

In the Classroom 64
Reviewing the Book:
The Productive Online and Offline Professor

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thanks ever so much for taking time to listen to this podcast. I really appreciate it. I know you could be doing other things, but you're hanging out and listening to me and I am really grateful. How are you guys doing with this working from remote thing? From my perspective, I see faculty seem to be getting into the groove. I'm getting less questions, which means they're getting comfortable. They're finding their routine and things are moving along pretty well from what I can see.

I'm glad to hear that but I know this working remotely is a new thing for folks and that's why I'm really excited to talk about this new book. This week I'm going to talk about Bonni Stachowiak's new book, *The Productive Online and Offline Professor*. It is certainly a book that I would recommend for others. It's packed full of great tips and strategies for getting more time in your life and I think it's really applicable, especially to this period of time where we have so many people going remote, going into this online world and trying to figure it out.

She outlines wonderful tips on how to make the most of being in the online world, what things that you should be focusing on and strategies for doing it easily and quickly. I have been a huge fan of Bonni Stachowiak's ever since I started listening to her podcast, *Teaching in Higher Ed*. If you have not listened to this podcast and you are an educator, you need to listen to this podcast. She brings on wonderful guests who share important educational strategies and a lot of these strategies focus on productivity, but also really focus on impact.

Now, Bonni and I, we seem to be cut from a similar piece of cloth because she's tapped into the same articles and books that I am and listening to the same thought leaders that I seem to be. This may be just coincidence or we're working on the same path. Both of us seem to be interested in how to make instruction more efficient and more impactful. How we can get students to really grasp the content that we're providing them.

When I heard she wrote a book on productivity, I knew I had to get my hands on it. After looking at the book, basically, if I were to write a book about productivity for educators, this is the book I would have written. She shares many of the same strategies that I use and the same strategies that I share with my faculty. Most recently at a faculty development day, I had an opportunity to talk about productivity and had a few sessions dealing with that, and these are some of the strategies that I shared. Let's dive into this book.

My first impression of this book is that it's a handbook, a guidebook. It reminded me of many of the books, handbooks that I had in the military. They were of a smaller size. This one happens to measure 5 by 7 and it has 270 pages in it. Each page has got gold on it and so that just reminded me of what the military put together, something that was very compact but full of energy in it. That's what Bonni has put together.

She arranged this book into five parts along with the introduction and conclusion, and each of these parts has little subsections in it, and each of those happen to vary in length. I have listened to Bonni speak on her podcast and when I was reading the book, it was like I was listening to her speak. It sounded like her. She has a very inviting conversational style to her writing and podcasting, and I enjoy listening to her. There's other podcasts that have lots of great content, but I just don't necessarily resonate with them.

She delivers it in a way that you can tell she loves what she does and this shows up in her book and it shows up in her podcast. This book is thoroughly documented. She readily admits that most of our ideas and strategies are not necessarily hers, but these ideas, she has made her own and this is how I operate. I do a lot of reading and if you look in the show notes, I'm going to list a lot of books that are relevant to this particular podcast episode because they're relevant to what is being shared by Bonni.

Like her, it's through this reading I find a lot of great ideas and I try new ideas and some of them I keep and some of them I discard. In this book, these are ideas that Bonni has found to help her and she wants to be able to share them with others. What's this book about? In her introduction, she outlined her purpose and basically it's a guide for online instructors who wish to be more productive. She emphasized that the purpose of being productive was in her words, so we can be more fully present in our teaching and other parts of our lives.

This is not about becoming robotic and increase in productivity so we can create more widgets and do things faster and increase our workload, but rather this is in line with what Michael Hyatt says in his book, *Free To Focus* is you are implementing productivity so you can get back more time so you can use that time in a more quality way. Not that you're trying to increase quantity, but you want to increase quality.

This is what I have found with the productivity methods that I have weaved into my work life and into my personal life that I can multiply my efforts and serve more people. I can provide better quality in what I do. With over a hundred strategies outlined in this book, Bonni wants educators to develop trustworthy systems so that the educators can maintain a high level of trust. What does this mean? Basically, we can be overwhelmed by all the things that we have to do and things drop through the crack.

Where I work, this was happening on a pretty regular basis that things were just falling through the crack and it required going in and putting systems in place so we can try to prevent things falling through the cracks. Unfortunately, they cut the number of people that I have, they cut the number of hours that I'm working and so, I have to find more efficiencies because somethings are in fact falling through the crack and I have to prevent those.

I am really confident that if we were working under the old model that we had, it would be a disaster right now. I'm a, like I said, a huge fan of productivity strategies and building these digital systems and finding a system that works for you. Bonni, she leans a lot on digital systems and I'm a fan of that, I know that's important. She really stresses, you can have analog systems, it's just a matter of having a system that works for you.

What's in this book? I said that there was five parts and these parts are translating intention to action, facilitating communication, finding, curating and sharing knowledge, leveraging technology towards greater productivity and keeping current. Those are the five sections. Let's take a peek at each of these sections. The first one is translating intention to action. She starts out by really focusing on setting and achieving goals. As educators, we have goals for our classes, committees, and tenures. With so much to do we need systems to help us achieve our goals.

She talks about goal setting. Bonni approaches it in much the same way I do. That we take these really long-term goals, these really big goals and start breaking them into manageable pieces. Now she talks about different types of goals, but really for me, I look at a goal as a goal and so I try to figure out how to break it up. I am a fan of the 12-week year and in educational terms, this is basically breaking it into each of the semesters for the three parts of the year, and from there it's breaking it further down into two-week sprints.

Two weeks sprints, this comes from a scrum methodology where you decide over the course of two weeks, what are the things that you're going to knock out in those two weeks and that becomes your priority for that two-week period. Then at the end of two weeks, you reassess, you build out another list and you knock it out. All of that is really focused on what you want to achieve during that 12 weeks.

Also within this, she did a great recap of David Allen's, get things done strategy. Really the purpose of that is to get away from email as a to-do list and using task managers as a proper to-do list. The strategies she talked about are very much in line about everything that I've come to learn about to-do list and how to use them. What you want to do is in the course of your week you decide, part of that two-week sprint that you decide what are the three to five things that I want to ensure that I accomplish during this particular week.

You'll have anywhere from 6 to 10 items across your two-week sprint. Then each day you identify three to five things to say it's going to be a productive day that you have accomplished and your to-do list may be crazy. My to-do list is crazy, but what I do is every day I use a program called the Sauna and I identify the three to five things that I want to get done that particular day and then I get them done.

Now, if I get those done, yes, I'll knock off some others if I possibly can. One way to achieve this is managing your calendar which Bonni also talked about. A calendar, if you want to get more time in your life, you need to be more disciplined on your calendar. You need to block off periods of time both during your work and your personal life where you're going to focus on those particular things.

If you want to have more quality time with your family, block it off, if you want to work on that writing project, block it off, become a master of your calendar. Otherwise, somebody else will take over your calendar. I would say in line with this is using a technique called the Pomodoro Technique, which is basically a kitchen timer and it helps you focus for that period of time and removing distractions from what you're going to do. That was all in this first section.

The second section is facilitating communication. What we have learned from the research is if we have meaningful conversations with students, this will lead to more student success and engagement. In order to do that, we need to be more effective in how we communicate. As Bonni noted, communication can be a real-time suck if you do it one-on-one, not every conversation has to be one-on-one.

What you can do is utilize a strategy, having a discussion forum for Q&A that is part of your class where all students get in there and you can answer the question once and everybody gets the answer. That is a strategy that she certainly recommended. One of the big surprises is using Slack in the classroom. I'm a huge fan of Slack. Over the course of time, I've helped the faculty start using cloud computing and using Zoom as a way to have meetings and be more efficient and more productive there.

The last holdout that I have that I want to implement is the use of Slack. I'll just keep knocking on that door, hopefully, we'll get folks to start using it but it is definitely a force multiplier and really cuts down on unnecessarily email. Speaking of email, she talked about how to be more productive with email, for example, creating a collection of email templates. This is something I certainly do for my class, especially classes I've taught over and over. I have a folder that I've set up with emails for summary conversations that I have each week.

There's certain points that I want to emphasize, regardless of which class it is and so I have those email templates all lined out, but then I will personalize it for that particular class and add points that are relative to that class. It's a great starting point, it saves me a crazy amount of time and this is something that Bonni also recognized and wanted to make sure that she shared that.

One of the other strategies is, if you get questions in your class, this is considered a pinch point. This is an opportunity where you can go out and make improvements to your syllabus, to your assignments instructions, to your content to reduce that pinpoint. Anytime that you're receiving questions, take a moment to go in and improve your syllabus or course at that time. A tool that I have not used but she recommends is called remind. This is a strategy to keep students on track.

She also advocates for doing those reminders to remind students when assignments are coming up and reminding them for quizzes and pointing to resources. Students haven't necessarily become skilled at time management and so we can help them and coach them in how to get to the next level in that area.

The third section focus on finding, curating and sharing content or sharing knowledge. In this section, Bonni talked about developing personal learning networks and personal knowledge management systems. I am a huge fan of this. Matter of fact, my

dissertation is basically kind of a derivative of this and I focus on informal learning. What are those strategies that educators use to stay knowledgeable about teaching methods about their discipline and about the use of technology?

I research Extension educators about that, but I'm interested in this idea of lifelong learning. This is what she really tapped into. She talked a bit about Harold Jarche's personal knowledge management systems and kind of dove into this idea of seek, sense, share where you go out and find knowledge and try to make sense of that knowledge and then how to share it back out. She does a wonderful job in this, especially the sharing through her podcasts. It's absolutely top-notch. If I didn't mention that you should go listen to *Teaching in Higher Ed* podcast, you should do it.

The fourth section was leveraging technology towards greater productivity. This is really about using technology but also strategies to be more productive. She talked about batch processing, developing checklists, creating workflows and streamlining grading processes. These are all things, once again, that I do on a regular basis, batch processing. That's really about sitting down and focusing on one part of a task if you have to do a lot of tasks.

We often see this in grading, that you will sit down and grade all the multiple-choice or page one of a test sheet for each student and then you'll go to page two, and then you'll go to page three. That's batch processing, that you're focusing on one task at one time because it is just more efficient, other batch processing. If you're going to create a set of videos going out and writing all the scripts first, do that and then go ahead and do the recording and then sit down and do the editing and then go ahead and post those, right? That's all batch processing.

I do a lot of batch processing in my life. As far as checklists? Yes, I'm a huge fan of checklists. I also read the *Checklist Manifesto*, a wonderful book. In my previous career, the military, they were adamant about using checklists because they recognize it helped you perform whatever you were going to do with more accuracy and do it quicker. Probably as a minimum, you should have a checklist for your startup and shut down. The start of the term and when you're shutting the term down, definitely have checklists for that.

My team, we use checklists for term rollovers, when we have to add new classes to the learning management system and all the strategies that we go about doing that. Definitely, still using checklists to this day. Then also, Bonni talked about workflows. She uses forms and automation like IFTTT, If This Then That, to process the information she collects from the students. In my little department, we use forms because forms allow us to collect the essential information we need all at one time, which then we can deliver service just quicker and more accurately.

Once again, it's about getting all this stuff so you can go out and do your job fully at one time. Then she talked about text expanding. I also have used text expanders. Matter of fact, I use a program called PhraseExpress. I switched over to text expander because of the productivity show. They highlighted text expander all the time. Also, because of Bonni's podcast, *Teaching in Higher Ed*, I'm a huge fan. One grading

session alone saved me nine hours of work. If I had to type everything in from scratch, it saved me nine hours.

Basically, what a text expander does, is you type in a shortcode and it expands it into all this content that you have written. I use it on a daily basis for signature blocks because I have four or five different signature blocks but also in grading. If I'm grading the essay or paper, I have certain things that I may say over and over again. Well, I can rewrite new things for every student, but the odds are, they're not seeing the things I wrote for the other students so I've put it into my text expander and type a shortcode and bam, there it is, get that information out to students.

Which then leads us to the last section, keeping current. This is really focused both on your online classes but in your life. As far as the online classes and that's what I just emphasize, is if you want to keep your courses current and be able to roll them over with the fewest adjustments, some of the strategies she's recommended was make the courses date-free as possible. Rather than in every single narrative, mentioning when dates are, try to make it a little more generic so that it rolls over a lot easier.

There's certainly things that you have to update the dates, due dates, and things like that, but learning management systems typically have tools that will allow you to do that. The other thing is, when possible serve your content from the cloud. She mentioned Dropbox that she uses Dropbox. There was another program that I don't have on the tip of my tongue, but I'm a fan of Google Drive. The reason is, with one link in Google Drive, I can make an edit in that document and immediately, it's updated and all my courses. I'm a fan of that.

Also, at our campus, we're not allowed Dropbox so we have that. The idea is that you create one link and it should serve you over and over even after a course rollover. In order to find the right document at the right time, Bonni offered some strategies for naming folders and files and just as a way of being able to quickly find them. That was really the main content in the course or in the book. Like I said I'm a huge fan.

Some other things that were related to the book, throughout the book she encouraged dialogue. She wanted readers to participate with her. She used the hashtag that you can use on Twitter called #thriveonline. All one word. You can share different strategies that you have or comment on the strategies that she put in front of you.

The book is also supported by a website but when I went to the website, at least at the time of this podcast episode, it just really highlighted the book, but I'm confident that new things will be added as they're discovered and as they're shared. That's part of the book. Then finally she also included an appendix that is absolutely a treasure trove of useful resources and application. It covers each of the areas in the book and there's also some extra items.

There is also a couple of areas that were distractors for me but this was a great book. These couple detractors were small. In my case in the book, pages were slightly skewed so it was noticeable and it just marred something that was otherwise an exceptional product. Then as far as citation style, she used APA style. I'm a fan of APA for definitely journal articles but for a book, I found it a little distracting. I thought

Chicago would have been a better citation style but that's just preference. That's my preference.

The cool thing is you definitely know who she cited and why she cited him. There are a lot of great resources in that, the references that she provided. Final thoughts. Overall, I definitely think that all educators should benefit from reading *The Productive Online and Offline Professor*. Wonderful book. It's packed with solid strategies to get more time in your life. While you are going out to get this book, I'd like to encourage you to also pick up my book.