Crux of Time Management for Students

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At the beginning of each academic session, I typically devote a class or two to share my tips on time management and personal productivity with newly admitted students at the Central University of Punjab. I believe this is a crucial first step for students, as the curriculum hardly contains any information on either. I also notice that an article on this important theme is altogether non-existent. In this write-up, some of the most important methods of time management and personal productivity are thoroughly reviewed before concluding with a few pedagogical suggestions for teachers to ensure that their students manage time efficiently and be more productive with their studies and research.

Prioritization

At the heart of time management lies prioritization of tasks, spending time on the right things and not meaninglessly meandering on things that come by [1, 2]. I have seen a number of students who study ‘very hard,’ yet their perseverance does not get translated to academic performance. Students are continuously bombarded with assignments, term papers, quizzes, class tests, etc., to such an extent that they – those who do not manage their time wisely – hardly find any time for enjoyment. Having free time when you do nothing but enjoy, (for example, curl up in your bed on weekends reading a good book), is of paramount importance to personal productivity, as it aids in getting rid of stress levels, and boosts creativity. To find free time, students need to spend their time *smartly* rather than *hardly*. For prioritization, we need to differentiate between tasks that are important and those that are urgent, as originally conceived by Dwight Eisenhower, 34th US President, who once famously stated: “What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important.” He came up with a matrix, now commonly referred to as the ‘Eisenhower

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matrix’ for prioritization of tasks, as given in Figure 1. The matrix is divided into four quadrants, and these are explained below:

1. Tasks that are urgent and important: For example, a house fire, emergency beeps from lab equipments (such as autoclaves, centrifuges, etc.), school term paper deadline, household chores, etc., be immediately attempted. But most of these tasks can be avoided with a bit of planning and organization. For example, take precautions to prevent a fire, work on term papers regularly to complete them well in advance, and follow a weekly schedule for doing household chores. Spend as little time as possible.

2. Important, but not urgent tasks: These are the most important of all on which ideally the person may try to invest most of the time. For example, weekly and long-term planning, studying, developing a skill, reading books, writing a book, performing a scientific experiment, careful analysis of the experiments, writing a manuscript, etc., be attempted with a deadline. If you can do it in 2 minutes, just do it (do not schedule) – for example, reviewing five Spanish flashcards, or learning one Japanese kanji character. If it takes more than 2 minutes (or if you have a more urgent thing to do), schedule it. Complete these important tasks before they becomes urgent as well, and move to quadrant 1. Spend most of your time on this.

3. Urgent, but not important tasks: Some examples are help