

KATE'S STORY

"MY OPEN UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE"

Kate CRUDGINGTON

What do you do when you hit eighteen, go to university to study Drama & Literature, and realize you've made a whacking-great mistake? Well, I'll tell you.



You spend a solid month in your campus bedroom panicking in silence. To distract yourself from your anxiety, you listen to Kings of Leon's 'Sex on Fire' on repeat, and spin in circles on your swivel chair. You occasionally venture outside, wandering to Tescos to buy rotisserie chicken (and DVDs, *so many DVDs*). You try to ignore the state you're in, but feel like imploding when anyone asks you: 'How's uni going!?' You let the panic build, and build, until you finally realise: 'I *have* to get out. I have to get out - *NOW*'. You eventually find the courage to tell your parents this. You tell your Mum first (she's just forked out for a celebratory Pizza Hut on her first visit to see you). She's

shocked, concerned, and goes home to tell your Dad. He picks you up from the train station later that night, with half the contents of your bedroom packed in to your bags. You insist to them both you'll do *absolutely anything* if they let you quit university, and move back home.

 They try to talk you out of quitting, but eventually oblige you because they love you, and they're concerned your skin now has the texture of a rotisserie chicken. You break the news to friends and teachers: everyone thinks you've made a life-altering mistake, but you *know* you haven't, regardless of how awful it feels (and how chicken-like your skin is).

The above is what happened when I quit university in 2008. I came home with a sense of simultaneous relief and dread to reassess my options. I was an A-grade Drama and English student at my secondary school, as well as Head Girl (a title I wish I'd never accepted). When news spread that I couldn't hack university, it was an absolute shocker. 'Clever Kate' had failed. Oh dear...

I was out of work for three months, so I hit-up the job centre for pennies. I was distraught; I didn't know what to do. Fortunately, I found a part-time job after three months of panic, got off benefits, and realized I still had that burning desire to learn, to know more.

I considered higher education again, but knew I couldn't handle another campus university. I looked to The Open University for inspiration and that's exactly what I found.

I discovered a network of like-minded students and skilled tutors whose united goal was to achieve educational and personal success.

I began studying English Literature with The Open University part-time in 2009 and last week I finished my final module, completing my degree. My first act as a deadline-free

adult was to play David Bowie's 'Heroes', full blast, prancing round my bedroom. For the entirety of the song I felt infinite. When the music stopped, I wanted to cry. *Six years of my life, over.*

I began reminiscing with an intensity that would shame Uncle Albert from *Only Fools and Horses*. I remembered how hard it was to convince people The Open University was a *real* university, and that I was a legitimate student (difficult to do that when you're reading/crying over Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* as part of your Children's Literature course). Friends and family made jokes about my 'fake' degree, but I took it all in my stride, because I was running this educational marathon for a reason. I will graduate with a BA Hons degree in English Literature in September. That's right: a *real* degree.

My degree took six years instead of the traditional three because I opted to study part-time. This meant I could gain financial support, so I avoided accruing hefty student debts.

I kept my part-time job, and this funded all of my weekends at The Pink Toothbrush (90% of weekends in a year), and several trips down to Brighton to see my friend John, who was studying at Sussex University. I've managed to squeeze a lot of living and laughing in between my deadlines and work schedule, but there were times when I genuinely thought I might implode from the stress of it all.

These were dark days. I was not prepared for the crippling loneliness of being an Open University Student. My 'days off' were actually days on the books, on the laptop, on the edge of sanity, trying to cram in as much information as my little walnut brain could take. I'd stare blankly at my laptop screen, silently willing my grey matter in to action. It wouldn't respond and the frustration was ridiculous; I'd panic, talk in a gibberish rage to my Mum, then run upstairs to cry for a solid thirty minutes. I'd snot out all the fear, have a pep talk with my reflection, then return to the laptop to write like a beast.

Fortunately, encouraging emails from tutors and student forums bursting with similar 'I CAN'T DO IT, HELP ME!' messages, reassured me that it was normal to feel paralysed and lonely when deadlines approached. (I also discovered that power naps were the ultimate ally on deadline days, and this made the crying/snot less frequent).

ANYWAY, ENOUGH COMPLAINING: Now for the Praise

I have always relied on literature to help me process things. I cite Roald Dahl's *Matilda* as one of my earliest and closest friends (I'll allow a 10 second laughing break here). She knew books weren't for 'boffins' (classic year six banter) and your mind is an immensely powerful instrument which needs to be tuned, and re-tuned with all kinds of new information. It's this desire to devour the written word which made me choose The Open University and why, despite my initial traumatic entry into higher education, I never gave up.

Regardless of what was happening at work or in my personal life, I always felt I could hit the books and everything would be fine. The quiet, inner knowledge that I was consistently working towards something kept me going for six strong years. People who insist they 'don't read' don't realize what they're missing.

I'm all for living in the real world and putting yourself in the way of experience, but vicarious experiences is equally as valid.

I'm glad I have travelled through the minds of some of the most intelligent writers in the English language in the company of The Open University. (If you think I'm nuts, [a recent](#)

study has proved readers of fiction tend to have higher empathy levels aka are really quite nice, lovely people)

It was this intense belief in the power of the written word which made me set the following target for myself: in my last two years of studying, I vowed to score a minimum of 70% on all assignments.

In between the working, panicking, and being hung-over, I excelled this target and scored between 80-85% on my essays.

Sometimes I had to ask for extensions (ill health played a major role in this), and sometimes I had to sit up until the wee hours, then wake up at 5am before an 8 hour day at work to meet the seemingly unachievable deadline. Now, all of that sweating and studying is over, and I'm strangely sad that the student chapter of my life has come to a close. It's time to set myself new targets (preferably ones that don't have deadlines too).

If you find yourself in the same situation as I did when I first considered university, please don't panic, please don't think you've ruined your life, and for the love of God: **PLEASE DON'T WASTE ALL OF YOUR SAVINGS ON ROTISSERIE CHICKENS.**

Stand up, take a deep breath, accept it's not working and look at The Open University's website. If you're hesitant about starting, my advice is to pick a module that appeals to you, and *go for it.*

The Open University is D. I. Y for the mind. With the tools they provide, you'll be able to build something useful, sustainable and concrete. If you want it, you can have it, all you have to do is apply yourself and keep going, regardless of how hard it gets. You *can* do it, and you won't regret trying.



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