

Description

A Different Time

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Balancing study, placements and general life can be tricky for student midwives at the best of times. A pandemic is not

the best of times. Here, I reflect upon writing my dissertation during lockdown whilst simultaneously managing the learning needs of three children and explore how I used the skills I developed during earlier years of the course (and during a previous degree) to get me through.

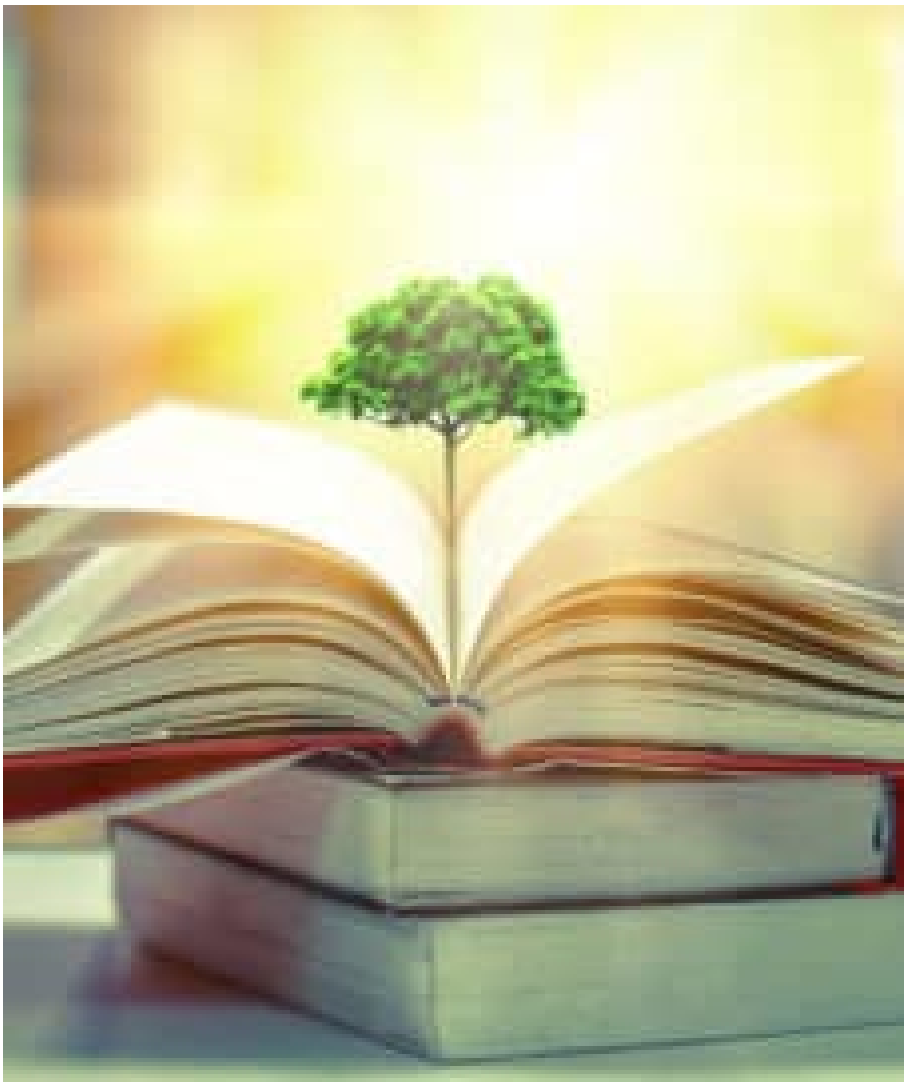
A Different Time



I am a mature student. Considering that any student over the age of 21 is categorised as ‘mature’, it is fair to say that, alongside the 10% of mature learners that also begin their courses after the age of 40 — I am a VERY mature student.[1] I am also undertaking undergraduate education for the second time, having completed my first degree during the nineties, which means that my study skills developed in a time before internet use was ubiquitous. Few students even had their own laptops back then. Essays would be prepared in university computer suites that could be accessed 24-7 with a university swipe card. There was always considerable camaraderie to be found amongst students consuming their body weight in caffeine, typing frenetically at 3 am in the morning and praying that the printers would be working (online submission wasn’t a thing back then!).

I lived on campus only a 2-minute walk away from the library. When deadlines were looming, it became my home from home. Like many students, I would barricade myself into a cubicle for hours at a time, with lots of pens (something which prepared me for the incessant need for black pens in midwifery!), paper and surrounded by the textbooks and journals needed to complete my assignment. Effective study skills, for me, grew out of having a designated space to work, plenty of time, and calm quietness which fostered concentration and industriousness.

Give and Take



Fast forward twenty years (and three children later) to September 2017. I am studying midwifery at my local university, an hour's commute from the village I live in. The study skills that I developed during my first degree remain useful but so much has changed, both within academia and within my own life. I can't take myself to the library for twenty hours to work uninterrupted, not when my childcare provider closes at 18:00 and I have to navigate city centre gridlock to reach it! There's less rifling back and forwards through paper textbooks to find the perfect phrase that I know I read three hours ago. Instead, I have learnt how to use the search function on online PDFs, and my university's online study skills guides show me how to cite the articles I now read from a screen. When I settle down to work, it's at a desk at home and I negotiate time slots for its use with a teenager who needs it to complete their GCSE science homework, or my younger child who has just remembered that they have 20 spellings to learn for tomorrow. There's a bit of give and take and somehow it all comes together, I find a rhythm that works for me and I manage to complete my assignments successfully.

Suddenly, faster than I ever imagined, I am in my third year and the big assignment — my dissertation (or 'project plan' as my university calls it) is looming. Preparation begins in September with a planned submission date in May. We are encouraged to choose our topics early and to start gathering relevant information. This proved to be far more valuable advice than anyone could have foreseen when, in March 2020, COVID-19 caused huge upheaval for us all. The library closed and our campus mostly shut down. I was on placement when this happened so it's a matter of luck really, that I had visited the library during our last study day on campus to gather the books I thought I might need. Our library has an excellent collection of e-books, but I'm still old fashioned enough to prefer paper copies of texts where possible. Or maybe I am not old fashioned, maybe my brain just processes information gathered from a paper source better than information learnt from a screen. Interestingly, an experiment to assess this phenomenon found that when screen learning is self-directed, it is less effective than personal study using paper texts.[2]

Splitting My Focus



We were all a bit flustered, but as a cohort, we were in it together (albeit socially distanced) just as we had been from the start. I was unable to opt into the paid placement which became the "new normal" for 2nd and 3rd year students, so my focus was solely upon my academic work. I allowed myself to imagine that it would be easier not to have to split my focus between study and placement, and conveniently ignored the fact that I was actually splitting my focus between my degree and supporting the home schooling of an 11-year old, a 15-year old and a 17-year old. It turned out not to be easy at all. The desk I mentioned earlier had never been in higher demand, our internet bandwidth creaked under the strain of providing online learning for four, sometimes five, people. I was anxious about the pandemic, about the health of people I care about, about what this all meant for my children and for my degree. I was not alone in this. A longitudinal study published in The Lancet found that, by April 2020, most peoples' mental health had deteriorated compared to pre-COVID levels.[3] A known side effect of anxiety is a deterioration in cognitive flexibility and the ability to make decisions.[4] For me, this manifested as an inability to settle into my work. The cliché about 'blood, sweat and tears' had never been truer, as I found myself biting my lip and crying with frustration at the fact that it took me fifty minutes to write a sentence, only to find myself deleting it because it just wasn't right. My sleep pattern became disrupted and reminded me of those feverish 3 am work sessions during my first degree, when I discovered that late, late nights were most productive for me.

Positive Feedback



I never completely found my groove. Progress remained painstakingly slow, but I felt passionate about my chosen topic and that gave me momentum. What I wrote about matters to me. I gave my inner perfectionist a stern talking to and learnt to accept that managing a paragraph in six hours is an accomplishment in this abnormal study environment. University were sympathetic and deadlines were extended if necessary. When I finally handed in my practice project, I didn't know if it was the best work I'd ever produced, but it was definitely the best it could be under the circumstances. When my work was returned, I was delightedly shocked to discover that it was actually one of the highest marks I've ever had and my feedback was extremely positive. Student midwives treasure good feedback. A course this intense is inevitably made up of highs and lows, so having positive comments to carry us through the tough times is invaluable. I read my feedback more than once and then turned my attention to my final piece of academic work, knowing that, whilst studying well in these strange and 'interesting' times isn't easy, it is possible after all.

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