Surveys for Friday 15 July 2011

Uid 11

Handover meeting for research project that I have nurtured through several years to stage where my research assistant is now lead author on a paper for August conference. With my retirement at the end of July, this is nearly one of last formal things I have to do.

Very mixed feelings - glad to be getting lump sum payout and to take pension early, but hard to let go of such a large portion of my waking (and sometimes sleep-disturbing!) attention over the last 20 years or more. to hand "babies" of courses and projects onto others to do what they will with them. I trust I have given them something useful to work with.

My email may get summarily cut off at beginning of August, so this may be my last entry. Thanks for opportunity to reflect and to work out some of themes of my past year. Good luck with this project for its future.

Uid 13

July 15, I was visiting the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. I direct a project called "Georgia Computes!" whose goal it is to improve computing education across the state of Georgia, and in so doing, broaden participation in computing. It's funded by the National Science Foundation's program "Broadening Participation in Computing (BPC)." There is a similar effort in Massachusetts called CAITE for "Commonwealth Alliance for IT Education." As BPC has changed in the last year, we have been told that regional alliances will have to go away. Several of us from GaComputes were meeting in Massachusetts about forming a merged project to serve as a national resource, whose goal it would be to help other states to conduct state-wide computing education reform.

I got up at 6:15 am in order to go running with our external evaluator on "Georgia Computes!" who was at the meeting with us. We ran five miles on a beautiful path around farmland and hundred year old farmhouses. I had breakfast at 8, and we left the hotel for the University at 8:30.

We started at 9 am. The first part of the meeting was to work out criteria for when we should partner with a state. We identified measures of potential (e.g., are there students \*not\* studying CS in that state? were there interested teachers who might teach CS if they had training?) and measures of commitment and buy-in (e.g., will the state help fund some of the efforts?).

We took a break at 10:30, then started talking about next steps. I got the job of producing the one-page summary of the new project idea, that we might float by potential new state partners. We want to have a couple of states lined up in the proposal, so that we can show that there's interest.

Finally, we talked through who was going to be involved in the project to start.

We had a bag lunch at noon, with some small discussions about details (e.g., how do we get the evaluation plan started?). We left Amherst at 1 for the drive back to Boston for our flight.

We hit lots of traffic jams due to construction, but did find time to stop at Walden Pond where Henry David Thoreau spent two years and wrote his book. We got to the rental car facility at 3:45, and to the airport by 4 for our 5:15 flight.

On the flight home, I started reading a PhD thesis in Physics -- a first for me! I'm on the committee of a student who is evaluating a new approach to teaching introductory physics, one in which programming is a necessary part of the physics laboratory experiences.

We landed just after 8, got baggage, and made it home by 9:30 pm. Long day!

Uid 14

Awoke for the usual routine: processing email, reading the news and comics online until my 18-month-old awoke, then to take care of him. Scarfed down some cereal, baked three dozen cookies (frozen batter, nothing special), and headed up to campus for my Summer class meeting.

The “class” is an internally-funded project, the creation of a digital archaeology simulation to teach kids (approx. 10-year-olds) that historical archaeology is more than digging in the ground. It’s a five-week project, and we have eight students and three faculty involved. Half the students are my CS students, students whom I trust from a big project they did with me over the last academic year. They are the “technology team.” Three are anthropology/archaeology students, and one is history”: they are the “content team”.

I would have said that everyone is doing a great job, but the previous night I got an email from one of my CS students, a student who I have no reason to disbelieve, telling me that he is upset with a member of the other team for failure to deliver, badmouthing the technology team, and generally not doing anything interesting. This colors my perception of the student, fairly or unfairly, but I decide to keep an eye on him. He is definitely the weakest link, and we have one more week for me to observe the nature of his contributions. He definitely comes across as arrogant, and I got that sense the moment I met him, but I assumed it was just personality conflict. The frustrating thing is that this one student---who, when you look at skills required to do the project, is the least qualified but whose essays show he can throw the most bull---was given a $1000 “leadership grant” by outside forces for his participation in the project. The profs had no input as to who got this, and the whole thing leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

Anyway, we’re using Scrum with one-week sprints (which is a breakneck pace, but in a five-week summer session, I don’t see another option). This was end of sprint, and so we started with the Sprint Review meeting, and ate the cookies. You /need/ to have treats at the end-of-sprint meetings. Last week, we had no treats but had a picnic afterwards, and that was just not the same. The students presented their accomplishments for the sprint. About half the user stories were not completely done. The tech team was quick to present their work, and I was ready to move on. Slowly, the content team started showing what they had done, which was all quite good. I tried to encourage them that their artifacts (things like probate inventories and pictures of sherds) are as important as the digital prototypes and that they should be eager to show them at the Sprint Review.

Next was the Sprint Review, when we listed what went well and what could use improvement. I was impressed by the reflections of the students, very honest about the process. These are a good group, no one is putting on airs.

After this, we talked about what to do with the rest of our time, since we meet 9-1 and it was about 10. I moderated a discussion of what things we can clean up before Monday. At one point, it was suggested that we make a data flow diagram (my words, not theirs). I pointed out that we had done this weeks ago as part of the design. A specific member of the tech team rebutted that she thought it would be useful. I said that it would only be useful if it helped us make working software, and that I felt they should just make working software, since we had plenty of sketches. I also told her that I had faith in her abilities, that I knew she could sit with the content team and sort it out and move forward. I think part of the problem is that she developed the implementation of the domain model, and she saw that it was likely flawed, and was upset about this: I don’t think she was in a prototyping / design thinking frame of mind. Change is the only constant, I reminded her, but I think it was not consoling. After some time, she did in fact have a great discussion with the content team and sort out what had to happen. I thought about emailing her a note to say that my faith in her was well-placed, but I was afraid it would have come across as “I told you so,” instead of “I knew you could do it.”

After class, I went to my office to straighten up in preparation for a new desk’s arrival from excess. Also, a professional staff member was supposed to meet me at 1:30 or 2, so my door was ajar. As tends to happen, my chair came in and talked at me for about an hour about things I didn’t really care about. Specifically, some hardware stuff they’ve been doing over the summer. I do not get a regular salary over the Summer, which makes it even harder for me to rationalize listening to him. He left around 2, and I realized I was stood up by the staffer for the second time in as many days. I hopped on Google+ and had a conversation with one of my students about a polite way to say that someone is a dick, since I didn’t want to use that particular term online (I only write it here for research purposes), and after a fun discussion involving my learning the word “clodpate”, I settled on “jackass.” Posted this on Google+ and got several +1’s from recent alumni and campus staff:

“I have been stood up twice by a member of the "professional staff" at [snip]. If he were a student, I'd send an admonition against this behavior.

Let's make this a teaching moment, so students, take note. You can actually have this kind of behavior in the workplace. The person on the other end may even be polite over email, but he really thinks you're a jackass.”

I returned home and split my time between work communication (including a discussion of unit testing in Unity and VisualStudio among the tech team facilitated by Google+) and playing games.

We went out for dinner with friends who are leaving town tomorrow due to a new job. They have been here three years and we became quite close. M is a good friend, and I’m glad for his new opportunity that brings him closer to his extended family, but it’s a big loss for my family and for the university. Every time I think of it, I am forced again to ask whether I am in the right place or not, what my connection is with this university, so far from my extended family, and even whether a university life is the honest and right place for me. They are uncomfortable thoughts that I am not sure I can act on, so I try to ignore them, leaving them as constant lowgrade stress, made especially worse by the fact that I don’t think my wife will seriously entertain the notion of leaving because she does not want to move, I think because of both logistics and the need to regrow social networks as a stay-at-home mom.

Dinner was great. Thai place in town that we should really go to more often if we want it to stay open.

Came home and put the boys to bed. Interesting challenges there but nothing related to my profession.

We got a movie last night that I’ve really wanted to watch due to a colleague’s recommendation, but my wife has started a big craft project for a friend who is moving out of town. (Another one, yes. She has been very sad lately.) Rather than just start the movie, she needed time to work on that, so I came up to the home office and played games for a while. By the time she was ready, it was too late, so I put the movie off again and we watched two TV episodes instead, which were good. She went to bed at 10ish, a little early for me, and I knew I was at the end of the game I was playing, so I went back to that, got to the end of the story, and was in bed around midnight. There are still a few hidden things in the game I’d like to explore, but soon I will uninstall it and then, hopefully, be able to use some of that leisure time more creatively. But that’s the subject for another post.

Uid 21

13:00 I just realized that today was the 15th, and that I should have

been keeping a time log. I'll have to reconstruct my morning.

I woke up early (about 6:00 a.m.) and started looking at a hidden

Markov model project that I had put aside since March to work on

teaching and other research projects. Had breakfast and showered but

was not able to focus on my research and went back to bed---slept

until about 11 a.m., which should make a bit of a dent in my sleep debt.

11-12 caught up on my e-mail, including a getting a draft of a paper

that I'm one of several middle authors on that will need to be edited

and returned to the primary author in the next week. It is about 25

pages long (without page numbers!! why are Word users so incompetent

that they can't number pages of a draft?) and this is the first draft

I've seen. I suspect that I'll have some detailed comments on the

graphs and description.

12-1 helped my son sand the floor in his bedroom and put on a layer

of shellac

1-1:30 picked up my son's new bike to replace the one that was stolen

last weekend.

1:30-2:40 ate lunch and skimmed the new copy of Make magazine. It

looks like there are some cool robotics projects in this quarter's

issue. I also like the steampunk gas masks.

2:40-3 read e-mail

3-4 biked to the credit union with my son, to transfer the replacement

cost for his stolen bike from his account (he forgot to lock the bike

in a high-theft area, so agreed that he should be responsible for the

replacement cost). Here's hoping that he is more careful about

remembering to lock his bike in future. Bought discount cookies on

the way home from the cookie bakery.

4-5:30 read e-mail and blogs, had a snack. Not able to concentrate

today on any real work. Probably still too much sleep debt.

5:30-7 worked on a circuit design, learning how to use the Eagle

program for schematic capture and printed-circuit board layout. I

found that the "group" copy operation does almost what I want (though

the user interface is different from any other program I 've used for

selecting groups), but I had to start over, since only generically

named nets get new names when copied. If a net has been given a name,

that name is kept in the copy. I have to play with this a bit more,

as I suspect there is a way to distinguish between global and local

net names with some trick in the naming, even though the program does

not inherently have any hierarchy.

7-7:30 dinner

7:30-11 worked more on learning to use Eagle, downloading some parts

libraries from the web and looking (futilely) for a particular part

that has a non-standard pin spacing. I'll have to learn how to layout

pads for a non-standard part and add it to the library.

Spent half an hour sometime in there helping my son with his

precalculus homework. He was frustrated with the problem of findng a

3x3 matrix that is 0 when cubed but not zero when squared. It was easy

to find such a matrix, but explaining how one can get there without

just guess-and-check was more difficult.

11-11:30 situps and leg lifts with my son, take pills, clean teeth,

read a little science fiction, go to sleep.

Uid 22

Vacation - I finished a large part of my garden work yesterday and now I have to wait until I can do the next part. Sooooo ... I'm spending this lovely summer day sitting at the kitchen table, writing on my thesis - how bored I am with this stuff. And if it ever get accepted I can only hope that nobody reads it because if that happens I'll probably never be able to show my face at a conference again ... since I'm pretty critical to much of the work done in this area.

Anyway, managed to send a new version to my advisor. Tomorrow, I'm off for a visit to a fair and my parents-in-law.

Uid 23

Just back from 3 days' leave for a family event, so should be feeling rested, but instead I feel I shouldn't have gone as there is too much to do. There is a real conflict of interests: my research project OR my PhD students'. Am now supposed to be on summer vacation research time, but two of the PhD students have delayed submitting chapters to me until this week, and another one needs a huge amount of support on a full draft. They are all frantically writing up, as they want to submit early autumn and return home (all are international students). I saw two of them today for 3 hours in total and just scratched the surface of some issues with both.

Still dealing with recalcitrant BA students who won't let us know which re-sits they'll be taking in September. I know it's symptomatic of struggling students that they don't answer e-mails, but this is driving us mad, as we can't finish things off.

Also sorting out arrangements for processing MA and PhD applications and students while our colleague and friend is off work having cancer treatment for at least 6 weeks from Thursday. Puts everthing else in perspective.

Uid 24

July 15, 2011

Summertime I get to spent lots of time with my two girls, 11 and 16. This morning I them up early, even though it is summer vacation for them too, because we had planned to go cherry picking. Our usual orchard advertised, on their web-site’s picking schedule, that they still had sweet yellow cherries. When we got to the orchard we found out that all the sweet cherries were gone, and that they only had sour cherries left. We picked sour cherries, mulberries, and raspberries.

Talking to the staff it turns out that they have step-by-step instructions that they follow to the letter whenever they need to update the web-site. To change the picking schedule takes them about half an hour, they say. However, they have a young college student who typically maintains the site, and she can apparently update the site in about a minute from her phone (!) I am sure there is a lesson about computational thinking somewhere in there. (Actually, it gets me thinking about my father-in-law, who was just over at our house and seemed uncomfortable with the difference between the address bar and the Google search bar in our browser, even though at home he has the same computer with the same browser. How contextualized is our knowledge?)

After getting back from berry picking I left the kids at home for a bit and headed in to my office to catch up on some course articulations and recommendation letters, and to continue with my office clean-out. Not only did I not get around to the cleaning last summer, in the fall we are moving into a new building and we need to start packing. I don’t want to pack things I really need to discard! In the end I only managed to work on cleaning – I never did get to the articulations and letters. Perhaps on Monday.

After getting back from the office, stopping by the grocery store on the way home, my darling wife and I made cous-couse, roasted lamb chops with a mulberry sauce. Then, to cap off a full day, we set off to see Harry Potter VII part 2, in 3D! It was enjoyed by all :-)

Uid 25

My goodness,it's the middle of the month already! So much for trying to protect July and August for research writing.....

Looking forward to spending next week at a conference on university teaching - went to one organised by the same people a couple of years ago and it was really good. It looks as though this one has fewer delegates than last time, surely a sign of more straitened times? The conference definitely marks the beginning of sustained research time, which I desperately need,as the teaching year is much too hectic to allow for sustained thinking and writing.

My boss,who is prone to making whimsical decisions, has done a u-turn on appraisals (last month we were not having them, this month we are) so I knock myself out getting all the documents to her. Hope she reads them.... This exercise (and some brilliant comments from our students about the programmes) reminds me that I,and we as a team,have a lot to be proud of, a useful counterbalance to some of the more noxious aspects of the HE debate. In an early entry for this project I wrote that I burned with indignation at the betrayal of our young people. The burn has subsided to a steady indignation at the ill-thought-through response to HE as an economic tool.

Uid 28

I love summer and especially being able to have an early swim in an outdoor swimming pool, with the sun shining. The pool was filling up with wet-suited triathlon trainees as I left for breakfast this morning, feeling invigorated and energetic. This is a real change from term-time when there is little energy left over for anything outside of work.

At work I signed the identification section on a Student Loan Form for a deaf student who is coming back next year to finish a final taught module and his dissertation. I like the fact that my University is flexible when students need extra time to complete their studies, as in this case. The student was very stressed trying to cope with the last academic year and would have gone under if we hadn’t made these arrangements for him. He looked much more relaxed today.

I had a tutorial with one of my MSc dissertation students. He seems to be a natural researcher and very enthusiastic about his topic of research. We have recently reduced the length of time students are allowed to complete their dissertations and, strangely, it has helped our completion rates. Students now have to be very focussed and diligent in order to finish in time. Previously, they delayed getting down to real work and some never got round to it. I’m hopeful that this student will finish in plenty of time.

I was pleased to receive an email from an ex-student who is on a short-list for a job and needed a reference. It is so rewarding to see our students going on to get good jobs and confirms we are teaching them useful skills and knowledge.

My afternoon was spent working on a joint project we have with a small business concerned with mobile phone applications. Again, it is so good to spend time on practical research and learning rather than racing to meet the next deadline for teaching or some admin task. Doing research is how I got into lecturing but is the one thing I have the least time for. I realise it is because it needs such a long, uninterrupted time to get into – something I only get in the summer.

I have made the decision to work for 4 days a week from September to give myself time to do things I want to do, which may include research. I am rather concerned that I could end up doing 5 days’ work for 4 days’ pay but at the moment I get exhausted and ill half way through every term because there is so much to do.

I head for home at a reasonable time, with energy to make a meal – summer is good!

Uid 31

Friday is Sprint Planning day with my students. We have adopted the Scrum

method, which involves working in short (in our case 1-week) sprints

during which no new goals can be set - work is planned at the beginning

and only that work can be done during the sprint.

I was set to meet with my students at 8:30, but my husband and I both had

a pokey morning. I arrive at 8:45 and immediately put $5 in the kitty for

being five minutes late. (We'll buy the CS summer students ice cream or

something during the last week of summer research.)

We immediately get to work. I wrote up a to-do checklist on the

whiteboard a few weeks ago, which we have since been using to guide our

sprint planning. We start checking items off - updating the product

backlog (our list of possible future tasks), photographing the task board

(as a form of documentation), and clearing the board for the next sprint's

work.

The next step is the Sprint Retrospective - a discussion of practices to

sustain and improve. I sit back while one of my two students writes on

the board and the other transcribes notes. All three of us contribute,

though I have to ask the student who is transcribing to speak up.

The "improve" list is expanded first - but as we think more, we come up

with several things to sustain as well (and this continues throughout

the morning). We also review our sustain/improve list from last week, to

see how we did. I point out that these lists will be an important source

of best practices, lessons learned, and open challenges for their report

on the summer.

We move into planning proper. It is the end of week 8 (out of 10 weeks of

summer research), so we need to start thinking about the end of the

semester. We determine how many working hours are available for each day

of the sprint and decide how to split them up between programming, UX

evaluation, and writing. This leads into a discussion about what kind of

paper they will write; I outline the type of paper I am envisioning. This

leads to the identification of a few writing tasks - not writing per se,

but finding examples of similar papers and brainstorming possible content.

Now that we know how many hours are available, we choose items from

the product backlog and negotiate the specific tasks that need to be

accomplished for those items to be implemented. We also estimate the

amount of time required for each task. Each task and estimate is written

on an index card; once an item is fully "tasked-out" we put the cards

on the task board and subtract the hours required from the total hours

available in the sprint. This is a somewhat tedious process---it is hard

to keep everyone focused, and we all take several breaks---but it seems

to pay off in students' ability to actually accomplish the tasks that we

agree on. We run out of hours allocated for the sprint before we run

out of items we want to complete---unfortunately, rather typical, but

the product backlog means those items won't be forgotten. We also write

task cards for work on the students' final paper.

By this time, it is after noon and therefore time for lunch. I've been

taking my students out to lunch on Fridays. Despite the heat, we decide

to get sandwiches and take them out to eat in Central Park---as the

forecast predicts the next two weeks are only going to be hotter. We have

a pleasant lunch and walk back to campus.

A colleague catches me for a brief conversation - letting me know he has

been appointed to an administrative position (related to an institutional

service project we have been working on together), and that as a result he

will likely be stepping down from the Personnel Committee. I'm

disappointed - he hired me as Dean five years ago, and I had been looking

forward to having a "friendly face" on the committee - but that's life.

I'm grateful that he told me.

At 1:30 I check in with my students for our Daily Scrum: A brief daily

progress report meeting. Since we've been working together nearly

continuously since yesterday's Scrum, we have nothing new to report to

each other. But I ask my students which of the tasks they plan to tackle

first and I'm relieved that they are all things they shouldn't need my

help with. I'm looking forward to some time away from my students.

I catch up on my email. At 2 p.m. I go downstairs to participate in a

psychology experiment that I had signed up to do earlier in the week.

It's weird but kind of fun. It's nice to have some time to do things like

this and support our students during the summer. The study takes about an

hour.

The rest of the day is weekly review time. I sort out my email, empty

my paper inbox, look at my calendar, and review projects and tasks that

need to get done. Things can get pretty out of control if I don't make

time to do this. There are some tasks on my list that should have been

done a long time ago, which I resolve to do next week.

I leave at 5:30 and hope my husband has a plan for dinner. He does - he's

grilling burgers - but before that we have a meeting with a contractor who

is testing our basement for radon. Fun stuff. We speculate on what kind

of work our house might need.

After dinner, we spend some time thinking about projects for the weekend

(too many of them!), read books, and relax.

Uid 32

Wheee!! On holiday. I did no <my field> related thinking. I did explore some different cultures, some art, some political science, and some history. Can I use it in my job? Perhaps not directly, but I'm sure I can - if I wrap my brain around the concept - find a way to apply some of this somehow. We have, in the college, have long talks about internationalizing the curriculum. Today (and the past weeks, actually) can be used somewhere.

But for now - I'm on holiday. The past few months have been so busy (no time to even create these entries!) that the time for me is absolutely critical. Recharging the batteries, re-examining ideas and beliefs, learning new (and seemingly unrelated, until I can think about how to make them related) things (history, art, political science, food, ...) are so important to being ready to start a new year.

So on that note, time for figuring out tomorrow and get ready for bed.

Uid 45

A slow day today. I should work on my textbook, but I probably won't. Other small jobs have priority. I am pleased I have done as much as I have so far this summer, as far as catching up on small jobs, but the text has languished. Can I get an additional 3 months of summer vacation?

Uid 47

15 July

Academic work has taken a back seat to spousal care issues today. My wife had ACL surgery yesterday so I've added a bunch of duties to my plate instead of working on research or server building as I had hoped to be doing at this point in the year.

1 pm Kids are at piano lessons, giving me a breather. I left my wife strapped into the CPM (Continuous Passive Motion) machine. I should get home at about the right time to turn it off... The break gives me time to check on messages.

I'm being asked to contribute to an advising session about "Good Advising Enhances Retention." I'm not sure I have much to contribute other than advising students to get their butt in gear or get out.

The only other message is from my secretary and I think it means I don't need to do anything. She frets about faculty not getting back to her when she reminds them of things -- being faculty, I assume no news is good news or at least I-accept-the-consequences news.

So as long as I ignore the tasks I'm not getting done, all is good! Fantastic weather for a Friday so spending extra time at home is wonderful.

3:30 pm Father-in-law is painting the doors, giving me a headache, but I may be able to grab a bit of time to work on installing server software.

12:20 am mostly played with the kids while various makes ran on the server. Hard to keep things straight in my head with everything going on, hopefully I installed some of the correct software!

Uid 50

I'm sitting outside enjoying a cup of tea and the sunshine. But, obviously, I've got my laptop with me and I'm doing work, despite the fact that a) my semester's over and the summer has started, b) I'm on sabbatical for the year, and c) I'm not even in the country anymore. Our curriculum revision project needs my input, so here I am generating Curriculum Action Reports and updating prerequisite graphs. Also, our dean authorized a three-year visiting position, and as I'm the senior CS person in a very small department, I need to be involved in the process even though I'm officially not on duty anymore.

Fifteen years ago I told my wife that this job would get easier with time -- that the day would come when I wouldn't have to work every evening and every weekend. I don't have the heart to tell her how far off the mark I was. I guess I don't have to at this point!

Uid 52

Thank goodness for the summer! However much I usually moan that the summer isn’t long enough and that I never learn that it is just not possible to do all my planned summer tasks in the time between semesters, it is still slightly less frantic than the rest of the year. I managed to get a week of holiday at the end of June and have begun to feel a lot more human again. However, the ‘to do list’ is now the ‘should have done list’ and it is a case of trying to catch up.

I started the morning by tidying my desk as I had begun to lose things and in the end the half hour it desperately needed will save me more than half an hour in the long run! I then did quite a bit of admin - sorting out dates for a range of meetings and booking rooms and then responding to a range of emails. I then spent two hours finding and reading articles for an exercise I want some students to undertake online. These students are overseas and are part of a project which requires them to continue to study over the summer. I pulled out the best of the articles and added these into the virtual learning environment with instructions for the students on the group work we want them to undertake.

I am involved in a project in Iraq that is supporting staff at one institution to increase the use of more student centred learning within its curricula. As part of this project staff members have been observing each others’ teaching and feeding back to each other on ways they can enhance student centred learning in their classrooms. So my next task today was to watch one of the videos submitted by one of the Iraqi staff and to provide some tutor feedback on how well they have done as well as making constructive suggestions and asking questions to try to get them to think about other ways they can move towards more student centred approaches. One of the issues which I think some of the staff are really struggling with is the same thing so many people struggle with – moving from talking about student centred learning as a good thing (because most people agree about this), to changing the way we actually practice our teaching. I have witnessed a lot of teachers demonstrating their student centred learning approach in the classroom but the only voice I can hear is the lecturer’s from the front of the classroom. I know this doesn’t automatically mean it is not student centred…but it is a warning sign.

Lunch at my desk today – such a bad habit, but at least I had tidied my desk today so there were no crumbs in my keyboard or on any important papers! Then I worked on analysing some results from a survey I have been involved in along with some collaborators from other universities. I realise this is going to take a lot longer to do that I put time aside for this afternoon, but at least I have started. Then I completed a book review that needed to be finished. It is always nice to complete things and get them off my desk. Finally I made a phone call to a member of staff who was unsuccessful in getting one of the teaching excellence awards this year. She wanted some feedback on what could be improved in a future application. It was a particularly strong field this year so it always seems hard on good candidates who just missed out. We have a public holiday on Monday, so it looks as though the thunder and lightening is just starting and rain is scheduled for the weekend!

Uid 53

I am writing this entry some time after the event, but my over-riding memory coming from the 15th was the realisation that there were only five working weeks, bar a work trip away and a holiday, until the start of term.

This is a repeating annual problem for me! There I am, thinking I have all the time in the world to get ready for the coming year, and then it's suddenly just a few short working days until it all starts again. The summer used to seem so long - and yet somehow it is now getting smaller and smaller! Start of induction week is September 11th. This is nearly a whole month earlier than it used to be. Yet it doesnt' feel that the year is finishing that much earlier - back in June/July.

It's a big wake-up call this year because of new courses for me to teach next session, a new student records system to get our heads around (as an adviser who communicates with all new incoming students), and being class head for Level 1. Not to mention commitments to complete on from sabbatical and such like.

Uid 65

Today was the final day of a wonderful week’s holiday spent in North Wales. We stayed in a lovely, remote cottage near Dolgellau with our three cats and had a relaxing few days. Unlike the rest of the week, when we had beautiful warm and sunny weather, today was overcast and cool. We had a couple of very short, local walks, but spent the remainder of the day doing something I rarely get time to enjoy the rest of the year – reading! Nothing academic you understand, just a normal novel, something to escape into and forget about all the pressures and anxieties of work.

It’s just such a shame that most of my holiday leave is concertinaed into a short space of time in the summer – it would be so much more effective and enjoyable if it were possible to have shorter periods of leave throughout the year. Alas, with ever more things encroaching into the Christmas, Easter and summer periods. This is not possible. Even while on holiday this week I had to respond to some urgent e-mails where people had seemingly got their knickers in a twist. We are moving to a new VLE at the end of August, and although I have been shouting about this for some time, it’s amazing how some people really don’t get the message until it really starts to directly affect them!

Anyway, for once, a diary day filled with pleasurable things instead of academic stresses and strains!

Uid 67

After my holiday to Sweden, I had only a few days leave left, so I took this Friday off. Everyone else is off for the whole of July, but I never manage to get my holidays right, so here I've been for most days other than this.

So, what did I do on this day? Very little that was work related. I have been watching the final season of Oprah on diva tv. I haven't watched Oprah since I was about 10 and it started getting very self-helpy, but I feel that by watching it, I get to keep in touch with my American roots. This September, I will have been in the UK for 10 years. I have grown to an adult here and honestly wouldn't know the first thing about being a grown-up in the USA. I increasingly find myself out-of-touch when I go back home. Oprah may not be the most accurate method of keeping up with America, but it doesn't seem too far off. So far I've learned that Americans like to scream, cry and hug when they get free stuff. I don't, but the Oprah audience sure does.

With that in mind, some Oprah was watched while sipping a cup of tea or three. She visited Yosemite National Park - that was interesting. Some laundry was started, some cats were fed and some emails sent. I had a tennis lesson at 1pm where I was reminded what a bad student I've become. I get consumed with WHY I can't seem to change the way I play - blaming the way I was taught in the 1980s for my bad habits, complaining about injuries and otherwise finding it impossible to make my body do what I (to be perfectly honest) keep forgetting to tell it to! I can watch my coach do the same thing over and over again and try to imitate it, but then when a ball comes towards me, I just can't seem to do it. I then begin to question why I keep questioning and why I can't do it. It does take the fun out of tennis - something I used to really, really love. But then again, it's good to be a student and be reminded of this experience and admire how patient and encouraging my coach is when I probably ought to give up!

The rest of the day was spent grocery shopping, salad making, library visiting and...well, it was my day off...more Oprah. I just want to see Yosemite part 2! Come on diva tv what happens in part 2?!

To say I've been able to detach myself from work for a while would be an understatement!

Uid 71

ANNUAL LEAVE: YESSSSSSS!!!!!!!!!!

Uid 72

On holiday at a music festival. Arrived last night, spent the night in a tent, which I don't really like but is by far the best way to experience something like this. Had an enjoyable day far away from work - I find actual "having a rest" type holidays quite difficult so "doing something different" is really enjoyable.

Uid 75

7 am: A early start. Not really, I am preparing to go to a photography course photographing birds of prey. The change of job to Aston University and trying to continue to supervise MSc students at University of Birmingham has kept me busy. I am not convinced of these one year pressure cooker MSc programmes. The students have 11 weeks over summer to complete projects but they don't see the importance of doing background research and treat it very much like an undergraduate project. I don't see many of these students going on to do PhD research or more in-depth research. They simply don't understand the importance of putting their work in context.

At least one thing with the change of job, I am getting better rides in each day. A 12km ride still doesn't match the 25km or more rides I used to do in New Zealand on my commute but my fitness is improving compared to me 7km rides to Birmingham.

Teaching the non-CS students to program will be one of my tasks at Aston so I have been looking over the materials they have been using and beginning to prepare resources. It looks like the way that they have their programme set up is quite different from Birmingham so there will be some new challenges.

I am also to teach a course on testing and reliable software. Since I got rid of all of my testing books, I spent part of yesterday trying to see whether there was a suitable textbook or what other reference material there might be. This isn't a testing certification course but I would like to think that a student graduating from the course would find the certification easy to obtain and might question some of the certification topics. It is an interesting challenge to have but one that I feel reasonably confident about addressing.

There won't be a lot of entries today since I expect to be in a field most of the day trying to take photos.

Saturday morning: An exhausting day yesterday but some of the 400 photos make it worthwhile especially one of the falconer with a golden eagle.

Although I was a student on the photography course, I found myself thinking about the way we were being taught. It tended to be pushes toward certain settings and compositions. I would have liked to have been encouraged to experiment more with the camera settings and obtained variations in photos so that I could compare and contrast to determine what was working effectively. It wasn't until I sat down reviewing the photos that I really had time to reflect on what I had been doing.

Stationary portraits weren't really a problem as I already understood the issues around depth of field to throw the background out of focus. Flying sequences were more of a problem and I struggled to know what settings were best. With flights coming rapidly, it was difficult to take time to review what changes I might make and their impact. Although I did get some good shots of the bigger birds in flight, I felt I could have learnt more given more time to experiment and reflect.

This left me wondering about my own teaching and whether I am rushing the students when they really need time to experiment. Do I encourage them to try alternative solutions and to compare and contrast them? Are all my examples good solutions or do I show variations in solutions and then take time to discuss these solutions with them? How well am I really getting the important issues across or am I like the photography tutors happy when I see the student has a good solution and not so happy when they don't?

Photography might seem a practical skill but the thought process involved in creating a good image takes time to pick up and you have to know what the possible options on the camera are that will give the effect that you are looking for.

I wonder whether this is really all that different from teaching students to program?

Then to complete my day, I went to a cycling track event primarily to complete my commissaire certification. This involved getting the chief commissaire to sign off on my involvement in an event. As the chief commissaire signed the report, a discussion arose about how to train commissaires. The consensus was that people could get certified but not necessarily understand the real issues.

In my case, I am looking for certification so I can get on with commissairing here in the UK. As a qualified national commissaire in New Zealand, this process is simply about certification. However, I can see that the opportunities to learn about track commissiaring are not good. These track league events provide limited experience of the different roles and if none of the commissaires present have experience of the wider roles involved in a bigger event then you either end up judging or starting. The rules and their application and helping riders to understand good riding etiquette are ignored.

Increasingly, I see our university programmes being about certification and not about learning the craft. Students want to know how to earn the marks for the grade they want rather than to become immersed in the learning. My response is often focus on learning the craft, try out what is being taught, experiment with it, put in the practice, and forget jumping the hurdles for marks. The marks will come if you understand what the subject is really about. I have always been a person who has linked theory with practice and I want my students doing the same.

Uid 77

Share 15th July 2011

Today finds me at the last day of a 3 day conference, and the morning after the conference dinner! And to save money I am staying with my 89 year old mother in law. So the day started with me packing and having breakfast with mum in law, She appreciates the company, (says it makes her feel better) as long as it doesn’t upset her routine,

I am getting a bit 'conferenced out', but it has been a great networking opportunity meeting up with old friends and making new ones, I even spent an hour or so discussing some issues with colleagues from my own department. It is a bit daft having to travel 300 miles or so to do this, but somehow, we never find the time when we are back at base. Some of the conference sessions have been very though provoking. One of the benefits of conferences is that they give you time to think and reflect on problems that usual you don’t have more than 5 minutes to sort out on a purely practical basis. I have particularly enjoyed the insight into ‘failing’ students as were have been having discussions on how to best help the 15 or so that have to repeat their final year.

Being day 3 and conferenced out I am a bit more selective as to which sessions to attend, taking the ‘retail therapy’ workshop instead of the allocated ‘developing an e portfolio’. While out and about, I find the Scottish family history centre, and decide to spend the 3 hours I have to wait for my train indulging my hobby of building my family tree.

Safely aboard the train, (he train journey home is projected to be 6 hours), so I link up to the complementary WiFi to catch up and deal with the 20 or so emails that I have accumulated today. These include further UCAS forms to review, and the letter from the Lawyer with details of the final sum my husband and I need to provide to complete our house purchase. We will be moving in 5 days time.

Having completed all these tasks, I plan to spend the next couple of hours reading some paperwork I brought with me. I do find train journeys a great opportunity to catch up on reading, (which is why I am on the train rather than the plane) but I never quite seem to get as much done as I hope!

After 6 hours, 4 trains and several British Rail sandwiches (and a glass of wine), I finally return home. A quick turn round sees me meeting my Husband at the pub for a drink and a catch up: This is our first opportunity this week as we only overlapped by about 5 hours on Tuesday night (when both of us were asleep). Progress with the moving, report back on Mother-in-law and an update on our 18 year daughter are our agenda items before closing time.

Uid 82

Graduation day. Another of our cohorts are off into the big blue yonder! Can't say I'm overjoyed by the prospect of wearing my hot and heavy PhD gowns on a day when the mercury is rising but I am looking forward to seeing the students, possibly for the last time ever, so that I can wish them well as they move on to their next adventure. They are all certainly different to the raw recruits I encountered: they are older, wiser, more confident, more thoughtful, generally '-er' and 'more' than they were in many areas. There's a lot of hot air everywhere about university students/graduates, what academics do, what universities are for etc, but this is what it all boils down to: preparing students to be graduates and sending them off into their next chapter.

Uid 95

I am in limbo. It's my leaving (retirement) do next Friday and I really am not coping very well.

I am clearing the office, throwing away 35 years of work at this institution. I read the odd document and decide:

a) all things go round a cycle

b) times at university are changing for the worse (too many students, far too much admin., not enough time to do a good job)

c) no one will miss me - so why did I put so much effort into it all?

I save a few boxes of papers (I am determined to complete my teaching diploma after I leave). Colleagues tell me to throw every thing but I am also a graduate from this place do have some affection for the place.

My regret is that I feel that the university is losing my experience and expertise. There is no opportunity for part-time work which I wouod have likely so that i don't sudenly stop working.

On the positive side, I know I shall miss the students (I haven't told them yet). I'll also miss a few colleagues who have always been supportive. I know I did a good job despite being down-graded a few years ago. Yes, there are things I would have done differently but overall I know I have had a small part in shaping a large number of students. I have taken great satisfaction in seeing them develop from "schoolies" into mature twenty somethings embarking on worthwhile careers.

Uid 96

Friday 15th July

Annual leave today, up at 6am as is habit and on 9am train to go to a friend’s wedding. Reading on train consists of a textbook in a subject I teach – want to make sure I have a mental map of all the good bits and nifty ways of explaining, so that when I return to writing my online module next week the appropriate stuff will be at the front of my mind. Plus, this is a bit of a departure from my original subject area and there are still some textbook things I may not know. Not too many from these chapters, and I find that even if there aren’t new things I’m still glad I read it just to reassure myself that there aren’t any basics here I haven’t grasped. I have no desire to be an ignoramus and reading can save me from this fate. It’s a subject and a textbook I enjoy (Principles of Ecotoxicology). I read for two hours or so and then snooze. I was up late last night finishing wedding gift and packing because I had wanted to finish things at work and didn’t leave the campus til after 7.30.

From the train I cycle to my hotel – 12 miles along a canal towpath, just for fun. I could have got a second train but I like cycling. Glorious sunshine and scenic scenery. I’m thinking about my friend who is getting married; the other friends I will see there; what I will tell them about my life (how to explain why I’m the last one still single? the list of possible reasons is too long and it may not do me much good to dwell on them. I wonder if men get away with workaholism more readily than women? I doubt I will find anyone to tolerate that along with my other somewhat ‘challenging’ traits..); what I will do with the rest of my annual leave this year (I must take my leave or I won’t get it, but how will I fit in writing this module and that article and that research proposal? What shape will the research proposal take exactly? I need to read those articles I printed off yesterday evening at work and brought with me, maybe I’ll read them after dinner tonight); I should come to Yorkshire more often, it really is pretty. Maybe M (a certain young man of my acquaintance) would like to meet me here and we could cycle along the sunny towpath and stay in a charming hotel.

I’m here a day earlier than the other guests so I wander around the town by myself and find a pub to eat in. I order a pint and open a book while I wait for fish and chips. I’m reading “Communities of Practice” by Etienne Wenger. It might relate to the article I want to publish but I’ll need to read it to know for sure, and I’ve been meaning to read it for ages anyway. I’m interested in “learning, meaning and identity”. Really quite interested. The further down my pint glass I get, the more my face wriggles with pleasure as I read interesting things. As I eat, I try to relate what I’ve read to what I want to write and what else I might need to read to facilitate the process. Food gobbled, I return to beer and reading. I don’t bother getting another drink but I carry on reading until the pub gets so full I feel I shouldn’t occupy space without ordering anything else so I wander back to my hotel. Send text messages to my mum and a friend, and read in bed. I didn’t bring any fiction (because I’m reading Anna Karenina and judged it too heavy to be justified in a bicycle pannier) so it’s still Communities of Practice. Asleep by 10pm. Amongst other things, there was a dream about one of our students who has recently failed her final clinical examination for the second time. A dream in which the student’s fragile mental state manifested. She is (in dream and reality) somewhat unstable and this (in the opinion of clinical tutors) constitutes a lack of fitness to practice. I dreamed that one of the final clinical examiners was telling me about a part of the exam that she very clearly failed on the basis of knowledge, not just conduct/professionalism, and I recall feeling relieved. If someone is ‘borderline’ or their qualifying might leave a faint (or sometimes substantial) trace of anxiety in the mind, it is much easier if they fail properly and thoroughly so that we can be confident in our decision. However, for the mentally unstable student I worry very much about her graduating. The four hours a week of counselling support provided by the university will disappear, along with all the structure in her life and access to the personal development tutor whom she emails between three times a week and eight times a day. Her graduating successfully would be a worry for her mental health, the prospect of her failing and being kicked out even more so. She may “cease to be our responsibility” and, I admit, I think it better that she doesn’t qualify in this particular health profession, but I’m not a monster.

And for the record, 15th June was graduation day. Can't believe I didn't record my reflections, I had so much I wanted to say. Mostly about how absurd it feels for people to take me seriously while I'm slow-motion prancing up onto a stage in Harry Potter costume to Serious music involving trumpets. Maybe they don't take me too seriously - after all, my hair was in a giant pigtail like pippi longstocking and right up until entry to the auditorium the academic behind me was holding onto it like circus elephants in procession, in gentle taunt towards the admin staff who had herded us into line and struggled to keep us there, threatening to make us all hold hands.

I always cry just a little bit at the the part of the ceremony where the graduands applaud their family and friends.

I think about the fact that it might actually matter whether I turn up to graduation or not, because I am some people's favourite teacher. Some of them value my congratulations and care that I'm proud. I am. And I'm grateful to them for caring.

There's a mystique to the academics at graduation. Having talked so much to (or at) these people for four years, we are now silent in our costumes on stage. Keeping it ever mysterious from the assembled families what exactly it was we did that turned their child/sister/friend from an applicant to a graduate. "I'll get you along the road", as Scots say, meaning "I'm walking that way too, so let's go together". Not so much lifting and carrying in it as the phrase implies. Still, the graduates themselves know what we academics did. Or each knows some of it and collectively they know. They know that I lecture in jeans and that I twiddle the end of my childish pigtail round my fingers absentmindedly when thinking about something I'm trying to explain (then realise I'm in front of an audience and sheepishly replace it behind my back). They know how tired I look towards the end of term, those who notice. They've got time now to figure out exactly what it is they have just achieved, and what it means. I expect that will include some cynicism. I hope it was worth it, graduates, and I hope it made your lives richer. It did mine.

Uid 98

Today I was on a 'placement', the fifth and last day experiencing work and already providing enough material to rewrite a lecture. The early start time (7am) led to some office work and then a trip by boat to a dredger. I was in the thick of Health and Safety, sea conditions, vessel types, heavy machinery, precision 3D positioning, rock removal and spoil disposal.

By midday I went to the main office (and avoided raw herring for lunch).

A talk by one recent graduate on the course and its relation with work was part of wider feedback from the company. The drive to the airport by another graduate gave time for catch-up and further briefings (from him on work and from me on results). I arrived home at 11pm (midnight by my alarm clock).

Uid 99

On the 15th June, I was lying on a sunlounger in Cyprus, with no desire to go anywhere near a computer or think about anything work related... One month on, and it feels as though I have never been away!

I spent most of this week at a PhD residential, and I am at work today just itching to get on with it, rather than thinking about the many jobs requiring to be done. The trouble is, I'm so used to constant firefighting, that when I have no urgent deadlines, I find it quite hard to plan my work effectively! I live an hour's drive away from the university, so I'm working at home a fair bit, but had to come in today to meet with a dissertation student. Needless to say, they cancelled at the last minute... On the plus side, I finally got my new PC installed, removing one of my major frustrations.

I had to leave early today, to collect my car from its annual service. This left me spending what seemed like an incredibly long evening at home, which is a bit of a luxury, as I usually don't get back till at least 8pm. I'm also managing to contain my workload within my working hours, which is a rarity. I can never quite relax, though - enjoying spare time at home is always accompanied by whispers from the PhD monster sitting on my shoulder, reminding me of what I SHOULD be doing instead.

Uid 114

Today I am on study leave - an oppertunity to catch up on the best bit of my job, but also the bit that usually gets pushed asside for opperational crisis!

I'm up early with a list of tasks to get completed. Unfortunately my study day starts with having to speak to a colleague about student marking which has not been completed. I love being a line manager and supporting people who are teaching, but I don't enjoy dealing with those few who don't perform. I had left a message asking them to call me back... they called at 08.50 and left a message. The cynic in me thinks they purposely called before I would be there to answer. Conveniently they work in a building with no phone reception so I can't call them back till later on. Dealing with the start of a diciplinary case is not my idea of a great way to spend Friday night!

Next I deal with a sick chicken, I don't know what is up with her, she's just a bit off and not laying properly. Ilet her spend some time on her own for a while separated form the other girls who get very jealous when I give her some corn.

Finally I get down to doing some study and am ust getting into it when the phone rings. I need to pop out to collect a new kayak paddle which I ordered a couple of weeks ago. As we are going out this weekend I'm keen to collect it, decide it will only take an hour to drive each way so I could get there and still have time to complete my work this afternoon. Alas the M25 had other plans..... Just over 4 hours later I get back with a shiny new kayak paddle and a bad mood!

I do get some work done in thelate afternoon and evening but have to stop to deal with my diciplinary case. I am frustrated as I am sure the individual is lying to me abouthaving done the work. But the computer system is not reliable enough to be 100% sure so I have to give him the benefit of the doubt. I don't understand why someone would bother being in teaching if they don't care enough about the students to give them a reasonable level of support. This one is going to run and run!

8pm - it is now officially the weekend :-)

Uid 116

10:49 AM: A late start today. I had beers and french fries with a former student last night, so took it slow this morning. My sabbatical position has very flexible hours for an industry job. We're expected to put in at least eight hours a day, but we can time shift that however we like as long as we're here from 11am–4pm. We can flex that time too with prior notice, which is helpful for doctor's visits and whatnot.

I'm now 6 weeks into my sabbatical and am enjoying it thoroughly. My initial feeling is that I have as much freedom to explore new ideas in this industry position than I do in my academic one. At school no one is telling me what to work on, but the demands of my teaching are such that I have no time to work on things outside of my teaching and service obligations. In this industry position, I have focused work to do, some of which is mundane and some interesting, but the company has reasonable expectations about how many hours I can productively contribute each week. As such, I have substantially more time available to pursue other interests.

I'm not missing teaching at all at the moment, but that's not surprising considering how brutal the past school year was. I'm curious to see how I feel about it when my colleagues head back to the classroom in the fall.

1:17 PM: My current task is to implement a "split row" feature for our outlining application. That's involved a bunch of refactoring to extract an abstraction for contextual menus. I can get the request from a user now, but need to figure out the best way to actually implement the splitting in our model, then update the view.

I spent the rest of the morning researching our existing code base to decide where the responsibility for the action should land. I think I've spent at least an order of magnitude more time reading code than I have writing it over the past 6 weeks. This experience is convincing me that a significant component of our Object-Oriented Design course should be on code reading. I'm envisioning giving students a few thousand lines of code and asking them to identify and describe all of the design patterns employed.

3:00 PM: One thing I enjoy about the company for which I'm working now, is the CEO and CTO are actively involved in our day-to-day software development work. They write code and fix bugs on a daily basis. I met with our CTO to discuss possible approaches to the feature on which I'm working. He didn't have any easy answers, which is a good thing. It's nice to find that something I suspect is subtle, actually is, since that means I wasn't missing the obvious.

Unfortunately, he also showed me another half dozen classes from different products in the same product family that I'll need to study to craft a complete solution. So this feature will take at least a couple more days.

For the rest of the afternoon, I'm going to work on sharpening my tools. That includes writing some scripts for some common development activities in my workflow. It also includes diagnosing and attempting to fix some indexing errors that are slowing down my IDE.

5:53 PM: The level of indirection in these build configurations is mind-bending. After an hour of reading documentation and studying our build configurations, I don't feel much closer to understanding any of it. I hate to end a week with a problem not understood. I like to end every work day with a solution in mind but not implemented. That has me itching to get back to the office and get to work the next day. I've heard that Hemingway was in the habit of writing a half sentence at the end of the day, so he had a starting point for the next day. Someone called this "parking on a downhill slope". That makes a lot of sense to me. Oh well, I guess I'll just have to push the metaphorical car up the hill on Monday.

Uid 119

Today begins 10 days of supposed vacation. Please, Lord, give me the strength not to check email!

Uid 123

My institution is going through a massive restructuring involving pretty well everyone applying for new jobs and fundamental change to all administrative processes and academic/programme leadership. By this time in the year usually my workload is slowing down, however, I am still here until 7.00 p.m. most evenings. This will be the first day for a while that I will finish at around 6.00 p.m. I am beginning to feel pretty tired.

9.00 - meeting with Research Officer to ensure that a bid for external funding is ready to be sent off by 12 noon. This is the fourth bid that I have been involved with over the last 8 weeks, and it is time consuming. I enjoy the bid writing, but find the institutional process and budget requirements quite onerous.

10.00 - meeting the Faculty Head of Quality, as we move from School to Faculty with new Departments all our policies and regulations need to be scrutinised and agreed or re-worked. A preliminary meeting just auditing all the policies across the Faculty.

11.30 - finished resit marking yesterday, today is uploading marksheets and making sure that all is archived/filed.

12.30 - going to a presentation on how the university's IT services will be structured. Sounds like we will have far less support...

1.30 - lunch

1.50 - meeting with newly appointed Programme Lead to discuss and prioritise immediate issues. Not sure that this is my job anymore, but doing it anyway.

3.30 - emailing and filling in this diary entry!

4.30 - travel to see A level Examiner to discuss first year curriculum.

5.00-6.00 p.m.- meeting with A level Examiner

6.00 p.m. - I will be going home!

Uid 124

I was at a conference, and chairing the first session, so had to cut short an interesting conversation at breakfast to make sure I was in the appropriate hall by the appropriate time. As it happened I knew all the speakers, which would have made life easy had the convention at this conference been to introduce them - but it wasn't. The first presentation, however, was given by three speakers - a composer and two instrumentalists, who were to speak about and give two performances of a new piece by the composer. First the composer asked me to persuade the audience to move into the middle of the three sections of the concert hall in which the session was taking place. Then he asked me to persuade them to move to the front, so that the presentation could be made without amplification. When I had done this he thanked me and suggested I could have a future as a sheepdog, if necessary - or perhaps I had been a sheepdog in the past? I reported this to the audience, with the result that the "sheepdog" tag stuck with me for the rest of the conference. The second presentation was beset with technical problems; I couldn't resist using my chair's prerogative to ask the first question of the third presenter and by the time the fourth speaker started I was feeling so laid-back I nearly forgot to announce (if not introduce) him altogether. Chairing can be quite stressful, particularly if no-one from the floor has a question, so I usually try to think of at least one to occupy the speaker while members of the audience formulate theirs. And if there are too many then it can be hard to keep track of who wants to speak, and when. I call on people by name when I can, but I addressed one young man I'd only just met by the wrong name, and failed to retrieve the name of another. Overall, though, it was a good session and the presenters were all pleased with the way it went. I dotted about, rather, in the afternoon to a session here, a session there - supporting colleagues engaged in similar research, listening to presentations in fields I don't know so much about, taking the opportunity to hear presentations involving live music-making (the theme of the conference), talking to friends, colleagues and students. In the evening there was a formal concert, open to the public, in the hall where I had been chairing during the morning - marvellous performances of marvellous pieces, though an unusual experience for me since I usually hear chamber music from very close up, and not from half-way up a large concert hall a long way away from the performers. I'd meant, last thing, to prepare my own presentation for the morning - just reading through it to make sure my notes tallied with the slides, and that I was clear about the points I wanted to emphasize but in the end I just went to bed, exhausted.

Uid 126

July 15th 2011

July 15th and am in Chester at a conference: Empowerment through literacy: literacy shaping futures. So up early, anxious because there is no promised wireless access and the end of term at the university with graduation approaching and government changes pressing I am finding lack of contact difficult. I am first to arrive at breakfast because I could not remember what time they had said it was last night. This is a busy conference run, it would seem by two very hard working people –not much thought given to how to make people comfortable. Am concerned at the way speakers are introduced, thanked, cared for, especially those who have travelled a long way. I meet an old friend and we catch up over limp toast and watery scrambled eggs.

A really great first speaker – Usha Goswami on developing understandings of the reading brain, especially in relation to dyslexia. She is lucid and fascinating. I add to my picture of what dyslexia means and think about how severe my daughter’s dyslexia must be. Then to a symposium on writing. A collection of four presentations about writing which don’t seem to hold together very well. This format does not seem to do anyone any favours. But interesting overall. This double session takes us to lunch which is a really sorry affair, especially for a vegetarian. My colleague and I decide we will walk around the city walls. It is a lovely sunny day, but then decide against it but walk into the city and, on a whim, book a table at the rather good restaurant we had found the previous night. Good move!

We listen to Marcus Sedgwick on the writing process and I am engaged by his description of the inception of his latest novel –especially as it includes a stay on a remote Swedish island. I shall be presenting on Sunday and one of my co-presenters is unable to be here. I take some time to work on what I am going to say, despite the lure of an interesting range of seminars. It goes very slowly and is very soon time for Hilary Janks from the University of Witwatersrand. Very good on empowerment, whose language, and whose power. Despite my best efforts I am still not radical enough –or at least not in the that sharp face to face with issues way. So good, we slip off to dinner which is delicious. We are glad we are at the conference together as there is something of a lack of life and socialising. We walk around the city walls which is a strange experience for me as I recognise a territory that I was very familiar with during adolescence. We eventually arrive at my school. Although I don’t feel any animosity to the place, I feel little warmth. I did not fit in here, not musical, not sporty, not conventional, though not wild.

Back to our rooms and I sit at the computer a little longer. I have such good data. So much of it, though, and I do not want to have the personal growth accusation levelled at me. Accusation? It is where I come from but has never been the entire picture for me. What I do know is that there is something here about treating teachers and children with respect and truly valuing what they do and who they are.

I am so tired. I have had a week of meetings, including two full days away from the university. Travelling across the country by train was lovely. It is good to be in this northern space where I am from. Leaving this paper so late troubles me. But I work every day, much too much. I am not in a position where the research is privileged, even though it is important. To bed, to bed.

Uid 126

July 15th 2011

July 15th and am in Chester at a conference: Empowerment through literacy: literacy shaping futures. So up early, anxious because there is no promised wireless access and the end of term at the university with graduation approaching and government changes pressing I am finding lack of contact difficult. I am first to arrive at breakfast because I could not remember what time they had said it was last night. This is a busy conference run, it would seem by two very hard working people –not much thought given to how to make people comfortable. Am concerned at the way speakers are introduced, thanked, cared for, especially those who have travelled a long way. I meet an old friend and we catch up over limp toast and watery scrambled eggs.

A really great first speaker – Usha Goswami on developing understandings of the reading brain, especially in relation to dyslexia. She is lucid and fascinating. I add to my picture of what dyslexia means and think about how severe my daughter’s dyslexia must be. Then to a symposium on writing. A collection of four presentations about writing which don’t seem to hold together very well. This format does not seem to do anyone any favours. But interesting overall. This double session takes us to lunch which is a really sorry affair, especially for a vegetarian. My colleague and I decide we will walk around the city walls. It is a lovely sunny day, but then decide against it but walk into the city and, on a whim, book a table at the rather good restaurant we had found the previous night. Good move!

We listen to Marcus Sedgwick on the writing process and I am engaged by his description of the inception of his latest novel –especially as it includes a stay on a remote Swedish island. I shall be presenting on Sunday and one of my co-presenters is unable to be here. I take some time to work on what I am going to say, despite the lure of an interesting range of seminars. It goes very slowly and is very soon time for Hilary Janks from the University of Witwatersrand. Very good on empowerment, whose language, and whose power. Despite my best efforts I am still not radical enough –or at least not in the that sharp face to face with issues way. So good, my colleague and I slip off to dinner which is delicious andthe people there friendly. We are glad we are at the conference together as there is something of a lack of life and socialising. We walk around the city walls which is a strange experience for me as I recognise a territory that I was very familiar with during adolescence. We eventually arrive at my school. Although I don’t feel any animosity to the place, I feel little warmth. I did not fit in here, not musical, not sporty, not conventional, though not wild.

Back to our rooms and I sit at the computer a little longer. I have such good data. So much of it, though, and I do not want to have the personal growth accusation levelled at me. Accusation? It is where I come from but has never been the entire picture for me. What I do know is that there is something here about treating teachers and children with respect and truly valuing what they do and who they are.

I am so tired. I have had a week of meetings, including two full days away from the university. Travelling across the country by train was lovely. It is good to be in this northern space where I am from. Leaving this paper so late troubles me. But I work every day, much too much. I am not in a position where the research is privileged, even though it is important. To bed, to bed.

Uid 127

Share Project

Friday 15th July, 2011

I’ve really left it far too late to be completing a diary entry for this day, because I kept putting it off with ‘more important things to be doing’, but tonight I’ve realised I’d be really cross if I didn’t have a 100% submission rate for this challenge!

It’s been an interesting month, mainly because my job (along with the jobs of all of my colleagues) has now been put at risk due to restructuring. It’s put an incredible strain on everybody in the Department, and as a result I’ve spent most of my recent days in the lab, hiding from the endless circular discussions that are taking place in the corridor outside our offices.

Friday 15th July gave me another excuse to be out of the office though, as I took a few students and some of our lab equipment out to a local school to enthuse year 5 school pupils about science! I spend a lot of my time engaged with the community and visitors to the University, and apart from the fact that I love my work with members of the public, I think it makes a big difference to our recruitment and to our relationship with the local community. Therefore the changes that are being proposed with the restructuring do worry me a little, as there seems to be a major drive towards a research intensive outlook at the cost of these sorts of activities and, to an extent, time spent with our students.

Still, I’m now winding down all the open jobs in order to escape for a month, and I really am going to take the time away from the University; well, except I have to come in for that resit marking, oh, and the exam board, and I’d said I’d help out for a while at clearing, and…

Uid 136

Well, last month I was enjoying a conference on Share Day, and it is another day ‘off’ today – graduation. The ceremony for our students is the last of 10 for the University, and it looks like we will get the worst of the weather. The day starts with a brief exam board to consider possible alternative arrangements for assessment of a student with severe learning difficulties, before moving seamlessly into the prize giving for final year and masters students who have performed exceptionally well. I muse on the different experiences, expectations and successes of our students. How different they are for the student we considered at the exam board and those we are fêting now, yet achievement is a common theme. Somehow, I hope that we can continue to cater for the needs of all, yet I fear that support for the less able will decline relative to that for the most able.

Enough philosophy and onto the prize-winners lunch (at 10.30 am, such are the timings necessary to get to the graduation on time) and photo opportunities; sponsors of the prizes like photos of the awards being made. An hour in the office to deal with a few e mails before leaving with colleagues to get to graduation. The same problems as usual in the robing room (can anyone lend me a safety pin to fasten on my hood? which button looks best for the little loop? my hat is too big), the same interminable wait for the procession to start, the same musings on which University ‘those’ robes come from…. One thing I will say for this Uni is that it does ceremony well, and processing through the cathedral accompanied by clicking cameras of eager families of the graduands, I get my annual reminder of how awful it must be to be a celebrity. Although the VC has said his spiel nine times already this week, it still sounds fresh and encouraging. Not that academics can hear very well as we are sat behind the orators. Apart from time spent shaking hands with ‘my’ students, I spend the time applying statistics to the graduands, soon to be graduates – who will get good jobs, who will be unemployed, who will get married/divorced/have 2.4 children, have a heart attack at 40, live to 100 etc. The irritating thing is that so few students get back to you after a few years that you rarely see more than the first part of their stories. I wonder whether winning a prize is any indicator of success in life more generally.

Our ceremony goes on longer than planned and by the end of it I am worrying about my son coming home from school to an empty house, so while the group photos are being taken (luckily still dry enough to have them outside) I am quietly phoning him to see he is OK and my husband to see if he can catch an earlier train than me. I notice a colleague sidling away – if she doesn’t get home to collect her car from the garage before 6 she will be carless over the weekend.

Wend way slowly through graduates and their families – nice to meet you, well done, all the best for the future, no actually I am not on holiday for the next few months, I need to go home and start timetabling next year’s modules, processing applications and all the other delights of an academic summer. Must find time for writing……last summer’s paper appeared in print today.

Uid 138

Hurrah – today was the last day at work before I take two weeks off. I would rather take three weeks, to be honest – at least with three weeks absence somone else picks up your duties while you are away; if you are only away for two weeks, everything is simply left for you to pick up when you get back (so what’s the point of the holiday, then?)

I have just come to the end of a wonderful fortnight in Uppsala, where the university has kindly given me space to focus on writing my book – didn’t get as much done as I would have liked (but isn’t that always the story…) I would have got further if I hadn’t spent two-three hours a day dealing with stuff back at my home institution by email. It really is very difficult to escape.

I will be spending the next two weeks taking the Inlandsbanan train (affectionately called the Inland Banana) up the centre of Sweden into the artcic circle. I will be taking Christopher Brookmyre, Bill Bryson, a camera, a list of friends and family to send postcards to, and a man to carry my luggage. I will not be taking a computer. And I will not login to my email for two weeks. Honest.

Uid 138

Hurrah – today was the last day at work before I take two weeks off. I would rather take three weeks, to be honest – at least with three weeks absence somone else picks up your duties while you are away; if you are only away for two weeks, everything is simply left for you to pick up when you get back (so what’s the point of the holiday, then?)

I have just come to the end of a wonderful fortnight in Uppsala, where the university has kindly given me space to focus on writing my book – didn’t get as much done as I would have liked (but isn’t that always the story…) I would have got further if I hadn’t spent two-three hours a day dealing with stuff back at my home institution by email. It really is very difficult to escape.

I will be spending the next two weeks taking the Inlandsbanan train (affectionately called the Inland Banana) up the centre of Sweden into the artcic circle. I will be taking Christopher Brookmyre, Bill Bryson, a camera, a list of friends and family to send postcards to, and a man to carry my luggage. I will not be taking a computer. And I will not login to my email for two weeks. Honest.

Uid 140

Graduation day. Prize-giving this morning then the ceremony in the Anglican Cathedral this afternoon. There can be no better venue. Afterwards it will be photos with the students. Hope I can keep smiling. We're on with Astrophysics so I'm hoping our Chancellor, Brian May, will attend. Mixed weather forecast, but I hope it keeps fine for the ceremony. Congratulations to all today's Graduates.

Uid 141

Haha! Today was a half day :) Which is always a mixed thing - I end up trying to cram as much as possible into the half day. Anyway here's how it went...

Daughter is on holiday at the moment so no rushing out of the house whilst shoe-horning her into her uniform. And I didn't hang around so I actually got to work for just after nine. Something of a record for me!

Did a fair bit of email first. Nothing too taxing though - I'd been up till 11 the night before as part of my usual evening routine doing email. So there was very little fresh that had come in overnight and needed my attention. Then on with a little work on a paper that I am writing based on some student projects. Only I got stuck on some of the stats in the data analysis. I (foolishly) decided to do the statistical analysis in two different stats packages, SPSS because I am used to it and R because I want to learn it and use it in future in my teaching. And of course they gave different results. So I was checking to make sure I hadn't done something stupid like use the wrong data. I hadn't.

But by the time I'd worked that out, I needed to go to a meeting. I am the Chair of the Board of Examiners elect and so I went to meet with the current Chair to find out more about the job. Very nice meeting. We had a good chat beforehand about his research - he is clearly enjoying the opportunity the summer vac brings in terms of research. Then we got down to business. This meeting was for me to find out who in the university I need to talk to/listen to when doing the job. As ever it is fascinating to learn about the arcane workings of this (any) university. Actually though it is relatively straightforward and sounds like there is good administrative support for all the connections and committees involved. Very useful.

Then time for a bit more stats analysis (data definitely right and definitely doing the right analysis) before meeting my work experience student. I don't think many lecturers will have had 16 year old come and visit for a week to do work experience. But he approached us from a local school having had a visit to the dept in the spring as part of our outreach work. He wanted a programming work experience role. Poor chap got stuck with me and it was pretty isolated for him - working in the enormous student lab on his own. But he's done some cracking good programs for me looking at low level phenomena that influence time perception. I had thought I could use them in some of my research but it turns out they are far more delicate to reproduce than I expected. Still. Now I know.

So he was finishing up and transferring his programs to my computer. Which involved upgrading my ancient versions of Java and corresponding IDEs. Good for the soul and good to have a reason to do it. But a bit of me hates upgrading - it just shows me how out of date my knowledge is. Ah well.

Then we had lunch together and discussed his plans for the future. He's a bright chap and I hope he goes on to do interesting things - he's certainly capable.

By this stage it was 12:30 so still time to do some more stats before knocking off. Decided that as I didn't know whether to trust SPSS or R (though instinct says R) I should redo the ANOVA by hand. Bleah. A mixed measures ANOVA by hand - that's the kind of torture I only really reserve for students! But needs must. So I made a good start with the help of a good text book to keep me right. 40 minutes later I was half way through having calculated my first main effect (not significant) and it was time to go home.

And once home it was a whirlwind of busy-ness. Packing the car, sorting out baby food, toys, car seats... Then we hit the yellow brick road (aka the M1) and headed south to the Emerald City (London) where on Saturday we were going to see a show. Guess which one!

Uid 149

It’s July, but it feels like the summer hasn’t really started yet. It is a while since the exam boards were done, but the days are filled with students complaining about their marks which are rather lower than they wanted, and various work concerned with preparation for clearing and people doing resits and other work which necessitates their being given support and advice. Today however I have PhD students to contend with. One of them has made considerable headway with her thesis and our only concern is whether she’ll be able to write it up in time. Like many of my PhD students she is also a colleague. When we started this she was actually my superior – a principal lecturer whilst I was a mere senior lecturer. During the course of the PhD I’ve overtaken her and got promoted to professor. We have a most enjoyable chat about her progress and talk about the revisions to her methodology section, accompanied by coffee and cake. After this, there is another supervision session with a student doing a doctorate in health sciences who has just started his dissertation option and we talk about how he might approach the study of employment rehabilitation for people with mental health problems. The trouble is he’s been at the point of starting his thesis for nearly twelve months now and I’m beginning to wonder just how long he’ll be taking to complete this task in total. He’s nearing the end of his career and is doing this out of interest as a hobby, rather than doing the doctorate as a means of achieving career advancement, so there doesn’t seem to be a strong sense of urgency at all. We chat affably enough and then it’s time to referee a paper that has been sitting in my ‘reviewer centre’ at a well known academic publisher for several weeks. I read it a few days ago and I come back to it in the hope of being able to make more sense of what is going on. It’s full of interesting observations, and tells me a number of things I don’t know, but I’m not sure what the overall argument is. After reading it through a couple more times I make that observation at slightly greater length as part of my reviewer’s comments and hit the submit button. Now I can pick up my rucksack and go and catch a train. I’m off to Wales for the weekend. I manage to get the 4.49 so I shall be at my destination when it is still light, which is an added bonus. To contribute further to my delight, I now have a laptop whose battery lasts the entire journey with some to spare so I don’t have to struggle to find sockets. Simple pleasures, eh?

Uid 152

6-8.30am Getting everyone up, ready & out the house for the school run.

8.45am Drop off my son at school

9am Travel to work

9.15-10.30am Dealing with emails from students who have been referred at yesterdays exam board.

10.30am-11.30am Coffee with 2 students who graduated at yesterdays assessment board and came in to say thank you! How lovely, one of the nicest parts of the job :)

11.30-12.30pm Finishing materials for an e-learning package I am working on for clinical supervisors for our UG students

12.30-1.30pm Lunch with friends

1.30-2.30pm More emails, and sending out elective placement documentation

2.30-4pm Checking over resit exam timetable and referral deadlines. Checking over assessment deadlines for next year.

4-4.30pm Generally sorting, tidying, doing email etc

4.30pm Home

Uid 155

Most people are on annual leave at the minute so the campus is very quiet. The summer schools have started, but they are out on field trips, so the site was almost completely abandoned. I like this time of year - it is when I can 'play academic'. I get the chance to do what I thought academic spent their time doing as opposed to what they really do (teach, mark, do admin, chase awkward students, chase even more awkward colleagues, go to endless training sessions, attend meeting after meeting after meeting). So after my morning run (yes I suddenly have time for that!) I got to the office, checked my emails - hardly any because there is nobody here to send them – and then (Shock! Horror!) started to read a book. As the weather was lovely, I even sat outside. Kept on feeling guilty (surely there is a meeting I am supposed to be at) but carried on anyway. Did go to a meeting at lunch time (just to remind me that the fantasy world of academia is just a mirage) but in the afternoon I then read again. Followed up some student enquiries (they have suddenly thought that they should start planning for their dissertations while they have some spare time) and then went home (and before 5.30 too!). What is even more shocking is that I plan to do NO work this weekend. I may as well enjoy a bit of down time before the treadmill starts again in September.

Uid 157

Today was a very mixed day. I am a member of my University's Discipline Panel and this morning was devoted to hearing an alleged case of serious plagiarism. I have discovered over the last couple of years that such cases are rarely, if ever, straight forward and it can take some careful questionning to understand fully what has happened. The hearings can also be tiring and sometimes emotionally draining. I can only imagine what the hearings must be like from the student's perspective.

After some well earned lunch I met with a colleague who was considering changing the type of assessment for his module. A very constructive conversation followed where we explored the relative merits of different types of assessment which would provide the students with an interesting yet challenging task. And we made a decision.

This was followed by the inevitable task of going through e-mails - a mixture of new and old ones that weren't urgent but need some attention.

A pleasant hour was then spent with a colleague discussing some of the points arising from the recent examination process. This ended up with some speculation as to what we would do with the first year curriculum if we were starting from a blank piece of paper!

The day ended in stark contrast to how it started with my department's annual BBQ. Fortunately the heavy rain of the previous day held off and, with my husband and son joining me, a very good time was had be all.

Uid 158

Today was spent at a course revalidation event. Preparation in the days prior involved going through lots of paperwork provided in both hard copy and on a memory stick.

The event itself involved panel deliberations, meetings with students and the delivery team and finally feedback to the course directors. Fortunately there were no great surprises but the panel was able to make some potentially useful suggestions.

This was my first involvement with examining course specifications and module documents that were not my own. If nothing else it made me realise how difficult it must be for an external auditor to judge the level at which the material is being taught.

Then back to the office for more preparation for my upcoming trip abroad - which will mainly be teaching, and teaching teachers!

---- 15 June ----

Apologies, once again I omitted an entry.

This time, however, it was nothing to do with teaching. I was in Swindon at the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council on a panel conducting Fellowship interviews.

Uid 167

8.45am I am in Germany for a long weekend staying with my partners parents for a family occasion. However I've brought work with me, as I was on holiday properly the last couple of weeks and need to catch up. So we are both workng in the spare bedroom. I won't work Saturday and Sunday, that's the deal. We travel back late Sunday night.

I've started the day with emails. I have eventually got through the two week backlog but several are marked for further attention. A couple of students want recommendations for summer reading (unusual!) and an undergrad dissertation supervisee needs some advice on her interview plans. I also have to look through emails relating to an udergrad student who is making an appeal against his degree result, and forward any back correspondence to a colleague who is compiling the school response to the case. I am sympathetic to the student's case, no doubt partly because he is my tutee and I know him quite well, but I am frustrated by the school position which is that the appeal should be quashed if at all possible as successful appeals make the school look bad. My feeling is that the school did what it needed to but the student still has a case on other grounds. Its frustrating that the school's starting position seems to be generic and given, regardless of the specifics of the case. [please don't print this anecdote in the newsletter as if my colleagues should read it they would recognise it as mine and it could cause friction].

10am Got a bit sidetracked reading articles on bbc and guardien environment pages whilst looking for links to send to students. Actually its nice, and very useful, to have a bit more time to do this by viture of a lack of other distractions and deadlines (being away from office and out of term time). Make a mental note to try to keep up with these pages more often. Article on India and coal was especially useful in connection with current PhD student.

Uid 168

15th July

Graduation day! One of my favourite days of the year. The ceremony was scheduled for the afternoon, so I took the opportunity in the morning to fix an overdue hospital appointment related to some regular medication. The consultation was short – the doctor didn’t even take my blood pressure or check my weight which, it seems to me, was a missed opportunity to collect data appropriate for long-term monitoring of my condition.

Afterwards I met with a number of colleagues for coffee. The staff come from a variety of departments, both academics and support services. The connection? All are users of Twitter – so this was a periodic “tweet-up”. It was especially significant as one colleague is leaving to retrain as a primary school teacher – the children’s gain is most definitely our loss.

At lunchtime we had a reception for graduands and their families. These are always slightly awkward affairs; I am happy to mix and mingle with our students and meet their relatives (or meet them again, since I first meet several of them on open days in my capacity as admissions tutor). Some colleagues, however, struggle to break out of staff-only ghettos and would gladly draw you into these circles of comfort. There was one surprise for me this year, although in the second decade of the 21st century it probably shouldn’t have been, when one student introduced me to her mother, and her other mother.

Off to the ceremony itself, via my office to pick up my gown and mortar board. I’ve been attending graduation for many years and there is definitely a core group of ‘regulars’. This year our numbers were swelled with a goodly number of new faces. I have a sneaking suspicion that this may be linked to the fact that we were offering an honorary degree to a very high profile international figure – a definite coup for the institution. He, it transpired, had flown into the UK especially to receive the award, and this despite the fact that an unfortunate change of circumstances at home meant he had to fly out again the same day. He gave a characteristically engaging and thought-provoking acceptance speech before being spirited away for the return leg of his journey.

Aside from this deviation from protocol, the ceremony followed a familiar pattern, even down to the inclusion within the Vice-Chancellor’s speech of certain stock phrases and statistics (tweaked for the current season), and his challenge to the assembled students to outdo their predecessors in both the volume and duration of clapping.

The procession of students across the stage to receive applause and a handshake from the Chancellor or his proxy is always an excellent experience. With some 500 students in total, rapturous applause for all would leave one’s hands depleted of skin, so over the years I have perfected the art of non-contact “clapping” for those from outside my School, a proper clap for those that I know and then vigorous clapping for those that have been my tutees, my project students, or those that have overcome some personal difficulty or other to achieve their degree.

Inevitably with so many students, a certain natural rhythm becomes established – punctuated by the announcement of the awarding of one or more prize to certain of the cohort as they line up for their turn. I always feel sorry for the person after the prize-winners since, for no reason other than the alphabetic misfortune of their surname, their achievement end up looking meagre alongside an academic demi-god (despite the fact that they may well be just as successful as 90% of their peers who passed through without drawing such comparison). I therefore welcome these unfortunate “after-the-prizewinners” as recipients of my super-claps.

About two hours after we processed into the hall, we process out again. Outside the hall I seek out some of the students who had not attended the lunch but have been present for the ceremony. In milling around, several asked me to pose for photographs or seek introduce me to their relatives. Many offer gratitude over and above what I think I deserve, but there are sometimes those for whom you have gone out of your way over the years who are maybe not as forthcoming with their thanks as you feel they ought to have been. This year was a case in point, both a colleague and I were looking to congratulate the same student to whom we had given a lot of support in the roles of tutor and project supervisor respectively. Sadly the student did not seem as eager to find us and slipped away. We don’t do the job for the thanks, and I’m sure there are times when I’m similarly remiss in demonstrating my gratitude to others, but on this of all days you like to think that they would make some acknowledgement of your role in their achievement.

A slightly sour note to end this diary entry, but overall an excellent day.

Uid 171

Today was mostly taken up with a single DPhil student. This week he sent me a chapter draft and a document I'd asked him to write up, summarising his argument in bullet-point form. I had given him examples of sentence outlines to guide him, but what he gave me bore no resemlance to what I'd asked for, so I asked him on Tuesday to do it again. The version I read for today was also not what I asked for, but at least it had an underlined sentence that purported to be a thesis statement (though it wasn't, really).

I've just re-read my previous entries, as I could have sworn that writing about this student over and over again this year--but I guess I haven't, and instead have just been talking to my partner and colleagues about him. A lot. One comes across such students every once in a while. We have what seems to be a productive discussion about why what he's doing can't be right or how it isn't doing what doctoral work needs to do. He agrees, we write up a plan, and then when we meet 3 weeks later, his work shows no evidence of us having had that conversation. He has his comfort zone and stays in it. Unfortunately, I didn't foresee how entrenched this problem woudl become in his first year(when I could have more easily opted to demote him to MPhil), and so here we are in his third year, with him stressing out about being allowed to go onto continuation to reduce his fees, and me stressing out about whether we'll ever have a passable doctoral thesis here.

So, the day...I'd spent the previous day working all afternoon and part of the evening on his work, and still had 7 pages to read and a summary of my comments to write up when I got to work on Friday. Did that. Met with him. Had a productive conversation that I fear will amount to nothing.

Fit in a half hour's worth of email after that, and then the highlight of my day was going at 3 for a party at the creche (hello to new children, good bye to those leaving for school). Did a tiny bit of work-related networking with the other parents, but mostly made up for missed lunch with fairy cakes and hula hoops. And in the evening, I declared it a proper weekend. It's summer--enough with this working through the evenings (except for most of the time when something's due!).

Uid 171

Today was mostly taken up with a single DPhil student. This week he sent me a chapter draft and a document I'd asked him to write up, summarising his argument in bullet-point form. I had given him examples of sentence outlines to guide him, but what he gave me bore no resemlance to what I'd asked for, so I asked him on Tuesday to do it again. The version I read for today was also not what I asked for, but at least it had an underlined sentence that purported to be a thesis statement (though it wasn't, really).

I've just re-read my previous entries, as I could have sworn that writing about this student over and over again this year--but I guess I haven't, and instead have just been talking to my partner and colleagues about him. A lot. One comes across such students every once in a while. We have what seems to be a productive discussion about why what he's doing can't be right or how it isn't doing what doctoral work needs to do. He agrees, we write up a plan, and then when we meet 3 weeks later, his work shows no evidence of us having had that conversation. He has his comfort zone and stays in it. Unfortunately, I didn't foresee how entrenched this problem woudl become in his first year(when I could have more easily opted to demote him to MPhil), and so here we are in his third year, with him stressing out about being allowed to go onto continuation to reduce his fees, and me stressing out about whether we'll ever have a passable doctoral thesis here.

So, the day...I'd spent the previous day working all afternoon and part of the evening on his work, and still had 7 pages to read and a summary of my comments to write up when I got to work on Friday. Did that. Met with him. Had a productive conversation that I fear will amount to nothing.

Fit in a half hour's worth of email after that, and then the highlight of my day was going at 3 for a party at the creche (hello to new children, good bye to those leaving for school). Did a tiny bit of work-related networking with the other parents, but mostly made up for missed lunch with fairy cakes and hula hoops. And in the evening, I declared it a proper weekend. It's summer--enough with this working through the evenings (except for most of the time when something's due!).

Uid 172

On a long holiday in Oz. Still checking e-mail (almost daily!) to prevent it pilling up.

Uid 179

Friday, 15 July 2011

Graduation yesterday. Glorious sunshine and an opportunity to congratulate our students (and to thank their families for putting up with the temporary requisitioning of the dining room as a study). Feels odd the last week or so not to be so harried as is usually the case. I am so glad to be finished with marking, which seemed to go on almost continuously since January.

So what have I been doing post-marking season? I took a few days R&R in Devon to see my sisters, and last week started on a fresh round of interviews for the ongoing research project. Off to the doctor this morning for an annual checkup/6000 mile service. The eldest boy is going to wilderness camp this evening; the youngest boy has a schoolfriend to visit for a sleepover. Madame has bought a new lawnmower. Do you see where this is leading? Dad's taxi and gardening service will be busy this weekend!

Back from the doctor's at noon (I'm working at home) so after lunch reviewed an early draft of a dissertation from one of my MSc students and dealt with emails, including setting up two more research interviews for next week. Then went out on my bike for a bit. After an early dinner, Dad's taxi service took the eldest boy to wilderness camp, together with friend just arrived from Germany.

Uid 182

I've spent most of today trying to springclean and organise my office which was threatening to submerge me in avalanches of essays, paperwork that I hadn't filed at the time, teetering books and folders etc everytime I turned around! Even though it's now 3.30pm and I've only made dents into it so far, this practical task has felt the most directly satisfying of all the work stuff I've been doing in the last fortnight as at least I can see some tangible/concrete progress. In addition to creating an abstract for submitting for a 2012 conference (the deadline's in two hours!), I have a list of miscellaneous housekeeping to try to get through today as well: booking a flight and a hotel for an autumn conference, finishing up the Endnotes for references for two essays, creating and printing off rolls sheets and handouts for a summer course, finalising the (very small) budget for library purchases, checking the status of links on my course area on Moodle etc, finalising a guest speaker for September, reviewing and confirming the payroll for part-time lecturers in my Department, all of which are small to-do items but they cumulatively eat up time. I'm off on holiday on Sunday (yaaay!) but I'll be spending all day Saturday marking postgrad essays so I'm going to try to pack tonight.

Uid 186

Today will be spent interviewing a number of my students who have used facebook inappropriately. We are a professional degree programme, and the professional body has issued new guidelines, which we have to implement.

I didn't come into higher education to be a disciplinarian, but that seems to be an increasing part of my role.

I don't mind students using Facebook (I use it myself), but using it inappropriately (and I guess I even have to be careful about what I say here as this is potentially a public space) is on the increase.

I'm taking a box of tissues to the meeting, because I expect tears. The School admin manager is seeing the students with me, and she does a very good job of being the stern one. I'm not good at that.

Only one cried. But they were all apparently now recognising the problem.

the regulator has issued another statement of soemthign else they want done now. I feel more and more like an apparatchik for the government than a lecturer.

Time to work on department workload planning this afternoon. Friday is a good day for it, as there is no one else here!

And to do the extra marking that is on my desk as the admin people can't find anyone else to give it to.

Uid 187

7:15 AM - Alarm woke me up.

7:55 AM - Loud singing of scouts woke me up again. Opps! I overslept. I was supposed to be at flag assembly 10 minutes ago!

I've been working at a Boy Scout summer camp as the business manager this summer. It has been very rewarding, but has provided for some very long days with very little sleep. Hmmm; that sounds similar to my grad school days.

As a result of a very busy and full schedule for camp, I have had very little time to devote to non-camp activities. Therefore, my independant learning (online) students have received significantly slower response times from me than I like to provide. In total for the day, I may have devoted 15 minutes to them. To further complicate the issue, the camp's internet connection has been down since the early part of the week and just came back to life today. I'm going to have a lot of catching up to do this weekend!

3:00 AM - Off to bed.

Uid 191

15th was graduation day.

Got up late, got gown, sat on platform. Heard Vice-Chancellor's same old tired joke (he only has one). Students looked freshly scrubbed and both older and younger than in their normal clothes. Spoke to the ones who had done projects with me and a few others and their parents. Almost all had jobs, but not all were at the party, or even at graduation, of course.

I have to have at least 2 glasses of champagne in order to do this - despite appearing to be a friendly person. I guess I find graduation awkward and I hate goodbyes. So then I was pretty tiddly and I went home and slept it off. Woke up grumpy with a headache.

Another year.

Uid 204

Wow - if I hadn't kept a diary, I'm not sure I'd believe it. Apart from half an hour or so on sundry emails, I spent the whole of my working day on two teaching-related research projects, polishing one paper and analysing data for another. Working uninterrupted on single tasks for so long is an incredibly rare luxury. I think I must attribute it to the fact that my students and almost all of my colleagues are enjoying holidays - and what better time to get serious work done than notional holidays?

Uid 207

Graduation day. I absolutely had no time to write during the day so these are reflections looking back after a weekend off. I have always felt ambiguous abut attending graduation as I managed to collect 3 degrees in absentia and avoid the whole process. Family in retrospect felt a little cheated but at the time none were really too happy at the idea of coming along. Over the years U have been brought to a more or less pleasant acceptance that for some families/students it really is seen as the culmination of many years work by the students or support of the students and that their tutor’s presence is appreciated. So if I am in town I sign up and process and wear the gown and take tea with parents and (newly) ex-students. It feels good to do it well.

So woke early as I wanted to get onto campus before there is a 20 min tail back of traffic to get through the gates – so in my office for 7am, a couple of hours clearing e-mails and writing references for students (reference writing season!) some of whom I would see in a few hours. Then grabbed an umbrella and headed over early via a cup of coffee with my head of dept. Bought a paper and retreated into the air conditioned waiting room to read it quietly until we had to assemble and to peak over and see the family and students arriving. Was very grateful that it was a pleasant day but not unbearably hot. Then the ceremony, the photographs, the lunch, the prize giving – and finally at 4pm tore off several square yards of impossibly hot wool and deposited it in the office of a secretary bucking for sainthood who had offered to return gowns for us all in order to encourage us to keep them as long as possible for all the photo opps possible. Not sure she had really worked out just how heavy twenty odd robes would be.

Logged on quickly as an afterthought and found that a job I was advertising on redeployment before general advertising has an applicant – too late to get hold of HR this afternoon – have to be in early on Monday, must interview as quickly as possible.

Home for a very early night and simplest plainest meal I could put together.

Uid 213

Today is the last day I get for a while to do research. Next week I'm on campus nearly every day - Monday for a training day, and Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursdays I'll be at the programme boards. Long, long days of looking at every student's profile. We do get soggy triangle sandwiches to make up for it though.

So today I have time to research, and instead I spent part of the morning looking for a Post Office receipt that has a tracking number on it I need. I'm sure I kept it safe. Absolutely sure of it - except I can't find it. I did find other scraps of paper that reminded me of things that I need to do. I also spent too much time online reading about the News International coverage, which is gripping me far more than it should. I don't even teach journalism, so I can't claim it's 'work'.

It's also time to write references for MA programmes for students - one who will never get onto one due to her grades, and one who will easily make the grades, but I have to figure out how to say tactfully that she is so shy she barely speaks in class.

I met my husband for a rare lunch and he brought with him the advance copy of his new book! That was the absolute bright spot of my day. It's a beautiful book with CUP, and I'm so proud of him.

I'm proofreading his next book now, mostly on bus rides, like the one this afternoon to the London Library. I'm here now, and I've been editing my own work - my novel. I really, really want to finish this before I go on holiday in five weeks. But it's just emerging from the snarly, tangly stage to the point where I can see what bits I need to plug in and fix, and the amount of work it needs is starting to - no, is - feeling overwhelming. So I went out for tea and a chocolate chip cookie in the park.

Everyone in my department knows their teaching except for me. This is partly to do with new staff coming in (more on that below) but also because of another staff member who has been on leave. We won't know if they are coming back or not until next week, which means I don't know what I'm teaching, the students don't have the reading lists yet, and I don't know what days I'll be in on. I won some money to do 2 days of research a week in an archive in Semester A, but of course I can't tell them yet which days those will be. Which I think makes me look unprofessional.

I'm also coping with emails. A colleague who has been working as an adjunct is battling to get her hours properly converted to a fractional contract. I went through the same process last year to increase my fractional contract, and boy can the evidence of the crunch on universities be seen in the two processes. Mine went very smoothly - the hourly paid work I did was calculated and converted, but hers process is proving very difficult, and it's enough to drive her mad. But at least she has a job and is getting a permanent contract (albeit fractional) out of it. I've also emailed another friend whose adjunct hours are drying up and she doesn't have a lot of hope. It's a terrible time. What is going to happen to universities? And can we keep churning out PhDs when there isn't sufficient work for the completed PhDs we have now?

It all makes me feel really, really lucky to be where I am, but it also makes me feel absolutely sick for my friends.

The baby or no baby question keeps coming up too. My grandfather asked me yesterday. My husband met a woman academic this week who said she wouldn't lie to him, that having kids and being an academic is hard. I'm sure it's hard for everyone, but what happens when you never ever turn off work? It's not the yoke of the Blackberry that my lawyer friend has - it's the self-driven desperate need to wring out every tiny bit of writing and research possible. Where does a kid fit in that? People say to me that you find ways to be more efficient - but I think I'm pretty efficient already. What would have to give? But as my husband showed me his new book over lunch, a screaming, hysterical toddler at the table behind us completely defied all attempts of his parents to console him. And it made it seem like books are a pretty good alternative. Maybe they'll just be our children.

Uid 214

Today was what being a grown up must feel like. I began the day meeting (at 8.30) with an accountant - now \*my\* accountant, my first ever. Finally, aged 35, my finances are complicated enough to necessitate this. I then went into my office to find, oh joyous day, the advance copies of my new book awaiting me. I've been working in this book since 2008 so it was a big day to finally see it in hard copy - the pdf proofs I saw four months ago were one thing but now I had a box of real books! The book is even in kindle (I don't own a kindle but still, its pretty cool to have the option). Importantly I also realized that I [still] like my book for all the work on it and that it is pretty good - not all reviewers will like it but for now I'm content. The burdensome academic work ethic soon kicked in though, so after ten minutes of self-congratulatory skimming through a copy I remembered that I needed to get back down to editing a draft of my \*next\* book, which right now is a mess and also overdue. A hurried lunch with my wife followed before she went off to edit a draft of \*her\* own next book and I settled down to more editing too. By 3pm I then went in to a two hour long meeting with a colleague and a former member of staff of our Institute to track down some long lost - hopefully not destroyed - archives relating to our institutional history. Quite different from anything else I'd done all day and actually incredibly interesting, since there was lots of gossip about 'old Professors X and Y'. This kind of gossipy history is probably awful but always hooks me. By 5pm I was back editing my book, however, before a small work reception at 6pm. Finally, at 7.30pm I was on the way home, elated and exhausted after a day of many parts and a lot of emotion in many different ways. Formal celebrations for the book will come later: tonight it was my wife and I enjoying sausages and mash, a glass (or two) of wine and our latest addiction, working through the box-set of the first two seasons of the TV show 'Fringe'.

Uid 217

Nothing to say today, I'm afraid. I'm packing to go for a week's holiday. And about time too!

Uid 221

Not at work as I don't work on Fridays

Uid 224

15Jul2011

It's the first week of term for the new semester. I spend most of the day preparing lectures, interspersed with other events:

10am Meet with a student who is doing an individual course of study with me. She's just starting, and is making reasonable progress already.

11am Meet with a student who isn't happy with a grade from last semester - I was the person who signed off all the grades. It turns out that she should have put in an aegrotat application, so I send her off to do that.

2pm My third lecture of the semester on algorithms. The class are really responsive despite it being Friday afternoon. I love this part of the job.

4:30pm Join half a dozen staff for drinks to celebrate a successful conference that some of them ran over the break, and to celebrate a successful first week of term. It's great having colleagues who are also good friends. It's been a tough ten months with 3 major earthquakes wreaking havoc in our lives, and we've all become a lot closer as a result.

Uid 226

This has been an email sort of day. I'm in a bit of a lull and am caught up on all my deadlines (??!!) so I spent the morning filing email. This is more important than it sounds since I was filing records of correspondence with people who have been awarded money. But it is dull work. Very dull. I also cleaned up some more of my backlogged email as well as the usual incoming, answering random questions from people who want to know where their money is, can they spend it on something else and why haven't I approved that thing that I actually returned to them two days ago. That sort of thing. Also pinged the 20+ people who are coming in for review panels in a week or so to remind them to do their homework.

Had lunch outside in the beautiful weather since it cooled off.

I spent a productive hour talking to one of my research collaborators about a paper we are writing. Found out how to use an archiac system to look up critical information. And made and broke weekend plans.

And now I'm calling it a day.

Uid 231

So there goes another day, lots done and even more to do. Started at 8.30am updating notes and outcomes from an all day research meeting yesterday. Wrote a draft workplan for a new research assistant to prepare and plan a series of teaching and curricula workshops. Wrote an annual ethics report, an invitation to lecturers to use a new software for group assignments with associated documentation, and fiddled around answering emails etc until about 1pm when I had to go into work to fix up my endnote, a program I hate and tend to screw up a lot. One of our very clever and patient Research Assistants spent an hour or two with me sorting out the problem while I finished a conference paper. Had a coffee with a graduate to discuss his interest in pursuing an academic career. A bit of a dilemma given the state of academic careers, one of my favourite research topics, so I suggested he couldn't lose anything by doing a part-time PhD preparatory course for a year with some tutoring before deciding whether he wanted to go ahead and ultimately whether he wanted to be a full-time academic or a full-time contingent or sessional academic which is less secure but better paid and less stressful. Interesting half hour really.

Spent an hour with the School Director lamenting the state of quality assurance and accreditation measures that are taking up so much time, and producing in Tom Peters' words 'a cement life-jacket'. I am increasingly despairing of the general fear among colleagues of speaking up and out about the stupidity of these processes, let alone the costs of accreditation that could go into employing more people rather than overloading the few full-time staff so they have no time for students or teaching! We chatted a bit about ways we could sabotage the project but ultimately decided it would probably die a natural death before implementation because of lack of physical space, complaints from financial partners, students and potential conflict with government regulations. And with any lack there will be some new leadership in the Faculty that might see the Emporer is without clothes. Or it could be wishful thinking.

Home at 5pm to write up an ethics variation that I have put off for three months but having done it, it really wasn't as bad as I thought. Anything to do with ethics is fiddly. Sorted out a few employment contracts for new research assistants, returned a few phone calls that I had missed during the day, answered a few of the more interesting emails and had dinner about 9pm. Tried to get the television to work but couldn't so settled into reading last week's Campus Review until a colleague phoned at 10pm with a variety of complaints and concerns. Spoke for an hour during which I drank too much scotch and had to go out into the cold and rain to smoke and listen. Did a bit more reading of the Campus Review and then remember I had to fill in the survey for today, 15 July.

Uid 234

I start my day late at 8:30 rather than 7:45 because I give my two sons a lift to school sports day. The sports day is happening on the University athletics track, which is four minutes walk from my office. However, I am officially banned from watching.

So I start my day late (and finish my day early) and I spent most of the day doing personal research. How great is that? In the morning I continue an on-going disagreement with the Editor of a journal who doesn’t understand how to read a report from anti-plagarism software. I am meeting a research participant this afternoon so I spend some time making sure I have got my questions sorted out. It’s a re-interview and I want to use some of his quotes from last time. There is also a paper that that is at the editing stage, I have a meeting at 1 with my co-author so I spent some time thinking and planning what needed to be said at that meeting. And my third job of the morning was data analysis – this is really enjoyable and when I am this stage of a research project I find myself thinking about the emergent themes almost continually whether I am at work or not.

We have known for a year now that we are going to rehoused, but the stumbling block seems to be there that there is no obvious place for us to go. However, there is a rumour, which isn’t being quashed, that we are moving into an old hospital. A new hospital has been built, by and large the staff and patients have moved into the new building leaving behind an empty listed building. Rumour has it that we are moving in. Providing the building is given a fresh lick of paint it could be a marvellous place to have an office.

In the afternoon I head off campus for the meeting about the paper that is now at the editing stage, which passed without incident. I went on to interview the research participant but he wasn’t in and wasn’t answering his mobile. He is a mecurial chap, but I guess that’s why I want to interview him.

Back at the office I need a job to do that won’t tax my tiring brain too much, so I invest an hour micromanaging my diary for the next two months. Why is it every year I am taken by surprise that I need to leave space in my diary to mark resubmitted work?

I leave work early to drop the car off before I go onto three different social events; an end-of-term works do with colleagues, a meal with ex-colleagues and a small university reunion. Like I said at the top, it’s been a good day.

Uid 237

Diary entry 11

Friday 15th July

Context:

Wednesday of this week, my grant-writing colleague and I sat through a peer review session for an AHRC proposal we're currently working on. It was very constructive, and we are beginning to feel that we can make a good case. I especially like the way the Director of Research and two senior colleagues have taken it upon themselves to engage repeatedly with our proposal. I think they see worth in it, and want to help us achieve the money! Thursday was graduation day; I forget how lovely it is to see the students who I've spent so much time working with graduate. Students bought me gifts to say thank you this year (wine, chocolates, flowers - how well they know me!)

Content:

After a quick trip into work to get some papers, I worked at home on revising the Case for Support for the AHRC grant in light of Wednesday's meeting with peers. Despite allowing myself to be distracted by emails about 20 times, it has been a fairly productive day working on the revise. Off to training now to work off some chocolate....

Uid 239

As with many institutions across the country this was graduation day. A culmination which is a great event and lovely for all the graduating students. You are still having to fit lots of things either side of it, which flattens it a bit. Need to make it much more celebratory throughout more of the day if we can. Some prize giving speeches perhaps next year and our own special guest! Must try harder!!!

Uid 241

Our recent workshop for high school teachers was a lot of fun, for us (the organizers) and for the participants. A few months ago, I was worried about getting it done, but I was mostly pleased with how it turned out. Hopefully the teachers will be able to use what they learned from the workshop. Now I need to get motivated to finish another project before classes start again. It is great to be able to hang out with my lovable old dog a lot during the summer. Earlier in the month, he enjoyed playing with his much younger canine friend.

Uid 245

Assorted meetings with masters students about their dissertations, PhD students.

Meeting about REF.High angst levels.

Uid 246

This summer I've been teaching Speech Communication and the Life of the Apostle Paul this summer in our university's Athens program. These subjects are a little out of my subject area as a computer science professor, but I have enjoyed teaching them and have learned a lot. I have made extensive use of PowerPoint presentations and exam questions that others have written for the exam, so I am very thankful for the time these have saved me.

Today my family and I are traveling with our 32 college students in Israel. We don't have classes while we're traveling because each day is already packed with an exhausting amount of touring. Yesterday we toured around Jerusalem, and today we visited the Judean Lowland where we visited a number of places like the Beth-Guvrin (house of the Nephilim), Ela Valley, the archeological site of Beth Shmemsh, and walked along the Emmaus Road to the Dome of Silence.

It's been fascinating visiting some of the places where Jesus once was, and it's very eye-opening to see the collision of the world's largest religions in such a small geographical location. This is our last big trip-- the other trips were to Egypt and all around Greece. This summer has been an amazing educational experience for me and my students. And to think that I am not having to pay a cent to experience all this... I love being a college professor!

Uid 256

Diary, July 15th

Rose at 06.30 to half a dozen e-mails. One sought advice on a bid for JISC funding. Sadly, I felt this was way off target, and so first had to take time to be innovative and creative and work out what I would advise, then summarise that succinctly and clearly, then explain why I thought the original suggestion was bland, unattractive and lacking in potential, and then get all of that off. A busy two hours.

Breakfast and ablutions.

Now prepare for a meeting with a WBL student whose final report is now in. There are real problems here, in that the first version, which I turned back firmly, was merely descriptive. The descriptions were clear and well written, but there were no M-level skills on display. Now it has come back with sound analysis, and adequate evaluation. But the problem for the students, which has been there since the project objectives were being drafted, is that her work situation is one in which she has already acquired a great deal of experience (not much scope, then, to work-based learn!) and one which, without straining confidentiality, does not lend itself to the exercise of creativity and problem solving. This student is ham-strung by the fact that her work is with bureaucracy and legislation. I had to take time to work out two things. How could I explain this, without breaking her heart? And what could I suggest she might do which would add a bit of creative problem-solving to her reporting. The first of these maybe easier than the second.

I took an hour on that, then the bus to town to meet her. The one hour meeting went fairly well. I’m hoping she and we can rescue this, from problems which are not of her making, but arise from a particular situation in which creative work-based learning would be somewhat out of place.

Adjourned for lunch with a former colleague. Spent some time reflecting on how apt Machiavelli’s advice is for innovators in the present day; and – something new to me – that this had been anticipated by Socrates. Must find time to read Socrates.

Bus home, to cut the grass with all these long sprouting bits which I cannot eliminate. Then an hour before tea to review two journal papers, for different journals. One was utterly dreadful. It was an absolutely horrifying product, I deduced, of a PGCertHE course in which a trio of lecturers had undertaken investigations which were badly planned, badly executed, and summarised in the form of sweeping conclusions without any rigour or sign of acquaintance with the basic principles of enquiry, research and critical thinking. I hate to hurt writers’ feelings, having had my own hurt sometimes in the past by scathing reviewers. So I spent a bit of time trying to get my points across firmly, tactfully and constructively. Glad to stop for tea.

After tea, a short paper written by two Chinese academics in exemplary English, summarising the difficulties involved in getting students to the point of assembling reasoned, critical and sound arguments from their reading. After a wonderful literature survey justifying their experimental study, I found myself thinking in admiration “I wish I had written that” – and then remembered Whistler’s response when his arch enemy Wilde confessed “I wish I had said that.” “You will, Oscar, you will.” A great experience put some joy back into a day which had not been easy. I managed to raise enthusiasm to frame the assessment on the WBL report.

Uid 257

Having got back from a conference at Greenwich last night, I take a few days annual leave. I gather things together to head off, with parents and mother’s best friend, to Snowdonia, leaving Northamptonshire at 1030-ish. My father and I try and get in a hill-walking short break somewhere in the UK each summer. We did some walks in Snowdonia last year, the Lake District the year before that, and over a number of years before that managed to bag a few munroes (staying with my father-in-law when he was living in the West Highlands of Scotland). We make good time driving, getting to the guest house in Beddgelert soon after 4pm, after dropping the women off with the best friend’s cousin in Penrhyndeudraeth. My father has been up Snowdon by all recognised routes except the Snowdon Ranger path, so doing that is one of the objectives. We picked this weekend also because, having followed Wrexham FC for a number of years, we can join the sponsored walk up Snowdon (via the Miners’ Track) on Sunday organised by Wrexham Supporters Trust, who are trying to increase their funds available to secure a major stake in the ownership of the Club (to help prevent unscrupulous property developers moving in and asset-stripping the Ground, for one thing). We manage to achieve both walks over the following two days but concentrate for now on a warm-up walk up the local hill, Moel Hebog. Setting off at 5pm from the village, as I got beyond the cloud level and it rained a bit, with some steep bits up ahead, I wondered whether to turn back, as my father had done already, sufficiently warmed up, but I persevered and reached the 782m summit at 7.30pm, back down to the pub at 9.30.

Uid 260

I'm working from home. I start the day with a delicious helping of schadenfreude as I contemplate Rebekah Brooks' resignation. As Nick Robinson observed at an earlier date, "This is a story that keeps on giving". In high spirits I take my dogs for a walk and then do the weekly shopping run.

I finally settle down to review a 167-page set of notes of a conference I could not attend. Every year a pro bono attorney from Skadden Arps prepares a set of notes of the proceedings which he distributes to attendees and those who would like to have attended. When I first attended the conference I did not know that this attorney provided this free public service - I was baffled by the fact that I seemed to be the only person not taking any notes. Three days after the conference ended I discovered why when his summary was circulated by the organizers. It is a miracle of accuracy and succinctness. The conference lasts 3.5 days. Somehow this lawyer manages to extract everything worth remembering from every contribution and reduces it to a memorandum that leaves me speechless with admiration. His memo is circulated three days after the conference ends. Regulars at the conference long ago realized that their notes could not possibly be better than this lawyer's - so everyone just sits back and listens, then enjoys the ambience of rural Virginia, schmoozes and finally hits the smokehouse bar secure in the knowledge that someone far more dedicated than themselves is labouring into the night to provide masterly summaries of the day's presentations and discussions.

Having digested a three-and-a-half day conference in little more than a couple of hours, I peruse my emails. We are about to launch a new Anglo-American journal and I have been tasked with recruiting to the editorial board. I constucted a standard email pitching the journal and circulated it yesterday. All invitees have accepted so far - most reply with a fairly lengthy email. This morning I receive a response to my invitation from a senior academic at City University whose reply is a model of brevity: "Sure". A couple of years ago I invited the same academic to act as external examiner for a doctoral candidate and received the equally laconic reply: "OK".

I move on to consider repsonses to another set of emails I sent out yesterday. These solicited contributions to a collection of papers I am editing. This is only Day 2 of the project and I already have four contributors in the bag. I receive a very apologetic email from an academic at Columbia University declining my invitation. I reply telling him that he need not apologise so profusely for declining an invitation from an academic hitherto unknown to him asking him to do unpaid academic work.

Next I turn my attention to NVivo 9 - a new software package installed on my computer. Although NVivo is designed for qualitative data analysis, I have decided that it could be equally useful as an aid to writing journal articles where there are many documentary sources with passages that can be tagged and analysed. I spend 3 hours running through NVivo tutorials and familiarising myself with its capabilities. It looks very promising.

Finally I turn my attention to an incoming email from our Head of School. I had my annual "individual performance review" with him earlier in the week. Part of that process involved me writing a self-appraisal that formed the basis of our discussion. In my self-appraisal I made clear my feelings about the events recounted in my diary entry for 15 May. At the IPR we had an amiable discussion about my self-appraisal and I awaited with some amusement as to how he would deal with the events surrounding my resignation as Director of the research centre. When we finally reached that section he smoothly said, "I think we'll draw a line under that now - unless there is anything further that you want to say?" I replied that I thought I had made my feelings plain. He said "I'll give you credit for what you have done this year". I now have to see how he has written this up in my IPR that goes for review by the Dean and H.R.

He's a sneaky one. The relevant section begins: "Objectives for 2010-2011 have been dealt with fully in the Self Review Form" - this cunningly incoprorates by reference my views but rests secure in the knowledge that only the signed IPR form and not the self-review go to the Dean and H.R. He goes on to write "With the Head of School's support, \*\*\*\*\*\* resigned from the role of Director of \*\*\*\* in May 2011 so that he could devote more time to his research. For the record, \*\*\*\*\*\*'s leadership of \*\*\*\* since its formation is much appreciated." Hypocrite! But it's water under the bridge.

Uid 266

Woke at 6am, as planned so as to get to the airport on time, my final night in the hotel having been the same mix of heat and ear-blockage induced headache as the last three. Quick, cool shower then a final check under the bed, in the drawers etc. and downstairs to the waiting minibus. I’ve been at a mini-symposium in a small seaside village between Venice and Trieste this week, which has been great. Fifteen people who know their way around the topic very well, in a very convivial and relaxed atmosphere. The tone was set when, along with the programme and joining instructions, the organisers also sent the planned menus for the week (lots of very fresh, beautifully cooked seafood at the restaurant on the waterfront) and a reminder of the etymology of the word “symposium” (a meeting to drink, eat and talk). The week has been slightly spoilt by my getting my ear blocked when I dived down into the water whilst swimming round the headland, past the castle to the beach only accessible from the water on the first evening, which has given me a headache (not helped by the heat – 95 every day) and a feeling of being deaf in one ear, but otherwise it has been fantastic.

Sharing the ride to the airport in Venice with four colleagues, and the two admin staff from Berlin who have done such a good job of making the meeting run smoothly. There’s some quiet conversation, but I mainly feel like closing my eyes and letting the journey slip by. Arrive at the airport with no problems and we go our separate ways, agreeing to keep in touch, exchange papers and datasets discussed at the meeting, etc. Then I am swallowed up in the ritualistic dance through check in and security, and emerge air side for a relaxed breakfast of coffee, brioche and juice. Buy a copy of la Repubblica and go and sit by the gate to see how much of it I can make sense of.

In due course, it's time to get on the plane, which is all very smooth (partly because it's being done by Swiss Air, partly because, what with partial deafness and tiredness, I'm in an even more dreamy than usual state), and get a window seat. Lovely views of Venice and its lagoon, walled medieval cities across the Veneto, then clean and clear Alpine vistas, with little villages sitting atop bright green hills, all the way to Zurich. There are lots of things I like about plane travel: the dignity of paying attention to the safety briefing, and not undoing your seatbelt until the light goes off, the fact that they serve you food and drink, even in economy (can you imagine that on a train?), the views you get from nowhere else in the world. But most of all, I like the miracle of flying. It's best when you're sitting in a plane on the ground looking so that you can see down the runway as the plane in front of you takes off. When it's close to you, it's hundreds of tons of metal and humans and suitcases, and at first it trundles slowly, like a walrus struggling across the beach to the sea. But then it goes faster and faster until, magically, it just takes off, floats, levitates up into the air like a giant silver swan. Can you imagine a Victorian's reaction to this? "a large metallic contraption, transporting people through the air at hundreds of miles an hour, kept up simply by a pressure difference caused by the slight difference in speed between air molecules that go under and over its wings? have you gone quite mad, sir?". This is closest almost all of us will ever get to space travel, and all some people can do is whinge about the time they have to wait in airports, and the food.

Once in Zurich, it's an easy stroll to the gate for the flight home, where I spend a little while reading, then onto the plane. The lakes and mountains give way to expanses of agricultural northern France, then the coastline, then the slightly more cloud-obscured mass of the soggy little island on which we live hoves into view (but there again, if you choose to live at 50-something degrees north, immediately downwind of a 3000-mile ocean, what do you ruddy well expect?), and before I know it, we've landed, my suitcase has appeared, I've got the bus to the car park, and I'm driving home. As everything does, the trip has turned rapidly from anticipated treat, to slightly surreal reality, to happy but fading memory. I go and pick our girls up from school with my wife, come back home for tea with my parents before they go home, and we all then take the path of least resistance to bed, and to sleep.

Uid 267

Spent the day writing a new version of my staff profile in the latest format to be foisted upon us - although leavened this with watching some of the Tour de France live. This is the first bit I've actually watched live during this year's race (two weeks in) as opposed to watching the highlights in the evening - although at work on Wednesday after meetings with PhD and MA dissertation students, I did manage to watch the final 10km or so on itv.com on my pc (although the sound doesn't work because my pc is a distressed antique). Finished the staff profile in the evening and sailed straight into my mammoth annual assessment form - describe your career plan for the next 3-5 years, describe your TL&SS (teaching, learning and student support) activities, reflect on your TL&SS activities (DOH! only as I type that in does it occur to me that I could have mentioned my participation in this project!!! Oh well I'll save that for my next promotion application...), describe your TL&SS successes, describe your professional development needs for TL&SS. Ditto R&KT (research and knowledge transfer).. ditto C&M (collegiality and management) etc. My completed form (which I eventually finished monday evening before collapsing into bed with a temperature) was about 20 pages long! It's all very well debating the balance of teaching and research in the profession but the time actually goes on filling in interminable forms... One good thing that happened on Friday evening was that I had an email from the publisher including a very positive reader's report on the proposal for a co-authored book we submitted in June, which is quick and welcome. If I get on with it, might even write most of it before the next round of forms starts.

Uid 268

I did not write an entry on May, 15th as I was recovering from being ill.

I did not write an entry on June 15th, as I had just chaired exam board, thought it went well, was then on the receiving end of too much unnecessary gloom and doom and as a result was feeling kind of 'f\*\*\* this'.

However, July 15th was a pleasanter day. I awoke amid the downy pillows of a London guesthouse bed, having had uninterrupted sleep without insomniac partner drifting about or needy daughter having bad dreams (she was busy interrupting insomniac's non-sleep, of course).

Then had breakfast in a cafe, which is really one of the best things life has to offer. Fried eggs, mushroom, being out at breakfast time... oh I really love this, weekend or workday. What a treat. And then I walked in to the conference, through sunny leafy streets - I'd seen a fox running across the road the night before.

I was not all that enthused about the conf, but my own paper was the previous day, and I'd turned down being on the plenary panel as I had to get a train, so no pressure that day. Was mulling over some new thoughts on my paper that had come from the feedback, and considering a rewrite (it's meant to be a book chapter eventually). In some ways, I could usefully just have worked on this at the BL, but having undertaken to be at the conference, I thought I might as well go. The day began with a very good paper from my former PhD student, and she was so nice to me all day that I was very touched. I'd thought she didn't like me much, but I suppose I had last seen her under the stressful circumstances of PhD viva. So this was lovely.

I also had further chats with someone I'd newly met, but who I'd been in contact with about working groups. She was beautiful, bright and charming and enthused about a conference in Chile, which sounds exciting, if long-haul. Had lunch at a table with one of the keynote speakers (most of whom were notable by their absence at other papers). He thinks the postdramatic isn't specifically interested in the dramatic. I think there's a difference between postdramatic and postmodern. He wasn't very interested in talking to me, however, and I was a bit bored, too.

Subsequent papers were fairly interesting, including one about scenography from another ex-student from my former institution. I can't really claim much credit for him, as I was rather present in the same department than his teacher, but I still felt a bit proud all the same.

I then rather gratefully sloped off to get the train to visit my friends. On sitting down, there began a small drama about a suitcase that had seemingly been abandoned on the rack above my seat. A handsome man in a suit was quite concerned about this and ineffectually worried about terrorism, to the point that I couldn't sit with what had now become a ticking bomb right over my head. So I made my way up and down the train to try to find a guard. No guard, but I did find a queue outside the toilet - 'Someone's been in there for the last 10 minutes!'. The owner of the case was forced to emerge sheepishly, having received a phone call mid-ablutions. She was too willowy, young and vague for anyone to be able to be cross with. 'This is how paranoid we've all become!' I said to her and she nodded vaguely and wondered where the buffet was.

Arrived at my friend's house and enjoyed the cluttered, chaos-filled lovingness of her home. Phoned my Lola, who was busy screaming and refusing to get into the bath, while insisting that the reason for her tantrum was that she wanted a long soak. She was shouting so hard that Soren Lorenson couldn't get through to her that the way to have a long soak was to get in quickly. 'I want YOOOOOU Mummy!' she wailed. It was a long time before I could get off the phone and quickly get changed to go out.

Ah! Lovely restaurant, good food, chats, etc. Except my conversation with my other friend was, as it has tended to be in recent years, teetering on the edge of disarray... the kind that could end up with someone shouting and/or someone laughing hysterically and only doesn't because one person is too polite (me). Nothing against therapy, but is it supposed to make you madder and less nice? (Ooh, this better be anonymous). The latest brand seems to involve getting starkers and letting some spiritualist masseur work intensively on various parts of the body. Unsurprisingly, this unlocks a variety of feelings.

Perhaps I was just piqued, because she was really not at all interested in anything that has happened in my life. I did venture to say timidly at one point, 'I got a book contract... not a book that'll earn money of course, but...' I lamely punched the air. Cue divulgence of recently unearthed family trauma, just to make sure the focus stays where it should be.

I am such a bitch. I was really very happy to see them both, even though it is easier with my other friend, who is a lot more easy-going.

Anyway, we got a cab back to the house, pleasantly, but not totally drunk and again I slept the sleep of the dead, until sounds of family breakfast - but that's the 16th.

Uid 276

Just about finished a manuscript that I have been working on for the past few months: my intention is to submit it before I go on leave and take that feeling of satisfaction away with me! I’m still deciding whether to apply for a high profile post that has just become vacant in my Faculty. It would mean leaving the department that I’ve been part of for nearly 20 years, which is a huge wrench, but I really need to step up and grab this opportunity. The landscape and management is changing so much around me that I have to consider if it’s right to stay doing the same thing. Two senior colleagues have independently encouraged me to apply over the past week, so if they’ve got faith in my ability…

Uid 279

This has been quite an arduous week, there are so many changes going on within the College and within our sector. So many people being made redundant or taking voluntary redundancy. Within our team our Curriculum Leader has taken voluntary redundancy and this has meant that our team are being split so that the Media team are going to have a new Curriculum Leader and Animation & Interactive Media are going to be put with Photography. It seems a strange split, but who are we to argue.. I have always been more comfortable in Higher Education as I have up until this year always been a tutor for HE courses, but this year I was made to be an FE tutor (we are a FE & HE College) - now suddenly it has been taken for granted that I will be Course leader for the FE course and this is not a direction that I envisaged, or feel comfortable with, particularly as there will be no salary increase to go along with the extra responsibility and work!

The course leader for the foundation degree in Animation and myself have at least planned out the assessment points and modules for next year, but we now have to write them and update the reading lists for each module. Our team has now shrunk to the two of us and an agency lecturer who comes in for one day to run the whole Foundation degree! I have also been given the responsibility for planning for a new HE website along with a colleague from graphics, who has already gone on holiday - so that cannot be started until we return in September and the deadline for getting that up and running is December! So much to do in such little time - I also have to complete my final module for my MA in the summer and it has been so manic here, I have to admit to not focusing on it at all - this will have to change once I start my holiday... well, sort of holiday, what with the MA to complete and the amount of work I know I will be taking home with me... When I was reading some of the diary entries for last month and people were talking about doing their gardening and pottering about - I was so envious, it sounded like another world. I have felt like I have hit a brick wall this week, my mind is on overload and is telling me I need a break!! I have had three HE students in today and have been helping them with their re-sits, but this is impinging terribly with the FE marking that is still outstanding, I don't think I have ever felt this behind with everything and I must say that overall morale with so many of the staff here is pretty low :(.

Uid 282

4:00am

The alarm goes off on my phone but not before the sun wakes me up in Glasgow. Today is the day I leave Glasgow to return to the US. Attended the ICET conference this week and am amazed at the amount of daylight I have experienced. One evening we had our closing dinner that was scheduled from 7-9pm, but we didn't finish until 10:30pm. It was just becoming dusk. Amazing. Caught a taxi to the hotel after a brisk walk to the taxi stand.

Turned on the TV to watch the news and to give myself time to wake up. I have been told to be at the airport three hours earlier than my 9:00am flight. That means 6:00am. Back that up for taxi time, and I need the whole hour and a half to wake up.

5:50am

Even at this early, lines of people with suitcases in tow. Walked right by the check in gate the first time. I was headed to security before I realized I needed to check my large suitcase. Did that and then headed for security.

Ordered a porridge and coffee at Starbucks. They have taken my Starbucks card everywhere I went in Glasgow. That doesn't even happen in the states. I like it.

Long flight, tight fit on the Continental jet. But, the flight was pleasant sitting with an elderly gentleman and his wife. I could tell he doted on her because of how attentive he was to her and he was so generous with me too, asking me if I would like a drink when he got one for his wife. How sweet.

Couldn't sleep. Ate and drank what was offered on cue and then off at Newark, NY. Caught another plane to Houston, a BIGGER one, full but more comfortable. Then one more leg of the journey (in the tiniest of airplanes) into the home airport. My husband parked at the curb waiting while I waited inside for my luggage.

There's nothing like your own bed and bath, and time to reflect over the new friends I met and hope to see again. The University of Glasgow was just wonderful. However, the stairs in old buildings are a killer. The bath helped with that particular pain.

Uid 289

As a schoolkid and subsequently as a student, there was always great anticipation about all the things I would do ‘in the holidays’. As an academic I still have the same feeling. Regardless of what my mum – and many others – think, of course, the freedom of the summer vacation is not the opportunity to do nothing, but rather the opportunity to do all the things that there is not enough time for during term – writing papers, and research proposals, perhaps even doing some research. School holidays often did not live up to their promise, and neither do my summer vacations now. Somehow those weeks are never as empty as I expect. Today was an example.

I arrived and had time to answer a few emails. Then one of my MSc students arrived for a project supervision. He is a very keen and enthusiastic student – but he needs a lot of support. He is (finally) making some progress. I usually allocate 45 minutes for a supervision, but this one spilled over into an hour and a quarter.

Then time for a few more emails.

I usually have lunch with my two research students once a week. Today neither of them is available, but I decide to have a proper break and go and eat in the cafe on my own. I take one of their theses with me, though, and read it over lunch.

I continue reading that back in my office until another MSc student arrives for a project supervision. We have some practical work to try out – and so this one over-runs more than an hour too.

I am also trying to finish a paper. It has been provisionally accepted by a journal, but there is a long list of suggested improvements. My co-author is (genuinely) even busier than I, so I am trying to get on with them. There is no stated deadline, but if I can get it to them by yesterday, it has a good chance of getting into the next issue. I do not think it is a ‘REF-able’ journal, but I think it is worthwhile all the same. It has been rejected twice already, so eventually it will be perfect and published. Of course, I have to suppress the assumption that the referees are idiots and if they did not understand a point we had specifically made, then it is our fault, and I need to clarify.

I cannot spend the rest of the day on that. MSc projects are not handed in until September, but as Project Marking Coordinator, there is work to be done now. I have been sent two lists of students expected to hand in – and (surprise) they are not the same, so I spend some time trying to identify the differences, and then pass the buck to someone else who should have access to the full information to sort out the anomalies.

It is Friday. The department is quiet. I would be tempted to give up and start the weekend early. However, I have agreed to meet a friend on the way home, and he’s not available until 6, so I am tied to my desk until then.

Eventually I leave with some relief. That thesis is in my bag as I’ll have to read it before our supervision on Monday.

I stopped following one of my colleagues on Twitter because he only seems to ever tweet about how busy he is and how many things he has to do. Apart from the obvious response that if he spent less time on Twitter he'd have more time to do the other stuff, it got boring. There is probably a correlation for many academics between hours worked and seniority, but there is also a virility culture: 'I am so busy and much busier than all of you' and it's easy to slip into. Yes, I have a long list of things to do - even in the 'vacation', but I am not under real pressure; most of it will wait until I'm ready. Aside from an hour on that thesis, I am having a weekend off.

Uid 291

Fridays are always late-start days after the TaiChi class, made worse

this week as just as I was leaving the office a security man appeared

with the news that the power was going off in the building in a sort

while. It turned out later that this was due to flooding of the

substation from a swimming pool, but at the time it was suggested that

it was planned and no one had told us. I powered off machines under

my control and alerted support.

So when I did manage to wake the first task was to see if the system

was alive. The support guy had done a magnificent job in getting all

back by 09:30 -- even better as he is alone at present with the other

post currently unfilled. As we say, the best system support is the

support you do not see.

Of course there is a bad side of being back on the 'net; the spam

starts again.

My sister phoned about the sale of our parents' house which looks as

if it will complete while I am on holiday. Just more stuff to

organise.

In the mail i handle in the morning is one from my personal student who

managed to fail 6 out of 10 courses in year 1, which included

programming, software engineering and computer architecture. My

advice is that he is in the wrong subject. He is a nice enough guy,

enthusiastic and engaged, but he seems to have no feeling for

computers. I really find this odd as he has mathematical talents, and

to me computing is the an easy subset. I suppose yet again i find I

am abnormal.

I am trying to write a research proposal for a colleague. This

involves attempting to determine the pay rates for research staff.

This used to be easy -- there were fixed points on the scale for which

one asked but now it seems fluid, and rather secret. I deal with

e-mail responses to my inquires yesterday.

And so to 11am and breakfast.

After food I investigate how to improve my home network -- there is a

wireless dead-spot in the bedroom where my wife uses her android

device. Think I find a solution, but e-mail the manufactures help-desk

to clarify the Linux aspects.

Last Wednesday I had a little progress in contacting eduroam, so

incorporate the configuration into my laptop. Pity it does not

actually allow me to connect -- no DHCP lease available. Also shame I

cannot test from home where I still am.

About this time I remembered my dream of last night -- I was lecturing

to a large class of computing students, and was explaining that

programming is easy and not magic. They looked skeptical.... I

assume that my concerns with the personal student (above) had

overflowed into the dreams. It is very rare that teaching affect my

sleep -- programming bugs frequently!

I decide that definitely the departmental seminar this afternoon was

not worth the cycle ride. I like computing seminars and enjoy

learning about new aspects, but biology, management science and

psychology leave me cold. I use the saved time to shred some

examination material that really should not just go into recycling.

After a somewhat late lunch I start thinking about the poster I am to

give at a conference in August. poster-writing is not a favourite

activity of mine, and after some work I realise that it is an A2

poster, which is very small as I need to display some musical score as

well as code. Wonder about using 4 simple A4 sheets with different

aspects and cardboard arrows between. Mail my co-authors about this

idea, knowing that one is on holiday in France until the conference,

one is in Salt Lake City for a conference, and the fourth is

recovering from the award oh a PhD. Still I do get a response from

Salt Lake. The rest of the day is spent ensuring that if I cannot

show the work on the poster I can demonstrate it on the laptop withy

headphones. More work is needed on the GUI, and I correct some errors

and clue up others for consideration.

Supper late as so often. It was 18:30 when I was a RO, then 19:00 to

allow teaching 17:30-18:30. Drifted to 19:30 when I was first a

professor. Now it is usually later than 20:30. Compared with the

recent national survey that supper was before 18:00 again I am out of

line.

Uid 296

On annual leave.

Had a really nice day, but up early and then food shopping. Then a lovely morning drove to a nearby town and had a leisurely coffee and croissant while reading a book before having a relaxing back massage and facial. The sun was shining and everything was really relaxed (with two weeks leave to look forward to). After some gentle shopping drove home and sat in the garden and read some more of my book whilst having lunch. The rest of the day carried on in the same vein and I didn't even check my e-mails (leaving that until tomorrow!!)

Uid 301

Teaching at an international summer school in Asia for a few weeks. A chance to travel, experience another country and earn some much needed extra cash in the process.

Another reason for 'getting away from it all' for a few weeks, is to catch up on research and writing papers that are long overdue. However, I still have post-grad students to support back in the UK and a distance program to deliver in the USA at the same time. The wonders of the internet make all this possible, but it also means that I never truly get away from any of it and I'm continually distracted by the tyranny of the trivial (otherwise known as e-mail).

If the mantra of the estate agent is 'Location, location, location', then that of the overloaded academic must be 'Prioritise, prioritise, prioritise' - I just wish I could put it into action more effectively.

The day starts out waking up too early, to face the heat and humidity of the day. Lecture to keen and bright international students from 9am-noon. As they have paid handsomely to be here and have travelled half way round the globe, they turn up on time everyday and are engaged - How novel! But when I teach the same course at my 'home' university, it's a struggle to get engagement. Why is that, when most of my students there are also international and paying a lot of money? Is it the student 'culture' in the UK?

The afternoon is taken up with catching up on e-mails and updating lecture materials for next week. I finally get to look at some of the research work I need to do by the evening. The impression that most people have of academics is that the summer is one long, lazy aestivation. For me it’s the busiest time of the year as I try to get to all the things I didn’t do during last term and know I need to complete before September comes and teaching consumes me once more. About 90% of my work is stuff I voluntarily took on, so I can hardly complain about the workload. I love the work, but I really must learn to say ‘No’ occasionally.

Uid 310

15.7.11

What a good day. Beautiful, sunny and hot.

All the undergraduates have taken off for the summer except a few who are keen to start their final year projects. The exam board is over with a really good set of final year results. Post graduate students are getting on with their studies, producing papers and collecting data. And I got 2 emails to say papers have been accepted. Where is the big black cloud I wonder?

Lunch time was spent at a celebration at a local school which provides placements for our students. They just got in under the wire to have Building Schools for the Future funding and the refurbishment is complete and looks great. Met the local MP, and a number of the great and good from the local area, which is always useful networking. But the best thing was the children, who were ‘student ambassadors’ proudly showing us around their new domain.

It is a real privilege to be able to manage ones own time and, after the frenetic rush of the exam period, to have some time for celebrations, informal meetings, writing, planning for the new academic year and reflection. Even my annual appraisal seems to have gone well this year.

Did the final corrections to another paper, and sent it off to my co-authors for agreement, then decided that the sun was too good to waste, so early home.

Uid 314

not a great day.

8am crawled up

9am got daughter to school I think.

9am went walking - frost around for most of the walk

10am-12pm achieved very little

12-1pm, got into work eventually, missed research meeting, but paper to be discussed was boring...

1-3pm avoid doing work thanks to the internet.

3-5pm talk to graduate student about research

over the weekend:

complete some of the work I avoided on friday

- read 70 page phd proposal from another grad student

- read draft of paper by another grade student

- check final thesis post corrections for which I was internal examiner

so: yep, it's great being an academic.

you can avoid work - and then trash your weekend catching up

Uid 319

Another year gone and some good students graduated, some whom I am proud to have been able to help.

Feeling that summer malaise though, can't seem to do anything.

The usual attempts at re-organising things are under way but nobody really seems to have taken in what is going to happen in 2012 and they seem genuinely unprepared for what this new regime is going to be like. If there are any students at all. (But many colleagues regard students as a pest that get in the way of their research of course)

Uid 325

Friday. Met with my MSc student (slow progress). Met with my PhD student (adequate progress, some success in getting stuff published). Met with another MSc student (common, finish and submit already!). Met with my Honours student (good job! I am impressed). Did lots of teaching prep to clear up time for research in the next week (i.e. preparing assignments and tutorial handouts early etc).

Uid 333

As this was the first week free of teaching, examining, and university admin duties, I had scheduled it as a light work week, for professional development stuff, reading, etc. In fact, I had spent the whole week feeling so exhausted that rather than a relaxing week of reading, it had turned into something more like a period of convalescence...

Got up early and cleared my email for a couple of hours, in combination with checking out the latest #hackgate revelations on Twitter. My fears and frustrations with the current government's HE policy have been transformed this week into a vague hope that this all might get sticky enough to unseat them. Well, I can dream.

The rest of the morning was spent on chapters 7-8 of \_Teach Yourself Old English\_. I've been wanting to learn Old English properly for a while and was bought this book (and CD) two birthdays ago, since when it has sat temptingly on my shelf. Now I've allocated its 20 chapters to the first two weeks of a three week window between the end of term and going on a family holiday; the third week will be spent with Beowulf in the original (and possibly with the Heaney translation in parallel). This is not strictly related to any research project but is an important part of my general intellectual interests in language and literature before 1500. I am hoping that it will give me some ideas for my next book, since I'm feeling otherwise so drained by the quotidian round that I can't summon any up.

Lunch with an academic neighbour was followed by some free-form reading and, in the late afternoon, a game of tennis during which I attempted to put into practice the insights from the lesson I'd had yesterday. I managed one perfectly struck shot in a hour, which seemed an achievement. I like having taken up a difficult sport (real tennis, not lawn tennis) well after childhood; it reminds me what attempting difficult things for the first time is like and what rewards and frustrations effortful learning can afford. Compared to real tennis, Old English is child's play.

A light supper and then some nice gewurztraminer with another academic neighbour (one long retired) was followed by watching the first night of the proms on the telly. As is the fashion for those on twitter, this was watched in combination with following (and contributing to) the twitter feed about it, making it a multiscreen, multimedia, and interactive, social event. No more passive telly watching for the Web 2.0 generation! As a result of my opinionated tweets I picked up a few extra classical music enthusiasts as followers before retiring gratefully to bed.

Uid 335

This entry is really to summarise where I am now, and what's brought me here.

It's been the hardest year of my life, but very productive - so much so that I haven't kept up with these surveys!

This week I finish working at my current university, to start work at another. This is a big change for me and my new wife - moving across the country.

I'm moving to a very different institution, and leaving my current institution seems more right than ever before. Everyone is stressed out and miserable, courses and student numbers are mounting, and workload allocations shrinking so more can be piled on in the pursuit of financial efficiencies.

Even though this is my final week, and we're in the Summer, I've only just finished teaching (my course continues after I leave) and there's still marking to do.

Despite it all, I'll miss many of my colleagues. A complete geographical change of this nature is difficult, but really exciting. No holiday at all this year - as soon as I start at the new place, I'll have to start working on courses, but a change is as good as a rest!

Uid 343

Today is my wife’s wedding anniversary and, by a curious coincidence, it is mine as well. This year neither of us forgot the occasion.

We are in the middle of a week’s holiday in the Scottish Highlands, staying in a bunkhouse attached to a remote hotel. The forecast is not particularly good, but we decide to go on a walk over a couple of nearby Munros (Scottish hills over 3,000ft high). When we set out the tops are in cloud, but on reaching the first summit it magically clears with views across the Northwest Highlands that improve as the day goes on. We’ve plenty of time to relax and admire the scenery from the tops. We don’t meet anyone else all day and have the hills to ourselves, so we have some fun on the steep descent and are back in time for a cream tea at the hotel.

Unfortunately (?) the hotel has wi-fi, so I spend the early evening catching up on my email. I shouldn’t really be dealing with work email on holiday, but if I don’t the backlog will hit me once I get back to the department.

We then have an excellent celebratory dinner in the hotel – these traditional highland hotels have a unique ambiance and serve excellent Scottish food – even the wood pigeon contains some lead shot to confirm its authenticity!

Uid 347

Taking an annual leave today after returning at midnight from a conference, with a friend and colleague from another university coming back with me to stay for the weekend. Inevitably work and non-work fluidly merges into one - as we share stories about our writing projects, the latest pressures of academic life, and discover our sons are both playing at the same music festival later in the summer - whilst we hike along the coastal path. My student daughter is impressed at my friend's academic output in equal measure with her tips for accessorising the new dress my non-dressy daughter has just bought for a special event.

Uid 348

4.00 Wake in panic. I'm due to go on leave tomorrow and have so much to do. Get up and mark a draft essay resubmission and write up notes from moderation meeting yesterday.

7.00 In office and spend an hour organising essays (1000 of them) as we no longer have any admin support. Am fed up about leave situation - have three weeks due to me over and above what I'm about to have that I can't take.

8.00 - 1.00

Working on new module with colleague. A good, stimulating session but emails keep pinging in and students are still coming in to collect failed coursework so we are constantly interrupted. A shame - we work well together and have done for many years and are much enjoying ourselves - when we can get to it!

Afternoon

A myriad of things. Rather too much to do with faulty new tables procured for our teachign rooms that are breaking at an alarmign rate. Then there's negotiating between our cleaner and the staff of the language school about what constitutes reasonable clearing up. An academic's job is ever expanding...

Time to go. I am taking the timetables and staff workloads with me as I just haven't got to them. I'm sure my mum and husband will enjoy helping me with them whilst on holiday...

Uid 352

Spent all day cleaning my office (organising papers and files, labelling files, clearing off my desk and table) so that I can leave on vacation with last year behind and arrive back in August ready to take on the new semester.

It feels really good to have that organised, clean space in my mind while I'm away.

Uid 362

So, we've had the graduation ceremony (and it was really great to see students who I've taught for the last two years come up to shake the hand of the Vice-Chancellor) and so now, in theory, I should be planning for the next academic year. But I'm not sure I'll have a job next year yet. So what do I do about preparation? Do I prepare in the hope that I'm going to be re-appointed but take the risk that the work will not be needed or do I wait to see? Hard-headed logic suggests the latter course but then, if I am re-appointed, I won't be sufficiently prepared (and I know there's 7 new lectures to write). So I've adopted the former approach, keeping my fingers crossed at the same time. It also seems to be the season of references - two completed today (one for a former student who seems convinced that I supervised his dissertation - I didn't). I also spent a very satisfying 30 minutes sorting out my office and have managed to throw away a huge pile of out of date paperwork - it's very cathartic. In between worrying about the job, I'm also planning my summer holiday - 2 weeks in the sun with loads of 'fun' reading - bliss!

Uid 369

Got up early to get on with writing book proposal, and clearing email. I have an external examining day coming up next week too, so wanted to put in some time on that.

I took an hour and a half off in the late morning in order to go for a free scooter riding training session at a local motor-training school. It was brilliant, and I’ve now signed up for my CBT (tho I am still quite terrified!).

Afternoon was spent totally on the book proposal. I felt shattered by 6pm, as the energy to conceptualise and sell my still only partly written book is high level. Then a quick bath before going out to a ‘work’ dinner, where I drank a bit too much just to try to wind down.

Uid 370

I am exhausted. July is not meant to be this stressful. The goal for today was to keep an eye on summer research students A and B, and finish my dissertation (teaching in HE) because it is due on Monday at noon. I have done approximately 30 mins work on the disseration since 9am.

Students A and B kept popping in and out as expected, and extra trips to the lab were required as PhD student is away so more hands on supervision is required. That's fine, and I expected it. Another student popped in late morning to discuss some issues going on, which was quite a tiring conversation. I escaped for lunch (summer rules = having a lunch hour) and immediately on return to my office, found a stressful email. One of my courses had a very poor average mark and after our annual course review meeting earlier in the week (when the course leader was absent), it was quite clear that this was totally unacceptable and must be addressed. The meanacing 'or else' was implicit. The course leader is very difficult to deal with so I feel out on a limb with this one. I was half way through the response to stressful email when a colleage arrived. Colleage was applying for a job at this institution and was looking for some tips, which I happily provided for a little longer than I should have. I guess that's informal mentoring, but I think its important to share things that can help people.

I escaped for coffee with a colleage mid-afternoon to discuss our outreach project, a common teaching project and other common courses. I dropped of the exam scripts to the department office, having finished marking them yesterday - I also note that a resit paper will be required, as well as someone to chase up the missing course work.

After returning and finally finishing response to stressful email, and writting a response to email asking me to do more work (I said no! I'm learning, slowly!), summer student A appeared to discuss the successes of the day (success - yay!). Unfortunately then I discovered that summer student B's reaction was not set up correctly so have spent the last hour trying to fix it (student went home at lunch time) so as not to waste precious time. Its now 6.30ish on a Friday night and I'd normally be in the pub with colleagues. The final blow to a stressful week was getting reviewers comments back on a grant application and finding them contradictory and confusing. I understand that reading such things is similar to grieving - you go through stages of denial, anger and ultimately reach acceptance. I plan to deal with them on Tuesday, once the dissertation is done and I've moved past the point of crying at the sight of them. I will probably have to work this weekend. Its July. I shouldn't have to do this in July.

Uid 375

15.07.11

Another month, another strike; this time in tandem with the NUT. And that’s another day’s pay lost (with which I’m OK because I am a union member – BUT our university is one of a handful which deducts a 1/260th of our salary per strike day; other institutions deduct a smaller piece of the pie, at just 1/365th). So, what’s the message this sends out to us? Clearly we ‘don’t’ work evenings, weekends, or for 105 days out of very year! Extraordinary. If I want to keep my job (and there are redundancies going on in my university) then I need to keep utterly on top of the teaching and admin – which I do, and do well; but I also need to have ‘output’ in terms of publications. I cannot do all of that in 260 days a year. It starts to make the University look somewhat hypocritical, I think. I took leave last week so that I could do my own writing (I have a deadline fast approaching), and it felt good to be creative again. But as soon as I’m back, and the ‘out-of-office-autoreply’ has come down from my email account, I have to start being more accountable to the University. It’s hard. I’m tired. I get an immense feeling of hope (uncharacteristically, maybe?) when I look at my appointments diary for the remainder of July and for August, however: there \*are\* days when I can work on the book. The issue is to keep the momentum going. I had an annual review meeting with my Line Manager who wants my book for the REF but who doesn’t want to give me the time to write it. So, what happens? In scenario (a) I do not write the book and get ‘stuck’; or (b) I sacrifice my \*own\* time and energy and general health and get it all done.

Uid 379

Friday is not a work day. Now that I got tenure I simply did not work (but I worked on Saturday :)) I went to Tel-Aviv to the pier eith husband and mom

Uid 390

I actually spent the day dreading the weekly group meeting (my group meeting) which I am meant to lead. It turns out that my students all seem to be quite keen, while I drag my feet.

To distract myself, I engaged in chasing up PGR applications, spending money (end of financial year oblige) and trying to keep my door shut despite the heat, in a bid to avoid being constantly interrupted by the interns and MSc students currently finishing their project.

I feel mostly angry by the relentlessness of it all, and the fact that there never is any free time to escape to do meaningful lab or field work. A bit similar to having toddlers.