Symposium on Early Career International Law Academia: An Indigenous Concept of Time and Its Impact on Time Management: A Personal Reflection in an Early Academic Career (Part 2)

By:

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In Part 1 of this blog post series, I discussed Indigenous perspectives of time. The understanding of time that Indigenous Peoples have is the opposite of the dominant, linear perspective of time in Western culture, which is very much result-driven. In-stead, Indigenous perspectives of time are rather circular in nature, and focus more on efforts and process. Their understanding of time is fascinating and effective, especially in terms of time management. In academia, we have a lot of autonomy in mastering our own time, but when we do not manage our time effectively we will be less efficient and, most likely, we

will not achieve the results we aim for. Too many dead-lines will overwhelm us and racing against the clock could lead to burnouts. This being said, managing our time is of great essence. But how do we manage our time? Indigenous perspectives of time, in my view, can help us out here.

In this post, I would like to shed more light on this by discussing two matters central to Indigenous perspectives of time: time linked to tasks or duties, and circular time as a means that is attached to an activity in progress. I will use personal experiences in an early academic career in international law to clarify these matters.

Time Linked to Tasks or Duties

First of all, Indigenous perceptions of time show that important activities or events are closer in time, while unimportant or unrelated matters are further in time. What matters is to get important things done and to refrain from putting energy into things that are not important. As such, the daily life of Indigenous Peoples is not dictated by deadlines or clocks. Kelly Adams stunningly illustrates this with the construction of a clock in the town of Ernabella in the Musgrave Ranges. In 1984, the town council constructed a large clock "to teach" local Indigenous Peoples what time is. Adams quotes a council member who observed:

> Nobody looks at [the clock]. The clock has not been working for months. No one knew that it was not working.... European staff use time and watches to regulate their activities but often they also work until the job is completed or it is too hot or cold or dark to continue. This local adaptation to time is still going on.

In this way, time management becomes a matter of prioritisation where one focuses on successfully completing the most important tasks. Some also call this 'deep work'. Remarkably, I see many similarities in the way I currently manage time. Normally, I like to wake up early in the morning to get those things done that are important in a working week. Most of the time this is related to my research. Throughout the rest of the day, (academic) life can then start to throw matters at you. During the day you will have to teach, students might email you, you will have meetings or some unex-pected things might

cross your path. Having done those important things already, I can easily permit myself to shift focus to other things that require my attention and adapt to the situation at hand. It all depends on not losing sight of what is important, and time is mainly used as a tool to realise this. This brings me to the second matter: Indigenous perspectives of time comprehend time as a relative means that is at-tached to an activity in progress.

Circular Time as a Tool that is Connected to Activities in Progress

Instead of ‘racing against the clock’, an Indigenous perspective of time allows us to put more emphasis on prioritising what is important to us and devote as much attention as necessary to complete a task. Such a perspective does not allow us to let time take charge of our lives, something I was guilty of as a law student: this week a paper has to be finished, next week I have to prepare for an exam, the week after that I have to finish another paper etc. Truthfully, such an approach was not sustainable. I remember a moment during Christmas when I told my mother: ‘Mom, I have to do something. I see all my deadlines around me and it feels too overwhelming.’ Not long after this, I reflected upon the experience and noticed that this overwhelming feeling was caused by my perception of deadlines as if it was a sky full of stars. So I thought about it. How could I perceive this differently? What if I would imagine activities as being bundled in one single light orb in front of me instead? Maybe that would help me feel less overwhelmed? Fortunately, this shift of focus helped. Nowadays, I use a circular perspective of time and I tell myself that activities are placed on concentric time circles around me. In doing so, the activities on these time circles form an orb. The trick is then to focus on what is ‘closest to me in time’. What matters is that those tasks on the concentric time circles closest to me are finished so that this orb of activities becomes smaller. In other words, I am at the centre of time, and I work my way from the inside to the outside, ticking off the most important tasks. Then, the orb of activities becomes bigger again when other tasks are put on the peripheral time circles. It is as if a light orb organically glows and is dimmed, then glows again and then is dimmed again. A gradual process where I am the one in control at the centre.

Lessons Learnt

It is beyond doubt that deadlines are important in academic life. There is no way around this. However, only focusing on results is not sustainable, so it is

important to reflect on how we manage time and prioritise tasks. An Indigenous perspective of time has much to offer in this regard. Indigenous approaches to time focus on that things happen, not necessarily when they happen. Time is used as a means to work on what is most important to us, with us at the centre of time. As such, we can truly put in efforts and be productive, instead of chasing deadlines. This is not to say that a circular perception of time is the approach to follow. With this blog post series, I seek to nurture a conversation on how to prioritise tasks and manage time in an early aca-demic career in international law. For me, a circular perception of time is what works. Whether I will continue with this, perhaps time will tell.

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