



Maintaining the Complex Personal and Professional Elements of Our Lives in Academe

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Abstract: This reflective essay offers several practical suggestions for scholars and professionals who are looking for ways to sustain abundant personal and professional lives in a discipline that encourages workaholic tendencies and requires many to engage in hybrid working arrangements. We discuss the tensions experienced by many communication teacher-scholars in academe and how various types of boundaries can aid in the maintenance of rest and work.

Introduction

For communication students and faculty, staying connected with others in-person and online is an essential part of academic life. However, as researching and teaching in hybrid or online situations has become increasingly common (Almpanis & Joseph-Richard, 2022; Singh et al., 2022) and a *workaholic* lifestyle—one in which an individual’s time is largely consumed by work and/or work-related tasks—continues to maintain a steady presence in the discipline (Kotini-Shah et al., 2021; Ugwu et al., 2023), balance can seem further and further out of one’s reach. How does one turn off their *work brain* if the only difference between work and one’s personal life is the closing of a laptop or moving from a desk to the kitchen table? Further, if one’s regular interactions with colleagues and students serve as the only guaranteed social encounters for the day, are such interactions not also fulfilling a personal life need through a work function? When the 9 to 5 workday is not enforced, how are working versus nonworking

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hours determined? For these reasons, academics must reassess the complex intertwinement between their careers and personal lives.

The physical and psychological boundaries between parts of our lives have become even more flexible and permeable in recent years, a merging that was exacerbated by advances in technology (Lavigne & Grawitch, 2023; McCloskey, 2016). As many have likely experienced firsthand, boundary theory suggests that conflict can happen when our boundaries shift or blur, such as when boundaries shift to accommodate a change in work-life balance (Park & Jex, 2011). Similarly, Kreiner et al. (2009) asserted that everyone must determine what balance is desired or needed for their specific situation and time. Thus, shifting one's perspective from *balancing* separate pieces on a scale to *maintaining* a unique, complex system may mitigate some boundary-related conflict and make it easier to navigate and sustain busy, intricate lives.

First, one of the most frequently identified agents of work-life boundary blurring is mobile technology because people seem to become endlessly accessible (Sayah, 2013). Despite the fact that mobile technologies can enhance workplace efficiency, technology can also introduce higher expectations regarding response time and intrusions of work-related conversations on family time (Dhillon & Lambertz-Berndt, 2023; Duxbury et al., 2013). Not only does this feeling of being *on academic call* make it difficult to separate oneself from work fully, but technology decreases one's efficiency because it encourages multitasking, which increases stress levels. Hence, one must set specific times (e.g., only between 9:00 and 11:00 a.m. or nothing after 7:00 p.m.) when it is appropriate to attend to work-related calls and messages and nonwork-related communication, even if both kinds of messages are arriving in one's inbox at all hours. Utilizing different devices to establish a greater separation between different sources of messages (e.g., no email on one's phone) may help with maintenance as well (Fleck et al., 2015). Decide what technology boundaries work best and try to maintain them; apply the same mindset to respecting others' working hours and offline periods too, including those of your students.

Second, taking the time to perform tasks that are necessary to keep one's body and mind healthy is essential for all areas of life. Though one may find it tempting to sit and work through a mealtime to beat writer's block, eating regularly and taking breaks from sitting at the desk can do wonders for one's health. Prolonged sitting has been shown to have long-term negative effects on functions such as circulation (Dunstan et al., 2012), and skipping meals—especially breakfast—has been linked to lower energy and low blood sugar (Goldschmidt, n.d.). Further, some mealtimes may serve as quality time with others, so whether it is with the coworker down the hall or with family, sharing a meal with someone else is a nice way to step away from screens and re-engage socially (Hartmann, n.d.). In the same vein, getting an appropriate amount of sleep will give one a chance to reset and prepare for whatever the day holds (Worley, 2018). There are specific apps that can help one balance out sleep, exercise, and food intake. Taking more mindful approaches to behaviors such as these may seem like an obvious suggestion, but they are often the first thing to go when the tasks on one's plate become overwhelming. Prioritizing them will help prevent burnout and unnecessary stress. Encourage your students to consider these same points.

Third, structure and planning can help eliminate some of the chaos of juggling too many things at once. Academic lives come with many time stamps and deadline. However, some tasks such as writing a book chapter that has been difficult to start, running errands, or setting up a coffee date with a friend seem to get lost in the shuffle because they do not come with externally imposed deadlines. Scholars

who study self-directed learning recommend “benchmarking,” which is establishing a timeline with checkpoints toward the completion of one’s own tasks (Robinson & Persky, 2020). When one creates benchmarks for personal and/or professional tasks, they can be held at equal importance (e.g., blocking off time to celebrate a family member’s birthday would be maintained at the same level of importance as time blocked off for an advising meeting). It is important to schedule *me* time into one’s schedule, as sustaining balance plays a significant role in the performance of effective relational maintenance behaviors as well as relational and job satisfaction (Dhillon & Lambertz-Berndt, 2023). The authors can attest that building structure into seemingly nebulous time will ultimately result in more efficiency, more purposeful time with the people in one’s life, and intentional rest. For those practicing communication pedagogy, the products of such rest will encourage a more engaged, energetic classroom presence in the long run.

By making conscious decisions about when to plug in, resisting the urge to put productivity over wellness, and using time management tools to build structure into all areas of one’s busy life, some of the stress and burnout that can be caused by low work-life maintenance can be eliminated. Demonstrating work-life maintenance behaviors and being transparent about what one needs can also be a form of allyship for one’s colleagues. By taking care of oneself, it becomes easier to enter the classroom with energy, be accessible to one’s students and colleagues, and be present for loved ones.

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