A familiar story or cause for reflection?

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It is a familiar story, at least it will be to those of us who have been working in higher education a few years. I thought I had done all the standard things; followed expert advice to get the task completed successfully by the deadline. I verbally explained the framework for the task, the expectations and criteria to achieve success well in advance of the submission date. I provided accompanying hand-outs and popped detailed guidance and relevant links onto *Blackboard* [1]. Individual and group meetings to discuss progress were offered, emails sent with regular reminders. But things are never quite that easy, the road to hell, as they say, is paved with the best of intentions.

The task was met by a range of very different responses. There was animated discussion and engagement, lots of indications that all would go well for some, indifference or resignation from others. Then there were the utilitarians, who just wanted to be told what to do to get by. Of course there were those who seemed to feel that the task had been designed for the sole purpose of making their life a misery. A number of opportunities for formative feedback were provided; plans and first drafts were compulsory. Everyone submitted a plan, unfortunately, when the drafts subsequently came in, many had shifted considerably from the plan and some no longer conformed to the expectation or published criteria. I thought that having a negotiated submission date for these would let people organise the work around other commitments; but almost all submitted their draft as close as conceivably possible before the final deadline.

Emails reminding people about deadlines were not, as a form of communication, an unqualified success. There were those who took an ostrich approach to them and then there were those who emailed back some time later at a point when my response needed to be almost instantaneous to be of any use. With others email

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[1] Blackboard is the University of Worcester's virtual learning environment.

communication was profuse but in the absence of any evidence of progress I somehow did not always feel entirely reassured by this. All was familiar, including a spate of urban rumours which suggested that only half of the task was required by the deadline, which gained credibility despite a mass of electronic information to the contrary.

The first drafts made for an interesting read. Presentation was innovative: so many different fonts in one document, so many varied referencing styles. The blank sheet of paper syndrome, that we all suffer from, had in some cases been combated by recourse to copying, pasting and editing from a previous task completed some years ago, or what seemed a reasonable recourse to plagiarism to save time. As ever, a little listening to what else was going on in people's lives indicated why this task was not necessarily their top priority. They had hundreds of other pressing demands upon them, some were struggling with illness, one accidentally spilt a cup of tea on their computer and destroyed all their work, while others had major personal problems.

As the final deadline approached, it became clear that some were in danger of not completing, extra reminders were sent and there were negotiations over extensions, weekend and late-night email support and emergency meetings to discuss how best to complete. In the end everyone just about completed very satisfactorily, near the vicinity of the deadline. One or two people realised that they could have done the task better and wanted to change their submission; many felt disappointed that undertaking this task, on top of other deadlines, had compromised the standard of their work.

It is, as I suggested, a familiar story, it could be the story of almost any module I have taught or book I have edited, but it is the story of completing course approval for Curriculum 13 in the Institute of Humanities and Creative Arts. Is there anything to be learned from this experience for our teaching practice? Perhaps, we are not so very different from our students; we all struggle with deadlines and competing pressures in our personal and working lives. Often we do not share the same sense of priorities as those who set us tasks.

E. P. Thompson in his seminal essay *Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism* (1967) suggested that students, the self-employed, and those in pre-industrial society do not work at steady rates, but, resisting the imposition of labour, invariably work in a frantic rush before a deadline. Many of our students may in the future find themselves working in a post-industrial world, as sub- contractors and self – employed or in workplaces where they struggle with multiple competing demands. They will need to learn to take responsibility for negotiating, setting and managing their own deadlines.

Given the similarities in practices and behaviour between staff and students I wonder whether others find our attempts to discipline students to comply with non-negotiable deadlines, and regular, steady, working hours fruitless and, perhaps, a tad hypocritical. If so what should we do about it? Perhaps we should reflect upon the culture, practices, processes and systems which we find enable us to perform at our best and seek to reproduce them when working with students. Arguably there would be little sign of draconian penalties for failure or missing a deadline but instead an environment in which there is negotiation, communication, support and the sense that someone will come to your aid if you fail.

References

Thompson, E. P: (1967) Time, Work-discipline and Industrial capitalism. *Past & Present, Vol.* 38(1) pp. 56–97.

Biography

Professor Maggie Andrews is a cultural historian with over twenty years' experience of teaching, research, and management, in higher, further, and adult education, across the subject areas of History, Media, and Cultural Studies. She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. She currently chairs the Institute of Humanities & Creative Arts' Quality Committee and is its Learning & Teaching Co-ordinator. Her research focuses on the social and cultural history of twentieth century Britain, and the representation of that history within popular culture.