

Bonni: [00:00:00] Dr Robert Talbert talks about how to get more meaningful work done on today's episode of Teaching in Higher Ed.

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Bonni: [00:00:17] Welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. I'm Bonni Stachowiak and this is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to increase our personal productivity especially today so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

Bonni: [00:00:47] Today I am welcoming back to the show Dr. Robert Talbert. He's an associate professor and the mathematics department at Grande Valley State University in Michigan. As a professor he teaches courses mainly for computer scientists and he also teaches his department's online calculus course in the summertime. Robert welcome back to the show. Well it's very funny.

Bonni: [00:01:11] I know we both have been excited about this conversation since we both are practitioners of the Getting Things Done system. First off when did you start using Getting Things Done or when did you first get introduced to the book or the work.

Robert: [00:01:26] Oh my goodness while I can I can actually pinpoint the precise moment not when I started using getting things done but when I realized that I needed something like this and my wife was from my previous job a small liberal arts college I was just walking down the hallway in a small college. You see everybody in a sewing machine walking the other direction and just look at me and said so I'll see you too.

Robert: [00:01:48] And I just said You bet. And I had no idea what I was supposed to be seeing a router that I had had an appointment with them and I would eventually return to his office and kind of went from there but I realized

there was a chance encounter with the dean today which is no big deal if I blow it but there tomorrow could be something really really serious that I could just completely ruin my career with that for all I know.

Robert: [00:02:11] So I needed something other than what I had which was just letting stuff sit in my inbox all day long. I did some research about productivity and time management and so forth and I saw that a lot of nerd people in my discipline math computer science from gravitating towards.

Robert: [00:02:25] So they got GDG and started digging into this field that David Allen had written this book called Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress Free Productivity. And I picked it up and read it and it's really an overstatement to say that reading a book over the summer I guess was probably 2005. It's been a while. I've changed my life for the better in ways that most books do not. And ever since then I've been trying to hone my practice of this book. I can trace it back to about 10 11 years ago.

Bonni: [00:02:53] I'm going to be linking in the show notes which I'll be at teachinginhighered.com/120 to the revised Getting Things Done book. He revised it. David Allen is the author and he revised it in 2015. I've read both versions and like you Robert. I really got a lot out of the first one and I was able to have a friend of mine actually went to work for the David Allen Company.

Bonni: [00:03:18] And as they go through their extensive coaching training she was able to pick a couple of guinea pigs that she had to go in and essentially do their coaching that I remember what it costs for a day of getting things done coaching but let's just say it would be probably out of my price range.

Robert: [00:03:33] Absolutely.

Bonni: [00:03:34] Yeah that really helps me see where there were holes in the way that I had approached it to then but I want to recommend that people read the revised when my critique I think of the former version would be that it just seemed so deep and that you had to be doing every single piece to really be doing the practice and had a lot of heady stuff but maybe not as practical steps and I think they really shored that up with the new version.

Bonni: [00:04:01] And I know you'll be shoring it up for us a lot. Today we're going to be going through the five steps that and on their website I'll also be linking to these five steps. They describe this process as applying order to chaos which is exactly what you described.

Bonni: [00:04:17] And we start out with something called Capture and I want to mention that you and I are going to be going through all five steps but that there actually is an entire episode that my husband Dave and I recorded about our capture process as if anyone wants to go a little bit deeper than what you and I will have time for today because I'll say this especially for those of us that go from office to office working in home offices maybe work in a bar and then going from classroom to classroom.

Bonni: [00:04:43] You know this really does take on a whole new life. Then for those of us that are used to the traditional inbox that sits on our desk and there's only one of them. So what are some of the ways you think about when you talk about capture collecting What has your attention Robert.

Robert: [00:04:58] Well for me on what you say I mean I work in a lot of different environments and sometimes I'm working my office here in the Valley State University sometimes in the homes of homes on the road sometimes I'll be driving in my car between work and home and some idea will pop into my head and I don't capture it it's going to be gone. I don't trust myself to remember anything from one moment to the next anymore.

Robert: [00:05:20] So for me captured just means I need to have some way in any context then to grab ahold of anything that gets my attention if I feel like it's going to be something I want to keep. I need to go out and capture it and put it on for me sometimes in my office as simple as grabbing a post-it note writing it out of a post-it note and throwing it into a physical inbox that I have sitting here in front of me.

Robert: [00:05:43] I also use a tool called Todoist on my computer. The last time I was on that show that was my recommendation of the young was to do this and it has a like a quick capture feature where you just had a quick hockey and you can tighten what you need to know and saves a time If I am in the car. It means I pull out my phone and I tell Google to take a note for me. Google's got great voice integration where you can as told to take a note and hope that something good will keep for you.

Robert: [00:06:08] So for me capture is all about having the tools and 24/7 in any situation where something might come up that you want to keep to be able to keep that in a trusted system.

Bonni: [00:06:18] What about when a student comes up to you after a class you just got done teaching. And I don't know about you I sometimes even have lines of kids who are waiting to say something. What's your method of capturing after class. If that even happens to you as well.

Robert: [00:06:33] Usually that happens or it's during class even sometimes I almost never without my Mac book if I'm teaching so I will just when the students gone and almost hit my little hot key on to do list and type it in and some truncated form that I think I might be able to decipher later and just be sitting there todoist inbox the next time I get a chance to do.

Robert: [00:06:53] So or if I don't happen if I happen to have shut the lid on my Macbook and I don't even trust myself to remember the thing I'm trying to capture long enough to just write it down like maybe a 10 second process. But you know you can forget some of all just grab a sheet of paper or even turn around and run it on the white board and then get my computer up again and then capture it just some way somehow get it out of your brain. That's one of the big points about getting things done is getting things out of your brain and into a system so you don't have to think about it.

Bonni: [00:07:25] If someone started to try to practice GTD and they'd stop to after capture their life would probably be just as much if perhaps not even more chaotic. Would you agree?

Robert: [00:07:37] Absolutely. Because now you have all this stuff that you capture. It's an organization to process that. You don't know what it means. So you just have all these post-it notes. And to do items you just have longer to do lists and that sort of depressing and makes you not want to do anything with getting things done any more.

Bonni: [00:07:54] I think that's kind of with stickies. I tend to I still have stickies is that at both home office and work and they tend to doodle a lot. And actually some there's some literature out there that says doodling is a helpful thing but you know I get done and it's just a sticky note with a bunch of random things sometimes I'm just drawing something but sometimes it's words that are supposed to mean something.

Bonni: [00:08:14] So one of the things I think is really helpful with capture is to read or review for action. And we do that with our emails when I'm reading my emails I'm saying is there anything I need to do? Do? Do? Do? I ask myself that question with every e-mail.

Bonni: [00:08:28] And the same thing with the stickies so I need to be pretty prepared to just toss them. Another thing that I'll sometimes do because I can get sticky little sticky crazy is having some sort of way on our phone of capturing stickies.

Bonni: [00:08:42] Evernote is just one of many tools that has a real easy way of just capturing a sticky note it actually crops off the edges of the image and all you see in that note is the sticky and then it can be reviewed for action. The next step in the five steps going from order to chaos is clarifying and you started talk a little bit about this Robert. This is where we process what it means. Tell us a little bit about how you clarify.

Robert: [00:09:08] Well you can just take any inbox you wish. Give me your e-mail inbox or physical inbox. I'm sitting here right now at a pretty full physical inbox in my office and at some point if I want to be at peace with what's sitting here looking at me and my inbox I've got to go through each thing and ask myself what am I supposed to do with this.

Robert: [00:09:25] It's kind of like you just mentioned you know this is something that I even need and I'm around it all. Can I just toss it? Do I need to find away? Is it something that pertains to me at all and I need to to defer it?

Robert: [00:09:36] This is all about deciding, first of all, whether or not the thing in your inbox that you just capture is actionable in the first place. If it's not actionable then we have some choices. We could either trash it - if it is not actionable and it doesn't contain any information I want to keep, just get rid of it. Just delete it.

Robert: [00:09:53] For e-mails, particularly, I mean I don't I don't have any data on this but it seems like about 90 percent of the e-mails that I get in my inbox are not actionable. And of those 90 percent about half of them or just delete on site e-mails like yours nothing I don't have to do anything with those and there's nothing in there that pertains to anything. So just delete it. Just get rid of it - with confidence. Or maybe it's something it's not actionable but it might be someday.

Robert: [00:10:21] So then you can file this away or maybe it's just reference material or go to an email just now from a conference I want to be attending next month. It's not something I need to act on right now. It's just information

about the conference it's got my abstract number and so on and so forth so I want keep it.

Robert: [00:10:37] I don't want to trash it. Is that something you have to do anything with right now. So I need to have a place for that - I have to decide for it. But sometimes. Many times we have things that come into our inboxes whether it's physical or electronic but we do need to act on. Like I get an e-mail from a student asking a question.

Robert: [00:10:51] OK. I don't trash that obviously and I'm not going to just find a way I need to decide what I'm going to do. So that is an actionable I am I need to answer the student's question or if I get a second e-mail from this conference or was you asking me to facilitate a round table so that's not referenced information that's something I need to act upon and then I have to decide what is the what is the next physical thing that I can possibly do to act upon the thing that is actionable.

Robert: [00:11:19] So clarifying processing what something means is all about deciding. First of all whether it's actionable what to do with it if it isn't and then what to do with it if it is.

Bonni: [00:11:28] The next step is organized where we put it where it belongs we put action items on the right kind of list that we're going to regularly have come back into our attention span. And what is the way that you approach organizing.

Robert: [00:11:45] Yes I've played around with my system I'm sure you have to know that your system is kind of in a constant state of flux with the work where I am right now I'm pretty comfortable with so when it what I'm processing things out of my inboxes or something is obviously something so not actionable in trashiness or way or shredded or whatever something that's going to be sort of someday maybe kind of items not actionable now but it might be orbit's reference.

Robert: [00:12:09] I take it straight into Evernote for me is a great tool for saving all the stuff that you get in your inbox that isn't really actionable but you don't want to get rid of it either. It has many many strengths and one of its great strengths that it has a horrific search engine built into it even for things like If I scan a document from our department scanner or using my iPad it will digitize the text from that document. It is now searchable.

Robert: [00:12:38] So if I want to go in or you know like last night I was helping my son with his spelling words and I digitized that was that there was a paper item that came into my inbox the first day of school so I took it I scanned the trash the paper. I don't have the Evernote thing. I want to keep it. And so have I. But I didn't or was I just showed up and there was so that's just what I use for organizing sort of non actionable items things that are actionable.

Robert: [00:13:04] I sent them into Todoist. Todoist is a sort of task list making tool highly configurable can be organized into projects in some projects and meditated to it in terms of how much energy you got or really any kind of tagging system you want. And so my active projects with next actions and living to do as reference material lives in Evernote the trash lives on the trash. That's my organization system in a nutshell.

Bonni: [00:13:36] One of the terms that comes up a lot with this has been coming up since as long as I've worked in an office environment is the idea of incubating something. And we used to have these tickler files.

Bonni: [00:13:46] I don't really use a lot of physical files today but back in the day before we had tools like Evernote there would be a clear file and for it would be you know the 12 months of the year would be in your filing cabinet.

Bonni: [00:13:58] And then in the current month the days of the week or sorry the days of the month would be in the current month. And then if I knew you you used your conference proposal or your proposal sounds like you're going to be presenting at a conference that usually that would come in the past in a letter form so we would take that letter.

Bonni: [00:14:17] Oh I got excepted that this is great. This is the information I don't need to know about this until November. And we texted our November and then when November 1st came around we'd go and put our 1 2 3 4 5 6 all the way out to the end of the month.

Bonni: [00:14:30] And then if your conference was on November 20th but you needed to look at that on the 15th it would go into the 15th. Now I tried to use that form of incubation back in the file cabinet days for me and I was notorious literally there would be like six months would go by and I'd scratch my head.

Bonni: [00:14:48] I'm so confused what happened and what's so nice about technology tools is that there are way better than our brain than relying on me just remembering to go look at that file because whenever I try to remember

something like that is just not going to happen I just don't know what kind of brain.

Robert: [00:15:06] The human brain is fantastic for processing information it is terrible for storing information. And that's a that's a that's a big point that I think David Allen brings out is that you got to have this trusted system that was outside your brain that does all this heavy lifting for you right.

Robert: [00:15:20] Well I still have an actual physical file in my drawer here at work. I mainly use it or like handouts for classes like I'm going to be out for next Wednesday for example is in that that the folate for next Wednesday.

Robert: [00:15:33] But with Evernote you can set a reminder to pop up any time that you wish. So when you see something you never know you just set reminders of a deal. So the technology does all the heavy lifting for you and all you have to do is act. I think that's kind of the essence of GTD is you want to act in a Moleyns by doing the best possible next action that fits the moment.

Bonni: [00:15:55] One of the other real downfalls to most people systems you use the phrase and it is from David Allen a trusted system. We can't take that lightly cause I just described a non trusted system of my own office work days. Any time our systems aren't working right then we really need to think about how to make this a trusted system and one of the biggest things is people putting due dates on things when they're really not due.

Robert: [00:16:23] Oh my gosh yes. You know when you know myself all the time about this because I'm really bad about this and trying to do better when I read something that doesn't have the it don't put a deadline on it and make it a higher priority if you must. So you will have a system for raising priority items to a higher level of awareness. But you know you can really overload yourself with non-essential days.

Bonni: [00:16:45] The reason that we do that is because we don't want to forget about it. So we want to bubble back up but that often is a symptom of not doing the next step in the Getting Things Done process and that is to reflect. And the subtitle here is to review frequently look over your lists as often as necessary to determine what to do next. Do a weekly review to clean up update lists and clear your mind. Tell us a little bit about your reflection process and your reviews that you do.

Robert: [00:17:17] Yeah I've got a weekly ritual on Sunday afternoon. This is the only work that I allow myself to do on Sundays. Actually it's the weekly review and I set aside white 90 minutes set aside 90 minutes. It often takes a little longer than that sometimes less or I will just go. My kids are a news group.

Robert: [00:17:37] And actually on campus here at home just go to the library. Quiet place. And I have a whole my my system of weekly review starts with clearing out all the inboxes like everything physical boxes e-mail inboxes mostly were dropped notes to do us inbox all that I just like where it goes. Do anything be clearer. It's clear.

Robert: [00:17:57] And then I go through my next action list for my project like a ton of projects going and each one has several sortable atomic sized actions to them and one of them is taught for next. And I'll just make sure that every product anything that has actually been completed that I forgot to cross off cross often to update projects or archived projects or rearrange them somehow just make sure that everything in the system is kind of calibrated to what I want it to look like.

Robert: [00:18:24] And you know that sometimes involves cutting pasting merging you know changing things up making sure every project actually has a next action. Are you going to have any products that are stuck on you to think about why. And that sort of thing.

Robert: [00:18:38] And you know if I'll lie on a text file that's called Waiting for the where I put anything that I'm waiting for like responses e-mails or reimbursement checks or whatever the case would be upset that I'll make sure that I'm waiting for something I don't need to send an update that's there.

Robert: [00:18:55] So all these things that we have done in the organization process we just want to go through once a week as recommended and just make sure it's all where it needs to be and there are no outstanding stuff sitting in the inbox so often do those little mini reviews like at the end of the day.

Robert: [00:19:11] I find that doing a quick mini review just to clear out the inboxes and get things put away into the right products is a good sort of you know 3:30 in the afternoon type of action to do your kind of run down if you're tired you know you don't really have the energy to do much else you can at least process your boxes.

Robert: [00:19:28] And then other thing that I do for a reflecting is once a quarter I have a quarterly review. I think a lot of times GTD people forget about the big picture I mean what's unfortunate for GTD has a lot of strengths isn't that big picture where I will just take the whole day off excuse me go to a coffee shop or a library and just look at kind of reflect on what I believed to be my life's purpose.

Robert: [00:19:53] My my big areas of responsibility as a professor as a teacher or a scholar as a dad where my 3-5 your goals or what my want to to your goals are what my 90 day goals are and just make sure I get the whole system as organized not only in terms of projects but also in terms of where it all is that my wife and what's a corner to do out is very very important. It does take some time. Make sure the whole system is sort of vertically integrated as well as you know in good trim as far as your projects and actions go.

Bonni: [00:20:23] One of the real concerns that people will bring up pretty instantly if they trust you and they start talking about their own attempts at managing better is the time factor and they go wait a second. He said 90 minutes once a week. I don't have five minutes once a week. And how do you respond to that.

Bonni: [00:20:44] How would you talk a little bit about what that 90 minutes means to you because we all have the same amount of time and so you're choosing to invest 90 minutes and if I'm just completely overwhelmed I feel like I couldn't possibly do 90 minutes. How do you weigh that out with me. How do you how do you help me see a different way of looking at time and what that takes.

Robert: [00:21:06] Well suppose you didn't do it. I mean I guess I feel like that 90 minutes once a week it probably saves me three hours in that week in terms of just having my stuff together. Like literally my stuff couldn't work.

Robert: [00:21:18] And you know I think back to some some people that I know who were really really hard. But sometimes the busyness that we have is entirely self-inflicted I mean we work hard because we're disorganized not because we're working or we're spending you know two or three minutes trying to find that one piece of paper or trying to do even just think about five you know taking five minutes and trying to think about which of those 300 e-mails in our inbox is the one we are to next.

Robert: [00:21:46] OK. So if you just invest a certain amount of time an hour and a half instead of doing something else we totally get the time to do this. Anybody who says I don't get five minutes is not doing the math correctly on those spending just organizing your work. It will absolutely streamline things to the point where it will save you tons of time and give you much more peace of mind later on.

Robert: [00:22:07] So when it comes time to act on things you know you're going to be asking all the right things and you don't have to spend the time worrying about whether that other thing that you're not doing is should be the thing that you are doing.

Robert: [00:22:20] And you also reduce your cognitive and emotional load of the process because it is not the sure sherbets kind of like 90 minutes into the job you know 90 minutes work of the job and it will give you energy and wellness and mindfulness that will make you a better person and a better professional and many many other places. It's well worth the investment.

Bonni: [00:22:39] Sometimes I've found that when I take that time to reflect because it is a little bit of a slower pace than you know to go from class to class and all this interaction with people and the chaos of all of that when I spend the more quiet solitary time then it gives me a chance to think about really what I should be saying no to because sometimes our lives really are out of control I mean the sense that we really have committed to too much or there's too much on our plates.

Bonni: [00:23:07] But that's the time where I can see it more holistically because a lot of people that I see they're just managing their time and tasks out of e-mail and out of whatever interactions they have during the day they're bouncing from meeting to meeting and from student to other committees they're in that sort of thing.

Bonni: [00:23:23] And that doesn't ever give you a chance to reflect on your own meaning and significance and what it would mean to say no to something else. Remember I have a dear dear friend of mine who it's really hard to say no to our dear friends and she had asked me if I'd be some part of a committee and she's engaged in the fight against human trafficking so that kind of makes it worse too because you're like I'm not even saving the world you know.

Bonni: [00:23:46] And she had asked me to be.

Robert: [00:23:47] Wrong.

Bonni: [00:23:48] Yeah. She asked me to be on some steering committee. And I just toiled at this because I don't want to say no to a friend I don't want to say no to something that's really important as an issue in our world today.

Bonni: [00:24:00] And I called her up on the phone and I let her know like I really want to help you. I really want to help this cause but have you thought about asking this other guy because actually I think it would be helpful for you because you know he's not really engaged in your work very much. He's not you know and it turned out that she had actually thought of him.

Bonni: [00:24:18] And long story short he was a better person to be engaged in the work that she was trying to do. And that sort of made me feel good that I had taken that time to reflect and realize that I'm not going to do the best job unless I say no and then suggest something else to her.

Robert: [00:24:35] You know I think that's absolutely right. I would say for me what I've learned about GTD Getting things done in the last year or two is that it's all about having a plan for how you're going to live your life in the moment by moment scale.

Robert: [00:24:51] But it's not just a moment by moment. You also want to say yes to the things that matter and say no to everything else. Most of the things that we say you do don't matter. You know most of the most things don't matter to us and we have to say no to things that don't fit into the overall plan for our lives that we want for our lives and we should be saying no to them.

Robert: [00:25:10] And it's OK to say no to them and we need to get those permissions and GTD is about having a system for making good choices about what you should be doing and then make a choice to do something you're also making a choice not to do something else and you have to be comfortable with both. You have to be comfortable both with what you are doing and also with what you are not doing because we can do two things at the same time.

Robert: [00:25:31] And so if if something comes across my inbox and kind of an opportunity even a great opportunity I the human trafficking committee opportunity that you imagine you know of itself is a wonderful thing but you still have to weigh. Does it fit you know where does it fit. Is it something that makes sense for me given the way I want to end up and live my life in 90 days. 2 years 3

years 5 years 10 years. You know and we have to say no to a lot of stuff we just have to have a plan for how to say no and how to say yes.

Bonni: [00:26:01] We've mentioned the book Getting Things Done. Another great book along this same theme is called Essentialism by Greg McKeown and I read that and it's an easy read in the sense of it doesn't take that long. And boy does that ever get you really honing in on the importance of saying no.

Robert: [00:26:19] Yeah I second that I read that book over the summer it kind of blew my mind. You know there are a lot of what you're about 90 percent of what we say and what we count it really doesn't matter to us at least.

Robert: [00:26:30] And we can be focusing our energies on far fewer things generally speaking it's kind of hard to hear people in higher ed because we get kind of in the notion that we ought to be saying yes to every single thing or we won't get tenure or something to that effect but I don't know as someone who's currently up for tenure and has also in the past been given tenure and evaluated people for tenure I think I value colleagues who know what to say yes to rather than more so than colleagues who say yes to everything and then get nothing done.

Bonni: [00:26:59] Yeah absolutely. I'm going to go through the first four steps and then we're going to talk about the last one. We've looked at or capturing collecting what has our attention. We've looked at clarifying. That's the processing what the things mean that we've captured.

Bonni: [00:27:14] And then since we've captured clarified then we organize we put those things where they belong and then we talked a bit about reflecting reviewing frequently talked about a Daily Review a weekly review and a quarterly review. And the last step is to engage and this is where we simply do.

Bonni: [00:27:34] And I wonder if you would describe a day that you had recently where you did some doing and what that looked like and how you knew what to work on and how that process goes.

Robert: [00:27:44] Sure. I'll just run you through kind of the day today actually. So I like to schedule my time during the day even though it's mostly just going for me in my free time. Right now I want to have a sense of what I'm doing. So you know I have to do is to have it up here in front of me. I have some things that really do well and truly have due dates today.

Robert: [00:28:05] And so I want to make sure that I'm looking at those but I also have labels set up. And so I have to serve as a sage surgeon to do as you can bring up any action as labeled as next. OK. So in any given moment I have to ask myself what's my energy level.

Robert: [00:28:21] How much time do I have and where am I. Those are the three things that kind of govern how you pick of the many many next actions that I have. I'm counting 62 next actions in my words right now get most all my projects personal professional whatever.

Robert: [00:28:36] Sixty two of them are labeled as next. These are things that I can do the next physical action that I can do. It's like a little menu. I have very many. I have a lot more that are not labeled next to certain maybe have like 300 to do items on my list. Overall it's overwhelming if you don't filters right now and have them filtered by what are the next actions of my project.

Robert: [00:28:56] I'm looking at some I'm like prepare an assignment for next Monday write a quiz for next Friday read a chapter in this book and get tickets to a soccer match. It's taking place in October and so on and so forth.

Robert: [00:29:08] So had all these next action so now I have to ask myself OK it's it's late afternoon as a warning this is late afternoon on a Friday. OK. How much energy do I have. How much time do I have and where am I. So I'm sitting here in my office right now so anything that is not that anything that can only be done at home I can't do that right now.

Robert: [00:29:27] Right. I mean it's easy watch it but I don't need to even think about actions in my lists that can only be done at home. Likewise if I'm home and I don't have the means to get to campus anything that has to take place on campus that doesn't even enter my consciousness.

Robert: [00:29:42] So I'm not thinking about that. My energy level is kind of like medium low right now so I'm not going to try to tackle a high energy task right now. I will just have to be redone later because it would be terrible and I may have like an hour left before I get home so I don't want to tackle anything that takes a long time.

Robert: [00:29:58] So I can search through and slice through all my data and look just for the next actions that have low energy medium amounts of time and can be done at a computer or in my office. Right.

Robert: [00:30:13] You can do this with a paper notebook or have to have an information system to do this but to do it just as a simple query to the database of actions that I have. It's simpler than it sounds actually and so I think that brings up why five things is sort of that for a list of five things.

Robert: [00:30:31] I just pick the one that I like the best off of it. These are all things that I can do that fit a moment right fit my energy levels at the time that I have available in my location and so distinctive for everyone and just do it. And then that's that and then move on to the next one. Right. And if you just filter things down it becomes a much smaller and psychologically and becomes much easier to get one thing done. It gives you one thing that one next action. That's more than you would have if you were just staring at an e-mail inbox with 500 things in it.

Bonni: [00:31:03] Sometimes when people hear stories and by the way thank you for those are such good examples. And oh actually I'm going to ask you quick to give a few examples of something you can't do. I mean you told us about writing a quiz. Take us to the soccer match but what are some of the 300. Could you just give a couple examples of what's on that list that you couldn't do right now.

Robert: [00:31:22] Absolutely one that I put on last night is clean my grill at home and cooking some pork chops so I have to clean the grill. I obviously cannot clean my role right now because I am 20 minutes away from it right. It's not possible for me to do this.

Robert: [00:31:37] Right or get passport photos for my kids or something that I need to do when it's time but it's an errand and I cannot run an errand when I'm sitting here recording a podcast. Here's something that takes a long time like working through a tutorial that I found online for a piece of software that I use.

Robert: [00:31:58] That's probably going to take me two hours and two hours I need to be home so I can even start that right now. In fact it's questionable maybe I should break that. Maybe that's not a task that's like a project in itself that can be broken down on the small pieces. Or here's one. Cleaning out my crawl space is just not physically possible for me to do. So why even look at it. That's that's only me considering the next actions that are appropriate for the time energy and context that you've got in front of you at the moment.

Bonni: [00:32:26] And I want to encourage people if this is if you're early in your GTD days or this is the first time maybe haven't heard about it. You don't have to

do all of it the day you get started. And that's really key. And Robert you mentioned that you're probably not as good as you'd like to be about due dates that you're guilty of putting a due date on something that's not actually do on a day.

Bonni: [00:32:49] And what I am guilty of although I'm not feeling too guilty about it is I don't use all of those contacts that you just mentioned because for me in our family my husband tends to do more of the errands he does most of the grocery shopping and it's just funny I tend to be kind of a homebody.

Bonni: [00:33:06] It's like like if it's something that we're going to order we have a grocery delivery service from Amazon. And so that's my idea of going grocery shopping is I don't have to leave the house I go into the app. In fact there's a cool little gadget that we have that when you sign up for the service you can just talk into it or scan the barcode if you're running out of Cheez-Its or something.

Bonni: [00:33:25] Yeah and that will add it right to your list and you can review that list the next time you actually go to do the shopping. So I don't really use contacts that much I do have some location based ones so it's.

Bonni: [00:33:35] And it's your phones a lot of times the apps that we're talking about will notify me up you're at Vanguard you could make copies right now I don't have a copier at home. You know I have a printer but I have a copier so I'll get to Vanguard and I'll say make a copy of next week's exam because my phone knows. And the tool that I use is called OmniFocus but a lot of them do this with the context of location your phone's GPS knows that you're on campus and it can if you wanted to tell you.

Bonni: [00:34:04] These are the kinds of things that are coming up soon that you have a due date for whatever that you could do today. And I find that a lot of those location ones I just don't use them quite as much. It sounds like you're much more disciplined about that particular one and the other thing that I have probably never done is the time based ones and that's something I could get better at.

Bonni: [00:34:25] But GTD will do for us whatever we put into it and the time that we put in you know you're probably working that much more effectively because you do have those times and there have how long various things will take you.

Robert: [00:34:37] I hope so. I know that that's not something I used to do but it makes a lot of sense to me. This is this is part of an evolutionary process right. And like I said I've been using GTD for over a decade now and when I started it was real simple it was getting a all and it's fine it's fine to start simple. I think you read the notes book you know you'll be going to go. Honestly over time you know my contacts are the goal.

Robert: [00:35:01] So I have a huge list I'm just three for energy for time and then a handful of others. I also feel like sometimes the context can refer to like the psychological state that you're in and when you have a context for grading that's something I could really do any physical.

Robert: [00:35:17] But I kind of have to be in a certain frame of mind like an emotional place to grade papers. And so I have a greeting contacts and so whenever I'm in the grading context for it I click on my little table with this grating and it pops up a little of the stuff I can write and I just want to go with it.

Bonni: [00:35:35] One of the contacts that I have found really helpful is to have them for certain programs and an example would be our learning management system is canvas. I I put as a context for canvas I might have 15 things if I go and log in 15 different times because I don't realize how many tasks have built up that have to do with canvas I'm not batch processing.

Bonni: [00:35:58] I'm not being smart about hey just log in once take care of the 15 and you're out in probably less than half the time if I had logged in every separate time I do that for e-mail. I do that for calendar. I have different programs that when it's up then I can see what tasks I could take care of while I was in that particular application.

Robert: [00:36:17] Right. Your phone is another one too. You know the process is more efficient if you have multiple calls to make the same time while on the phone because sometimes you're not near a phone or mission where you can talk all along. So that's the first mission batch processing.

Robert: [00:36:31] So it's really huge. And that's what contacts are all about. You kind of go with your contacts if I'm in a position where I can talk on the phone. I really need to be thinking about the phone. But the flipside of that is if I do have the ability to make some phone calls I should just do all that at the same time and it's incredible how much time that frees up the soil. You get nicked and dimed to death spending 30 seconds to 90 seconds switching contexts.

Robert: [00:36:59] So all that context switching really adds up to probably 90 minutes worth of weekly review. Honestly we told about during the week that for me that was the big selling point for GTD is just realizing how much time I waste and little 90 second to five minute bursts trying to decide what to do next. If I could just pay that up front it would probably be way less time than the sum total of all that experience of the week. So batch processing is a good thing.

Bonni: [00:37:26] And this idea of batch processing actually takes me to my recommendation for today's episode and it was a real awakening for me. I have been and people who have been listening to this show for a while know that I'm a little bit of a zealot when it comes to having an inbox zero or zero inbox and that means that my goal on the vast majority of days I get my e-mail inbox is down to zero. No inbox there's nothing no e-mails in my inbox.

Bonni: [00:37:53] That doesn't mean I do everything that was in my email that those actions that were represented but that means they go over into my trusted system which is OmniFocus and then I can look more holistically at other tasks that didn't come through e-mail.

Bonni: [00:38:08] And so this was an awakening for me it's a tool called Sanebox and Sanebox is a paid service. There are different types of services you can pay for from the very little amount all the way up you could pay a lot more than pain.

Bonni: [00:38:21] And what it does for you is it goes through your inboxes and it sorts them out for you and it gets smarter over time because if they get something wrong you can drag an e-mail to train it and it will never forget where you want that one to go.

Bonni: [00:38:35] And in my case I'm using a sane box for newsletters. I get a few of them I actually usually like to just rely on having a news reader that will grab those things but if I have a few that still come in.

Bonni: [00:38:47] And so those go into my sanebox newsletters folder and then I have one called Sayne later. And those are things that aren't urgent. As an example the learning management system canvas they send out weekly updates about new features that are coming. I don't need to read that necessarily even today. Tomorrow it could be four days from now and that wouldn't be the end of the world.

Bonni: [00:39:08] So what sane box does is allows for my inbox to truly be the most essential emails and it's very intelligent about sorting but if it ever gets something wrong I just click and drag and I'll put a link in the show notes to people want to check out St. Marks I think they have a free two week trial I believe and you can check it out for yourself. Robert what do you have to recommend today.

Robert: [00:39:28] You know I was a teacher of money and a bunch of recommendations for tools for software and already mentioned Todoist earlier in the show and I just like to come back and plug it again. So it's been such a great tool for me to use to do a dot com it a a task management tool that is available cross-platform you can access it through a web browser or Android Windows on Mac you name it.

Robert: [00:39:52] So it's omnipresent and that's the that's the most important thing about a system a GTD system for me it has to be something I can get to any place any time. And so it is free. There's a paid a great subscription that is relatively inexpensive it's paid but it's totally worth the money on it. And again it allows you to create projects and getting things done.

Robert: [00:40:15] There's a there's a distinction between projects and tasks and as academics I can absolutely say one of our big downfalls is we often think something is a task like a single thing when really it's a project like grading test 3. OK that's not a task that's like a bunch of things.

Robert: [00:40:30] And so unbundling the task for projects is a very important step towards getting things done. It's hard for me to to to conceive of grading a test sometimes but it's easy to think about grading by tests you know five instances of student work on while 35 of them. So to do this as a tool they have all sorts of these things. You can e-mail directly you can forward e-mails from your inbox into Todoist.

Robert: [00:40:54] You can use an Android phone you can set up your voice commands to send voice messages that you speak into your phone that will transfer them and turn them into doing tasks. There are automations available and integrations available for calendar programs. So for me to do this is fantastic for central command operations center for all the stuff that I do I would be hard pressed to get through a day without it. That's for sure.

Bonni: [00:41:20] And it looks like it also has Project templates and I'll put a link in the show notes to some post that I've written before about checklists. And those

are great things to take advantage of at the start of the academic year starting with semester and so on.

Robert: [00:41:33] Sure it can be used as sort of a very fancy checklist for a room with no frills.

Bonni: [00:41:39] Yeah that's one of the things that seems like really good that it does where you can start real basic and then get more advanced as you go. Yes. Robert thank you so much for joining me again on Teaching in Higher Ed and contributing this I know you've been thinking about it now since we agreed to talk today and it's really appreciate your time and expertise.

Robert: [00:41:58] Thanks for having me on again Bonni. It's fun to talk about this and I hope it's helpful.

Bonni: [00:42:01] Thanks. It was great getting to talk with Dr. Robert Talbert today. Thank you again Robert for being here. And if you want to follow up on all the resources that Robert talked about you can find them at the show notes at teachinginhighered.com/120.

Bonni: [00:42:20] Lots of links there this time. And if you don't want to have to remember to go grab those links. I'd suggest you subscribe to the weekly update it's only a single e-mail in your inbox each week with all of the show notes and included in that e-mail is an article about teaching or productivity. You can subscribe subscribe and get your copy of the tech essentials guide and tools to help you with productivity and teaching. Thanks so much for listening and I'll see you next time.

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