

**Bonni** [00:00:00] They are everywhere. Yet we often don't notice them. On today's episode of Teaching in Higher Ed number 93, I speak with Natalie Houston about habits.

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**Bonni** [00:00:21] Welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. 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 approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

**Bonni** [00:00:50] I last welcomed today's guest on to the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast back on Episode 34. And if you haven't been listening for a while that would be a great one to go back and listen to because in it she provides such great recommendations and just a whole way of looking at our work in academia and how we think about the term productivity.

**Bonni** [00:01:12] She's got lots of great advice so if you want to check that one out it's at [teachinginhighered.com/34](https://teachinginhighered.com/34) or of course you can also find it on whatever tool it is you use to listen to the show.

**Bonni** [00:01:25] Today we're having a conversation which would still be in the realm of productivity but about something that we run into often in fact every day in our lives but sometimes without even realizing it and that is habits.

**Bonni** [00:01:38] But before we get to that part of the conversation let me tell you a little bit more about Natalie. She has a number of roles in her life she is a personal productivity coach and we'll have a link to her productivity work and her blog and Web site at [teachinginhighered.com/93](https://teachinginhighered.com/93).

**Bonni** [00:01:57] She's a certified coach with the International Coach Federation. And she writes about productivity at re:focus now which again we'll have a link to that through her blog. She is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Massachusetts Lowell and she teaches courses in Digital Humanities as well as Victorian Literature, Literary Theory and Science Fiction.

**Bonni** [00:02:25] Natalie Houston, welcome back to Teaching in Higher Ed.

**Natalie** [00:02:28] Hi Bonni, I'm so glad to be talking with you today.

**Bonni** [00:02:31] I know that I mentioned in your bio that you are in addition to your academic work you're also a productivity coach and you definitely live the life of someone who has a lot going on behind them and I'm excited to talk to you today about habits. Let's just begin with the definition of what a habit is and maybe how you first started getting interested in thinking and writing more about habits.

**Natalie** [00:02:53] So I mean read the most simple level and habits are the things we do all the time without thinking and habits. They're protective for your brain so that you can actually get through your day if you had to stop and think every time you tied your shoelaces would you have to do when you're 4 or 5. Learning how to do it.

**Natalie** [00:03:17] But once you know how to do it you don't have to think about it anymore and you can use your brain power for other things. And so habits save us tremendous time and energy. But they can also lead us to doing a lot of things mindlessly without thinking.

**Bonni** [00:03:34] I first noticed you talking about habits in your writing in The Chronicle of Higher Ed and then we were going back and forth a little bit on Twitter and thank you for making the recommendation of the book The Power of Habit by Duhigg and I know we're going to be quoting in that book a little bit including he talks about just emphasizing what you just talked about that habits are everywhere.

**Bonni** [00:03:55] He writes habits scientists say emerge because the brain is constantly looking for ways to save effort. Left to its own devices the brain will try to make almost any routine into a habit because habits allow our minds to ramp down more often.

**Bonni** [00:04:14] And it's hard sometimes to even have what our habits are revealed to us if we don't do some serious reflection or some other techniques we'll be talking about a little bit later in the episode. And one of the stories that stuck out to me was having to do with fish do you want to share about this next one where he quotes David Foster Wallace.

**Natalie** [00:04:32] Sure. This was from a graduation address in 2005. Wallace says there are these two young fish swimming along and they happened to me an older fish swimming the other way who nodded and says. Morning boys. How's the water and the two young fish swam on for a bit and eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes What the hell is water. The water is our habit. It's the unthinking choices and invisible decisions that surround us every day.

**Natalie** [00:05:04] But if we look at them the water can become visible again. We can begin to recognize that we're surrounded by those habits and that can help even adjust them.

**Bonni** [00:05:15] As we talk about the book The Power of Habit. One of the things we should be cautious about is what it's not. So would you share with us what it isn't. Before we talk about what it is.

**Natalie** [00:05:27] It's not a book that's designed primarily to help individuals change their behavior. It's really a much more broad based look at have it in a variety of different contexts including organizational habits the ways that habits can be used for good or bad within corporations or other kinds of organizations.

**Natalie** [00:05:51] Also how corporations are interested in using data to try to understand their consumers habit. Duhigg has done a lot of research and draws on all these you know context but it's not primarily a book about how you and I can start brushing our teeth every day.

**Natalie** [00:06:08] Yeah and you're going to give us some ideas for how to help us brush our teeth every day. In the latter part of this episode he has this three step loop as he defines habits where there's first a cue and then some kind of a trigger that tells our brain to go into this automatic mode and then there's routine.

**Natalie** [00:06:29] And the routines he says can be physical mental or emotional. And the last step in his loop as he defines it is this reward. And he says quote which helps your brain figure out if this particular loop is worth remembering for the future. Natalie tell me about Duhigg's story about the cookie.

**Natalie** [00:06:49] He has a he has a great section in the book where he talks about using his model of the three step habit loop the to the routine and the reward to understand and eventually to change his habit of eating a cookie every afternoon when he's at work.

**Natalie** [00:07:08] You would find himself every afternoon between 3 and 4 o'clock having the urge and mostly following the urge to go to the cafeteria and get a cookie chat with some people and then come back to his desk.

**Natalie** [00:07:20] And so using the cue Part of the loop he looked at you know what is the cue. Is it boredom is it hunger is it the time of day. He experimented with trying to change the routine you know would eating an apple satisfy him. He'd figured out ultimately that the reward that he was really craving was not the cookie itself it was actually the interactions with his colleagues.

**Natalie** [00:07:45] And so he was able to substitute just standing up and going and chatting with one of his colleagues for ten minutes. Substitute that for the unhealthy habit of eating a chocolate chip cookie every afternoon.

**Natalie** [00:07:57] So this model can be really helpful to try to break down and analyze a current habit that you have that you're not satisfied with and then figure out what you could change.

**Bonni** [00:08:08] Now I know this brought up some habits from you as well. So what are some of the things that came to mind with your own habits both as you've read this book but also through your own professional expertise.

**Natalie** [00:08:19] One of the most powerful areas I have found both for myself and for a lot of my coaching clients is to look at what your habits are around checking email because that's something that many people default to whenever they have a free supposedly free moment in the day or they find themselves checking email even when they know they should be spending their time doing something else.

**Natalie** [00:08:47] And so that's a that's a habit that can be very helpful to look at. Like what triggers that habit. You know when you find yourself obsessively checking e-mail it's often because you're bored or you're frustrated with something. E-mail is rarely going to provide the solution to your frustration or your border.

**Natalie** [00:09:08] But it's an easy button that we keep pushing because every once in a while you get a reward from it. It's a random reward thing much like playing slot machines and some studies have suggested that when you check e-mail repeatedly it's affecting your brain the same way that playing a slot machine does. So looking at when are you checking e-mail.

**Natalie** [00:09:29] And whether it's actually rewarding to you and then trying to create new habits around checking e-mail only at set time during the day. For instance that's easier said than done. But when you can begin to adjust your e-mail habits to be more mindful this tremendous payoff from that.

**Bonni** [00:09:50] When people that I've spoke with talk about being even unsure whether or not this is a habit that they have. One quick way that I have heard people talk about is just to not even have the button there so the buttons not on the toolbar or if it's on your phone it's not even something you can tap on to get to or even shut down the accounts or whatever.

**Bonni** [00:10:09] My husband has been on the show many times too. He talks about that. He got off Facebook. He took a break for I think about three months. And it was not even an application on his phone any longer and he didn't have an account or I guess his account was on hold. So even if he had gone to it there's nothing there - but he said he found himself just going. And then... But it's not there and then he realized what a habit that was for him and just imagining all the time that he was wasting because he didn't feel like he got that much out of it.

**Natalie** [00:10:37] Exactly. I mean you can see people doing this all the time they start typing a document. They start to feel stuck and instinctively they've opened up another tab in their browser and there's canning news headlines or Facebook or whatever it is.

**Bonni** [00:10:52] You have identified three steps for creating a new habit. And I know this is something you've written about in the Chronicle which will link to your article for people to find out more at [teachinginhighered.com/93](http://teachinginhighered.com/93) but I'd love for you to share these three steps with us now and a little bit how we can create a new habit.

**Natalie** [00:11:09] So first and foremost I think it's important to identify why you want to create a new habit. And you know especially at the beginning of the calendar year around January 1st lots of people are thinking about setting resolutions or creating habits. And it happens at other times of year as well.

**Natalie** [00:11:30] But if you're just saying I'm going to go to the gym more this year but you haven't identified why you want to go to the gym you're just saying that because you think you ought to. It's going to be very difficult to really follow through on the work of establishing a new habit which takes some time and it will feel awkward at first to try to do something new. It takes a while to make a new routine into a habit.

**Natalie** [00:11:57] They used to say 21 days to make a habit. Other research has shown has suggested 28 days over 40 days. It takes a while. And even after you have it in place it can. You know you sometimes have to work to pick it back up again.

**Natalie** [00:12:14] So understanding why you want to go to the gym more often for one person it might be to relieve stress and so focusing. I want to go to the gym in order to relieve stress makes it more likely that you'll look forward to doing that activity and follow through on it for somebody else that might be focusing on becoming more healthy. People have different motivations behind what might look like the same activity on the surface.

**Bonni** [00:12:43] One of the things that I've found to be so powerful is after having thought through that why is to have it documented somewhere and as a part of my monthly review it tells me to go revisit my annual goals and within the goals when I go and look at them there's not that many of them.

**Bonni** [00:13:00] And they all have that why. And it's the first thing that I see when I go to one of the notes having to do with those goals is the why. And it does actually help me. One of the things I was really encouraged about as I consider I am one of those people that does annual goals but I'm also one of those people that actually does annual goals actually follow through on them all the way through.

**Bonni** [00:13:21] And but one of the things that a man by the name of Michael Hyatt had recommended he's got this whole kind of kickoff to your year was that you don't have to accomplish all your goals. I think some overachievers like me think that it all has to get checked off.

**Bonni** [00:13:35] But as I go back and I look at them those wise start to get questioned like I have. They are to write a book in 2016 and that question keeps coming up why why why and why is speaking with James Lang for an upcoming episode. He was saying why. Why do you want to write him.

**Bonni** [00:13:53] I don't have a very good answer I'm realizing and I have so much passion for this podcast and what it can do. I'm realizing that maybe that goes on the back seat for at least another year if not longer. So I think you're so right about the importance of this why and getting real with our science.

**Natalie** [00:14:08] Absolutely and doing some work to explore your core values will also help make sure that those lives are aligned with who we really are and not some external idea about what you should do or even you know sometimes we have goals or intentions that are outdated there from who we used to be.

**Natalie** [00:14:35] And it's worth doing some inner work to explore. Like who am I now and why do I want to do these things.

**Bonni** [00:14:43] And sometimes even those external influences as you said the culture of academia can be so strong. What are we supposed to be as a professor what are we supposed to be as in our particular discipline and so on.

**Natalie** [00:14:55] Right. So when you have identified a lie behind a new habit that you want to create. The second important step is to get very very clear and specific about how you're going to measure that behavior saying I want to go to the gym more.

**Natalie** [00:15:17] This month is too vague. You need to define that in such a way that an observer could look at you and say did you do this or not. Because that's essentially what you're going to be doing for yourself reviewing your behavior and finding out if you were successful.

**Natalie** [00:15:36] So it might be. I plan to go to the gym three times a week on Mondays Wednesdays and Fridays at 4:00 o'clock. That's very clear and that's easy to say. Did I yet I go to the gym on Wednesday at 4:00 o'clock or not.

**Natalie** [00:15:51] And so setting a reasonable and realistic target is important. I think some people with strong perfectionist tendencies tend to set unrealistic targets. If you haven't been going to the gym at all I'm just using this make that they haven't been going to the gym at all then saying you're going to go to the gym five days a week is probably not realistic.

**Natalie** [00:16:17] And if you have a lot of resistance or anxiety around creating this new habit maybe the realistic goal is to start going to the gym one day a

week and build from there. Michael Neill I think it is talked about you know setting a goal that you could achieve on an average day.

**Natalie** [00:16:38] Not on your perfect day right. During an average week could you go to the gym twice a week. If that said yes then that's a reasonable goal. And so sometimes it takes a few iterations to figure out like what's the right frequency or quantity of whatever the behavior is.

**Bonni** [00:16:58] One of the things I've really loved that I've read even just about exercise is the idea of just putting the shoes on and starting. We're going to go for five minutes and you never put your shoes on and just go for five minutes.

**Bonni** [00:17:10] But the idea is that you could just go for five minutes if that was all you could handle on that day and I like that idea of these cues that can help support us into whatever more for me. I like that my Apple Watch it does have some of these habits for healthy behaviors built in.

**Bonni** [00:17:26] And they have these little circles that go around and tell you. For example one of the habits they tried to build is that you stand up for at least a minute for 12 hour hours out of every day. And it will tap on the wrist and go OK we need to stand.

**Bonni** [00:17:40] Or in that case they also recommend 30 minutes of cardio per day in cardio can even just be a little bit of a speedy walk it doesn't. You don't have to walk that fast in order to get your heart rate up enough for it to track it.

**Bonni** [00:17:52] And that's just nice for me. My exercise classes are an hour and I do like to do an hour but on my average days sometimes I've got some foot pain from surgery from about a year ago. I'm only going to make the 30 minutes and that's OK. That feels good to me. I like that sudden goal you can achieve on an average day. That's great.

**Natalie** [00:18:11] And finally it's really important when you're trying to create a new habit to track your behavior and then the tracking can be very simple it doesn't have to be complicated but you need some way of being able to look back over a series of days or weeks to see how often did I do this thing that I wanted to start doing.

**Natalie** [00:18:35] And so by tracking your brain your actions then you can review. You can maybe adjust your target if you need to. You can. Problem

solver. Like maybe Wednesday are never going to be a good day to go to the gym.

**Natalie** [00:18:50] So you need to figure out a different day which will work better in your routine because habits often work really well when they're connected to each other. So if your gym is on the way home from the university then maybe stacking going to the gym after a day of teaching is a good way to fit it into your routine.

**Natalie** [00:19:13] For example what you said about just put the shoes on to go out the door for five minutes. Creating the habit of setting your workout clothes sending them out where you're going to see them and put them on first thing when they once you've got your workout clothes on will you might as well do out for lunch.

**Bonni** [00:19:30] One of the things that Duhigg talked about in his book too was just the power of our social interactions. And so I love whenever I find someone at work who wants to distress with just a 10 or 15 minute walk and that can be a great thing whereas the afternoon we text each other and say OK it's time to get outside.

**Bonni** [00:19:47] And what a wonderful way that is to give me some endorphins in a time of the day when I need it most. I know you have some ideas for people who prefer to go with more of an analog approach.

**Bonni** [00:19:58] Could you share some of the analog tools that you have identified for creating and tracking new habits?

**Natalie** [00:20:06] So my favorite tool and one I use in conjunction with different digital tools is to put stickers on a wall calendar or to write a check mark on a wall calendar although I'm partial to the stickers myself and I actually saw the value of this when many years ago I first did.

**Natalie** [00:20:30] I did my first 60 day yoga challenge. I know I'm a student of Bikram yoga - hot yoga. And my studio every year would sponsor a 60 day challenge. And so that was 16 classes and 60 days.

**Natalie** [00:20:45] And the way we tracked it at the studio was that each person who was participating knew they printed out a long calendar for the two months of the challenge and put it on the wall. And then when you finished your class each day you got to put a star sticker on the calendar for that day.

**Natalie** [00:21:02] And it was incredibly motivating. It sounds so silly it sounds so simple but it really works. As you see the stars mounting you know day by day on the calendar you felt this excitement and this commitment to putting another star on the calendar to the physical act of writing a checkmark or a star or putting a sticker on a calendar because it's of kinetic action not just a mental you know sort of visual action.

**Natalie** [00:21:34] It helps reinforce the new behavior. It becomes the reward Indu Higg's turns at the end of the routine of taking the yoga class. And so I have applied the stars on the wall calendar in my own life to all kinds of other habits from you know riding habits to other kind of health goals and fitness school.

**Natalie** [00:21:55] So that's a really easy powerful one. And there are a lot of digital tools that mimic the same activity as what Jerry Seinfeld the comedian. You can Google him talking about don't break the chain. This was advice he gave to a young comic about how to write enough jokes. Put a check mark on the calendar each day. Work on your comedy routine. And you know you just want to keep that chain of checkmarks going.

**Bonni** [00:22:20] To that end. Would you share a little bit about rewire.

**Natalie** [00:22:23] Yeah rewire is an app I've been using recently. It's an Android app specifically for tracking habit. And there are a number of other apps and I linked to some in a recent tracker post I really liked the design of rewire it's very simple. It's compatible with the new Google design.

**Natalie** [00:22:44] So it blends in with the other apps on your phone. And every evening it think it's 10 o'clock in the evening it reminds you it says. Be sure to check off your habit for the day so you get the little nudge to go to the app.

**Natalie** [00:22:56] And you just click on the day of the calendar for each of your habits that you've set up in there. And it's very effective. It's very easy especially if you're trying to track more than one habit at a time. Sometimes the stickers on the wall calendar can be can get crowded or if you're not mirroring your printed calendar the app is going to be convenient for people.

**Bonni** [00:23:20] I tend to like the analog tools for tracking my habits although I'm still trying to get over my disappointment that NPR no longer has their printed 12 month calendar it's so sad. I know that many people have really liked the app

called momentum and that's an iPhone equivalent to the Android that you've recommended.

**Bonni** [00:23:39] And then I shared on previous episodes that for me it's less about the tracking and more about the nudging creating some kind of you that will get me to do whatever behavior it is I should be doing at a given time and I really like the app it's d'you e that I've shared about in previous episodes because if it's something like tracking my eating for example that I've been really successful at.

**Bonni** [00:24:01] I've been successful at it because my little wrist gets a tap a few times a day to say. Have you tracked her food. Have you logged her lunch etc. etc. And that's really working well so be it kind of goes back to your first step in creating a new habit which is to identify the why and part of it is yes why we want to adopt this new habit.

**Bonni** [00:24:19] But also maybe perhaps it's partially identifying why we haven't had success added in the past and then finding the tools that will help us get ourselves to extend your your original meaning beyond your intent.

**Bonni** [00:24:31] But I think that one of the things we should mention before we go to the recommendation segment is that Duhigg talks about what I've heard for a number of years now which is don't try to break a habit without having a habit to replace it with.

**Bonni** [00:24:47] And the classic thing is quitting smoking which is not something I've ever done because I fortunately never started but the idea that you don't just quit smoking without something to replace the act of smoking. I know there's a lot of other examples that are out there as well. That's something else I think that will be helpful to people as they adopt new habits.

**Natalie** [00:25:08] Thinking about combining or stacking or swapping habits is also helpful to avoid feeling like you know their eyes. So you know when people want to begin eating healthier if they're framing that in terms of deprivation. Right.

**Natalie** [00:25:28] Oh I won't be able to eat chocolate cake anymore. Then they're not going to feel much draw towards making this change. But if you focus on adding salad first like First eat more salad and track that for a while.

**Natalie** [00:25:45] And a lot of research has shown that when you start a new habit successfully and they used to think it had to be certain habit exercise in particular.

**Natalie** [00:25:55] And that's what Duhigg called keystone habit. But recent research says it's really any habit. If you successfully create one habit it will be easier to create any others so that's why the people who successfully create an exercise habits find themselves making more healthy food choices almost unconsciously because you're developing what psychology calls self-regulation behaviors that then extend to other areas.

**Natalie** [00:26:23] And so that you know that's a way you can often start with a habit that feels easier to begin with and then build to adding other ones.

**Bonni** [00:26:34] Well this is the point in the show when we each get to give a recommendation or a series of recommendations and I just wanted to mention some posts that I had a chance to read or reread in some cases of Lee Skallerup Bessettes who's been on the show previously and she calls them Bad Female Academic Posts and they're just so wonderful to read when whenever we start to have these feelings of expectations put upon us.

**Bonni** [00:26:59] You mentioned this a little bit Natalie earlier in the show and when we're sort of living our lives according to other people's expectations and in her case she shares a lot about the expectations people have of her as a mother and what that's supposed to mean.

**Bonni** [00:27:11] And as a faculty member what that supposed to mean and how sometimes she just decides to be what quote unquote is called Bad. She's going to be a bad female academic and just writes so eloquently and reflectively about that and I'd suggest that people go and have a look at her post. Got a mall categorized there of her writing that she's done both on her Web site as well as for other sources as well. And Natalie what do you have to recommend for us today.

**Natalie** [00:27:37] I've been really loving a music service called Focus at will. The website is [focusatwill.com](http://focusatwill.com). It was created by Will Henshall who is a musician and entrepreneur. He was a member of the band London beat. For those of us old enough to remember London beat.

**Natalie** [00:27:58] And it's a music service designed it's baseball and you know neuroscience research it's music that has been designed to promote concentration and you can select from a number of different styles of music.

**Natalie** [00:28:13] One of the important features is that they have room you know there's no music with words and they've also minimize the use of instruments that sound like the human voice because that's what the brain goes on alert from hearing.

**Natalie** [00:28:26] And you can also adjust the speed of the of the music beats and so people who feel themselves to be easily distracted people with AT&T often will find it more helpful to listen to music with a faster beat than some other people.

**Natalie** [00:28:44] But it's a fantastic service that has built in timer's so you can set the music to play for 45 minutes for instance and really you know focusing on your work. I first found out about it through an interview on the 5 am miracle podcast and Will Henshall also has a TED talk which talks about the science behind the service.

**Natalie** [00:29:06] And when you get when you sign up you get to try it out for two weeks for free. So you get to really play around and see if you're going to find it helpful. I use it all the time for concentrated lighting and I found it really helpful.

**Bonni** [00:29:21] It does sound like a wonderful service thanks for recommending it and Natalie just as we close the episode. What's your one final piece of advice for us as we think about creating new habits in our lives.

**Natalie** [00:29:32] My final advice would be to be curious about your own current behaviors and to bring that curiosity to bear as you're trying to strategize and develop new habits and to be compassionate with yourself. It can be challenging to create change in your behaviors.

**Natalie** [00:29:54] All of us have habits that were less than happy with. And they're there because they're meeting some need whether it's the need for comfort or excitement for other things.

**Natalie** [00:30:07] And so being compassionate with yourself about whatever behaviors you're currently doing and for whatever challenges you meet along the way but knowing that human beings are capable of change we're we're

always changing and growing and learning and habits are a great place to start.

**Bonni** [00:30:29] Natalie thank you so much for investing your time once again on the show. It was just wonderful to have been connected with you previously and to get to continue to read all your great work on the Chronicle and for the work that you do with your clients as well and if people want to find out more about the coaching that you do could you share a little bit about how they could get in touch with you.

**Natalie** [00:30:48] Sure. The best way is to go to my Web site which is an nmhouston.com and you can read there under the coaching section about my approach to productivity coaching and how to get in touch with me.

**Bonni** [00:31:02] Thanks so much for being on the show again.

**Natalie** [00:31:05] Thank you. This was really fun.

**Bonni** [00:31:07] Another big word of thanks to Dr. Natalie Houston. Thanks for being on the show and joining us for this conversation about habits. And speaking of habits maybe you already have a habit of checking on the show notes which will be at [teachinginhighered.com/93](http://teachinginhighered.com/93).

**Bonni** [00:31:23] But if you'd like a cue coming in your inbox just once a week that will include the show notes automatically and it will also give you an article most weeks on either teaching or productivity written by me and you can subscribe to that service at [teachinginhighered.com/subscribe](http://teachinginhighered.com/subscribe).

**Bonni** [00:31:41] And I just want to say a really big word of thanks to all of you who have been going on iTunes or whatever service it is you use to listen to the show to give a rating or reviews that really helps other people discover the show and has such an encouragement to me and I just love to see how this community continues to grow.

**Bonni** [00:31:59] And thanks for all the nice e-mails as well. If you want to give any feedback on the show you can do that at [teachinginhighered.com/feedback](http://teachinginhighered.com/feedback). I'd love to hear about any habits that you are seeking to form. Next episode. And thanks so much for listening.

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