I work halftime - officially, more in practice - but thats two survey days so far that have coincided with days off).

In intervals I was planning to finish marking electronic porfolios for our PgCert in Learning & Teaching in HE, and to review conference proposals for next years ALDinHE conference in Belfast. Sadly internet connection at my daughters house was down so I had to use iphone/3G signal instead - OKish for reading docs online but not great for adding detailed commentary. Recent snow and increased working from home have really brought home how dependent we have become on online working. Even snowed-off f2f teaching sessions can (sometimes, and with enough forward planning) be replaced with web-based tools - but once the internet goes, most of the things I want to do are impossible or at least inconvenient.

By end of the day - apart from quality time with my 8 month old granddaughter - I had at least dealt with most of my emails, including invitation to becoem an external examiner for a specialist HEI. A while since Ive accepted EE contracts as I've too busy on my own courses at the relevant times of year, but it will be good to do it again. I always learnt so much by the chance to root around in other peoples course designs and exploring the different solutions colleagues have come up with for ostensibly similar purposes.

Uid 333

Got up slightly later than usual (I’m tired at the end of term and it’s that nasty, dark, damp bit of mid-December). Working at home today. Checked email for an hour, answering various queries about a launch party associated with spin-off publications from the electronic project I’m involved with and dealing with a large number of colleagues querying the marking allocations I’ve given them for the final examinations in the summer of 2011.

One colleague had a good reason for not wanting so much third term marking—she’ll be on maternity leave. Other colleagues just feel they have ‘too much’ marking. This is caused by the very burdensome blind double marking system that my HEI runs, which basically doubles the amount of assessment at a stroke. Combine that with the weekly formative tasks that the tutorial system generates for marking and the marking load is definitely higher than at the two previous HEIs I’ve worked in. But the students do benefit: especially from instant, weekly, in-person feedback of a formative kind.

Spent the rest of the morning writing a tutorial on various editorial matters relating to medieval music for an online course on Moodle. Scoured the web for useful links to add to the tutorial and found a surprising array of open-source pages on medieval music notation.

Met up for lunch with a colleague from my former HEI, who is currently mired in end-of-term marking. Not a part of the job that anyone likes. And he thinks that the anonymized nature of the marking he does, weeks after the students wrote the essays, makes the feedback rather less effective, even though it is very time-consuming to generate.

Spent the first hour of the afternoon in the department because I’d volunteered to see what was billed as a group of consultants who are auditing the university’s induction procedures. They wanted to ask me, so I was told, about the ‘initial term of office’ (i.e. the probationary period), which I've only just completed (after 2 years in post, although the normal term here is 5 years of probation--madness!). The ‘team’ consisted of one woman, very slightly older than my undergraduates, with a stinking headcold, who worked her way through a number of set questions, which I answered, but which could mainly have been answered from the paper trail (which she hadn't yet investigated). I did manage to tell her that I thought 2 years (let alone 5) was a ridiculous period for probation and that the whole process was outmoded. I wonder if the higher-ups in my HEI will take that onboard (or if it will even get back to them). And how much is my current university wasting on getting 22-year-olds to tell them things that are completely obvious to those of us who have been senior academics in other HEIs?

Had a brief conversation with a couple of colleagues who were in the department about admissions issues and plans for the department Away Day in Jan. One colleague wants me to look over his document for the revision of the first year syllabus. Getting anything changed around here in terms of the syllabus is very controversial. Music as a subject is split down the middle between the traditionalist-practitioners and the progressive-musicologists. We can’t even really agree on what makes a good undergraduate applicant, let alone what we want to teach them. The traditionalists have control of the syllabus (for historical reasons) and will be fighting tooth and nail to keep it that way. I’m really not looking forward to the staff Away Day

Back home again (I live a 5 min walk from the department), I tweaked various bits at the end of a talk I’ve been writing for a large public lecture in the New Year. Felt too tired to run the whole thing and time it (it’s to be 60 mins, with no questions), so re-scheduled that for the New Year, when I might feel fresher. I’m planning a complete break from work from Friday 17 December at 5pm until first thing on 4 January 2011. I’m not going anywhere, I just want to vegetate a bit, read some fiction, listen to some music, cook, eat, and drink. In short—I need to relax. For a couple of weeks solid. I can’t wait.

The afternoon rounded off with writing a reference for a colleague at another HEI who is applying for a library fellowship. I then read an article in the most recent issue of a major journal which I will incorporate into the bibliography for the first year teaching I will do at the start of next term. I always try to give them something newly published to pique their interest, so that they realize that the Middle Ages might be a long time ago, but it is also—in the studentspeak of today—very NOW.

Sent 24 emails today.

Uid 339

Well, well, well!

I work for a prestigious institution which is relocating, and as part of that relocation we are undergoing the ineveitable restructuring.

I was informed in my consultation today that all the staff I line manage have been assigned to other members of staff - as they felt it best......I might add, although this should be a small and perfunctory part of my role as a principal lecturer, it has come to dominate my work - with five members of staff who were deemed unmaneageble having been passed to me. To be fair, I have done well - some left when it was clear they had not perfomred in their roles, we recruited and set up new work projects - which I ceovered in the three year interim - typically HR were slow in their approach and there was the usual rumblings of tribunals and complaints against me - all of which were thrown out. Interestingly, one of the major work projects I took on was developed, monitored, implemented delivered and transforemd - with a nomination for a national award and commendations from those on high; the work has simply been transferred to another senior manager, and the staff who work on the stream have indicated to me they accept that in reality, they have no manager now and the one they have been assigned does not even know what the WP in the work title means. All this and my cat was killed today. Frankly, that hurt more as I loved him dealry and he was just two, poor boy.

I spoke with the union and they are flagging up construcitve dismissal. Frankly, I have given my all - sorting out long term absenteeism, developing staff who had no CPD for ten years, dealing with staff coping with cancer. Last summer I havd a very severe depressive episode - and I know it was work related. My institution's response was to acknowledge that my own line manager did not support me, but that he was due to retire so I should just get on with it.

I have no idea what to do; I am applying for other jobs, as it is clear my talents are not appreciated, but I am going to have to be slightly creative on the application as in a 30 minute meeting, the 250K budgets I manage have been passed to others - would it be a lie to still allude to that? I am working on the basis that as I have had no official communique, I should not feel it is an outright lie - but thinking on, it is crucuial to have this in my portfolio to be able to go forward and find a similar job. Catch 22.

Apparently, those in the know tell me I have nothing to worry about - they have other work lined up for me; I am seen as an asset; frankly, I think I have been used to clearup messes noone else could manage, and with the new gleaming building, I am not in for the prizes! The good work I have done is now being given to others.... - but noone has told me that, so I am looking at an uncertain Christmas - and believe me, it is a difficult thing to put it out of my ind entirely.

At this juncture, I am even considering selling up and heading for the world of BandB or hotels! At least I would know what was happening to the work and the budgets.

I love working in Education, but I think at this juncture, I should apply my skills to something which I have more control of. Fuck the US model of always seeing a change as an opportunity. Between you and me, I think they are planning to tell me in January that my job is at risk. I think I will jump before I am pushed.

Uid 343

Teaching is now winding down as the term comes to an end, to the great relief of most of the academic staff. What with end of term parties, several students were missing from my tutorials today, and not all had done the work set. The students that did turn up were very keen and we had a lively discussion on second order differential equations and Taylor series. One girl had managed to fill some 25 pages with her (essentially correct) solutions to the problems on differential equations, whereas another student was rather more concise, fitting equally valid answers onto just two sides of paper.

I gave a supervision over Skype to a PhD student who is currently in Italy. Skype is a very effective medium for a one to one discussion - the video quality is good enough to show writing on the whiteboards with complete clarity. My PhD student, a mature student in his 50s, has just started writing up his thesis and it all seems to be going very well.

Today was the day of the department Christmas lunch, at the restaurant of the local theatre. Some 40 of us were seated by 1pm, but the service was slow and we didn't finish until 3pm - fortunately most of us had little teaching in the afternoon. We are a friendly department and the company was congenial, with relaxed conversation and good humoured jesting between young and old alike.

Uid 348

11.00 Late start - took some leave!

11.00 - 12.00 supporting hand-in of student work - an administrative job but new systems are still bedding in so we went to support

12.00 - 1.00 - tutorials, urgent emails, collecting 300 pieces of coursework, completing document for Teacher Development Agency, finish writing short piece for Schools Partnership newsletter.

Uid 352

Woke up at 4:30 and decided I may as well get up and try to get some work done - basically checking and answering e-mails - students, family, reading various newsletters etc.

Osteopathe appointment at 8am - good news as this means I will be able to attend the meeting of our research group on Friday morning.

Teaching is basically over for the term (1 last class tomorrow afternoon) so the day will be spent marking, writing the editorial finalising the already proof-read articles for online publication (pdfing, paginating, separating and putting online) in the journal I'm co-editor for. I don't mind this fairly mindless work, but it is time-consuming and neither recognised nor rewarded.

So, in to the office by 9:30 - short chat with colleague about sending in a proposal for an upcoming conference, bit about Faculty politics and strategy, especially concerning possible alliances within our "new" (grouping of 3 universities and several institutes under 1 umbrella) structure.

Various admin in the morning, lots of people in and out of my office - students to get back papers, the secretary for signatures and info, colleagues to say "hi".

A note from a teacher who we'd contacted yesterday about a student in tears - she couldn't find the room where the exam was being held. She finally found the teacher, in the usual room, over an hour after the start of the exam. The teacher let her in and waited around to let her finish. The student had just been to a doctor's appointment where she received unsettling news and hadn't recognised her peers waiting outside the room on her return!

Sometimes we are running a social service.

Lunch with another colleague to read over and make suggestions for his conference submission, then down to the publishing work for the journal.

Department secretary left at 2:30 because of snow and worries about getting home by train. I see the snowflakes fall and try to get an editorial finished, but with the secretaries' office closed, people knock on my door.

At around 5:30pm I wrap it up, but I take up the computer again around 9, to do a bit of work for the academic association I'm involved in and write a bit here.

Uid 354

December 15, 2010

7 AM. Lying in bed. Listening to my children get up downstairs. They preparing to go to school. I will stay at home with my dad and his wife. It is final exam week. My students have submitted all of their work. I have lots of grading to do.

I need more exercise. Need to get on my bike. Biking to work and back keeps my blood going, which keeps me sane. Working from home seems such a luxury, but without my biking I get grumpy.

I get up. My desk is a mess. Notes of research ideas. Piles of papers to grade. A closed laptop beckoning me to open it and peruse my e-mail. Resist that I must. Grade I must.

Yet, my dad and his wife are in town through tomorrow. Staying with us. I should get dressed, grab my grading and bike to a coffee shop at least 3 miles away to get my blood going.

8 AM. Dropped my daughter at a nearby friend’s house where she will get a ride to high school across town.

Back home, my dad and his wife are up. I lost my slot to do grading.

9:45 AM. Spent half an hour collating the final portfolio entries. I thought I had saved time by printing all of the documents at work, but a bunch of them had no names on them (they were separate files from within a zip file, so I presume the student did not feel a need to individually name the separate documents). I had to go carefully back through them all, checking the original submissions to figure out who had submitted which ones. What a pain. Sigh.

11 AM. My father and I are talking, or rather he is pontificating about stories of waste or frustration. I quickly tired these conversations, so remembering a conversation on Saturday about a a table saw that automatically stops before cutting a person's finger, I go over to the downstairs computer and look up the YouTube video for SawStop. Perhaps I can divert him into some positive stories about inventions that matter. The video is very impressive. It is such a great example of invention. How did the inventor think of using electrical conductivity of human flesh to detect imminent disaster and automatically stop the blade? It reminds me of TRIZ. Did the inventor explicitly use a strategy like TRIZ? I have been thinking of creating a course in autumn 2011 covering topics such as design, innovation, and biomimicry. This video is relevant to that, so I install delicious’s Firefox plug-in on the downstairs computer and tag this video for future use.

This reminds me of the quick talk on biomimicry that I did in my software testing course that I just finished. How could I redo that talk to make it more effective? It seems like it would be good to include some nice videos such as of Festo’s bionic penguin, since watching a video like that may help students appreciate what biomimicry does, and help them remember it.

11:30 AM. Dad and his wife go off to the Nordic Heritage Museum. My wife is at Curves. My children are at high school. Finally, I have the space in which to do some grading.

It is cold in the house, especially in the upstairs office, so I put on some warmer and I set up on the dining room table downstairs where it is warmer. Unfortunately, the light is not very good at the dining room table. I am beginning to regret that I printed the portfolio entries with two pages per side of paper. While the small font was fine at work with the bright lights in my office, here at my dining room table is hard on my older eyes.

Where is that grading rubric that I had been evolving for portfolios? I search in my e-mail. Not there. Search in my hard drive folders. Can't find it there. Search on my desk. Not in any of my piles. Have I lost these notes? I wish I had taken more time to organize evolution of my understanding of this course during the course.

12:30 PM. I found the old rubric. It was in and e-mail in which I sent the feedback to students after the last submission. I spent some time merging those notes with the original rubric to come up with the one that I want to use now. My rubrics certainly had to revolve quite a bit in this course, as I came to grips with what the students could do and what they understood or found confusing.

My wife returns home, and I feel my grading period slipping away. She opens the computer on the table across from me, and after a couple minutes asks if I want to order anything else from Amazon. She's ordering some stuff from Amazon for Christmas, and we might as well save on the shipping. I did have some books I wanted to order for work, so I end up spending 15 minutes in a rabbit hole reviewing my Wish List on Amazon and Skypeing her references for several books that I would like. Of course, I had to investigate some of the choices further to decide which particular book I wanted. The A3 technique used in Lean has been intriguing me for a while, and I have been doing more and more diagramming as I design my courses and research, but which book on the A3 technique should I order? There is so much interesting stuff out there…

1:20 PM. My wife and I have a lovely lunch of leftovers from my nephew’s bar mitzvah. Chatting with my wife during these times is one of the advantages of working from home now that classes are over. Even though I might be more effective in the office, it is hard to justify the one-hour commute, each way, to the office. Is about trade-offs, just like I have the students write about in their research papers. Staying at home I get time to discuss Christmas presents. And now it is time to get back to grading!

I am grading the student portfolios. Wow! The first portfolio I grade it was beautifully framed and woven. The words are quite poetic, and it includes some beautiful pictures. This is not what I expected from that particular student who wanted me to more precisely define homework assignments, such as specifying a word limit instead of a page limit for the research paper. It also is rewarding to read about how she gained some insight from the chaos with which she struggled in my course.

4:30 PM. I finished two thirds of the portfolios. The students are doing quite well. My one complaint is that a significant proportion of the students did exactly what I asked of them often but less than I had hoped from them. Many students simply pieced together homework assignments from the course, claiming that the portfolio showed what it meant to be a new student in software testing. Their story lines that connected the entries in the portfolio were very weak. The commentaries on each entry were. I was hoping for the students to include material from outside this course and show how it relates to software testing. Some students did do that. Some focused on the lessons they learned in this class, and wove threads about those throughout portfolio. That is what I was really looking for. How can I frame the assignment, next time, so that students better understand what I am aiming for? I am reluctant to provide examples, since students tend to focus on the example as a template for success. Still, there must be something I can do to improve the richness of the portfolio's overall.

As I grade these portfolios I think of more notes for next month's experience report that I am some of the students will be giving to a local special-interest group on software testing. It is nice that this course is leading into a talk and might lead into a publication.

It is tiring to grade the same type of thing for a couple hours. I take a nap.

That evening my family had dinner with my brother and his family at a local Vietnamese restaurant. At the end of dinner, my brother and I got talking about Mike Cohn's testing triangle and various extensions to it that I had seen. My brother mentioned how valuable this triangle is in his work as a software developer in a large organization. He is trying to help his group use better software development practices. I had wanted to cover Mike Cohn's testing triangle in this course this autumn, but somehow it slipped out of my plan. I only remembered about it after the class ended, when a set of the students and I were doing a retrospective in order to prepare for the experience report. When I added a triangle to the list of things to do next time, the students asked what it was. It only took me less than 5 minutes to draw the triangle and described its use and meaning. Perhaps I could have fitted that discussion into this course this time. Ah well.

My brother and I were struggling with one aspect of the triangle. The top third represents test that automate the application's user interface. Automated test for this are very expensive and problematic to maintain. When would you want to do this? It is unclear to either of us. We continued to talk about the triangle, and sketch different aspects of it that we have not seen in the original drawing. We headed dimensions representing trade-offs. It is always fun for me to work with my brother on such things. It was fun talking, diagramming and synthesizing with my brother. Talking to them helps me understand better. Wrapping in his deep experience with software development helps expand my knowledge.

Perhaps, I said, it is time to publish an updated version of this triangle. He'd love to work on paper like this, he said, but he doesn't have time because he is doing so much programming. I really wanted to ask him whether you want to collaborate on this paper, but I resisted the urge. Over the years I have learned that there is peril in me working with him. Despite how easily we can bounce ideas back and forth and build them when talking about software development, doing more explicit work together usually leads to disappointment on one side or the other. I resist the urge to invite him in. Perhaps if he invites me in, that might work. Why do I maintain my optimism despite all the evidence?

Planning is not my forte and the results of my course show that - both good and bad. Good because software testing involves a lot of chaos, and the structure of this course put them in some chaos from which they could learn. Bad because I do need to give more clarity about some things, such as what is coming up in the next couple of weeks. There were a few times when I lost even that much clarity about this course. This course was hard for me. I am not a domain expert in this topic and I struggled with how to teach some of the aspects. Several times during the course I had to revisit my assumptions of what level the students were at, and go back to more basics. The next version of this course will be much better.

10 PM. I am making cookies for my 13-year-old daughter to take to school tomorrow. It's a long story. She could've done them … If she had been better organized. Sound familiar? In any case, my mind wandered back to the testing triangle discussion, which I had preserved on a napkin from the restaurant. As I wait between batches of cookies, I think of the student who wants to do an independent study with me next quarter. I wondered if he would be willing to do more background research around the paper covering an update of the testing triangle. What information would I want? What does the triangle look like in some existing companies? Where do they put their testing efforts? How would you measure that? What does it mean?

Then I remembered that the student wants to do something on design patterns, so the testing triangle is probably not the right fit for him. How can I direct his interest and work toward something that would be highly useful to me? Something that would lead toward a publication. The mantra that I am trying to learn. At dinner, my brother had suggested that I do a course on design patterns. He and his colleagues had been talking about how universities are not putting out people who know how to design software objects. What if the student works toward an understanding of what would be a good set of patterns to put in such a course? That could be useful.

What are the principles I would want around which to design this collaboration? How much can I expect from the student to one quarter of independent study? As a new professor, with plenty of industry experience, I have lots to learn here.

Teaching. Research. My mind is never far from thinking of those. I'm working longer hours in this new career, but it certainly fits my wife's desires for me. Not the longer hours, but the type of work, it's fit for me, and her respect of it.