Time on Task

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Introduction

In this chapter, we aim to help students realize the need to determine and manage the way they spend their time. We provide guidelines on how faculty might help students to organize their tasks, estimate the time required to complete it, and balance academic needs with their personal lives.

What is it? The phrase "time on task" has traditionally referred to pedagogy, as in, "Faculty provide focused time for students to practice skills they are acquiring, through assignments in class, with the intention that time on task is critical to learning. Faculty may also help student understand that practice is critical to learning a new skill."

In this chapter, we take a broader view of time on task as time management and productivity. The core idea is to encourage the students to think of all their tasks that they engage in throughout the week such as: course work, outside work, hobbies, social time, personal time, and day-to-day chores. We would then periodically remind students to budget their time between these activities, taking care to estimate the time that each would require. The notion of productivity could be introduced where the goal is to get the maximum amount of work done in as little time as possible. We gently remind the students that planning their time is a key component in achieving this productivity.

Specifically with respect to the courses we teach, we would provide estimates on how much time each of the tasks we assign would take. Faculty have an obligation, particularly with novice students, to provide guidelines as to the number of "course credit workloads" that are expected on

average from students in their class. This information should be clearly stated in the course syllabus and explained at the beginning of the semester so that students understand the expectations for work in and out of the classroom. Below is a sample syllabus statement for a single credit course.

Syllabus statement

Course Credit Workload

[FOR A DIDACTIC CLASS] This [NUMBER OF CREDIT HOURS FOR COURSE]-credit course requires [NUMBER OF CREDIT HOURS FOR COURSE] hours of classroom or direct faculty instruction and [NUMBER OF CREDIT HOURS FOR COURSE X 2] hours of out-of-class student work each week for approximately 15 weeks. Out-of-class work may include but is not limited to: [REQUIRED READING, LIBRARY RESEARCH, STUDIO WORK, PRACTICA, INTERNSHIPS, WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS, AND STUDYING FOR QUIZZES AND EXAMS].

[FOR A LAB CLASS] This [NUMBER OF CREDIT HOURS FOR COURSE]-credit lab requires [REFER TO: http://www.lavc.edu/vccc/documents/carnegieunits.html] hours of direct faculty instruction and [REFER TO: http://www.lavc.edu/vccc/documents/carnegieunits.html] hours of out-of-class student work each week for approximately 15 weeks. Out-of-class work may include but is not limited to: [REQUIRED READING, LIBRARY RESEARCH, WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS, AND STUDYING FOR QUIZZES AND EXAMS].

EXAMPLE: 1 CREDIT COURSE

"This 1-credit course requires one hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and two hours of out-of-class student work each week for approximately 15 weeks. Out-of-class work may include but is not limited to: required reading, library research, written assignments, and studying for quizzes and exams."

EXAMPLE: LAB WITHOUT HOMEWORK

"This 1-credit lab requires three hours of direct faculty instruction for approximately 15 weeks."

EXAMPLE: LAB WITH HOMEWORK

"This 1-credit lab requires two hours of direct faculty instruction and one hour of out-of-class student work each week for approximately 15 weeks. Out-of-class work may include but is not limited to: required reading, library research, written assignments, and studying for quizzes and exams."

Tips on getting students to think about productivity

Many students have the notion that putting in large number of hours should automatically result in a better performance on the course. Quite often students cite the number of hours they have put in studying for the test or working on an assignment as justification for why they should be given a better grade. For example, pulling "all-nighters" are considered to be a badge of honor.

Students should be made to realize that rather than the number of hours spent on the task, the metric they should focus on is the percentage of task completed and the hourly productivity. Judging how well a metric is achieved depends on the ability to quantify it. Unfortunately, unlike the total number of hours spent which can easily be tracked with a wall clock, both percentages of tasks completed and hourly productivity are much harder to quantify. In what follows below is our view on how we can help students to quantify the two metrics.

With regard to percentage of tasks completed, students should be able to take their tasks, such as homework and studying for tests, and break it down into subcomponents. An estimate amount of the time required to complete the subtasks needs to be made to plan the total amount of time to be allocated to the task. The student should then keep track of the percentage of task completed in terms of the number of sub-tasks completed. Faculty could help students in this regard by organizing assignments into sub-assignments and by providing estimates of typical times taken to complete these.

In the simplest terms, productivity can be quantified by measuring the total number of sub-tasks done per unit of time (hours, days, weeks etc.) assuming that the individual's sub-tasks roughly take the same amount of work. The goal of the student should be to maximize the productivity by doing the tasks in the shortest time possible. One of the key requirements in achieving this goal is to start the tasks in a rested state of mind, keeping strict track of the time spent on the subject. This would involve the student immersing in a single task for sustained periods of, say, 30 to 50 minutes. To keep a good handle on the time spent, the start and stop time for each task could be maintained in a cloud based

spreadsheet (for example, Google Docs) that can be accessed anytime and anywhere. This would allow

the student to clearly see the number of hours spend on the task, calculate the productivity, and

compare their performance to the estimated time required for the task.

The embedded video provides shares additional experiences of one of the authors: