POSC 386 video message, Thursday, March 26, 2020

Hello everybody!

Good discussion board activity yesterday! I appreciate your contributions and found many interesting and important points. I’ll provide some summarizing comments in a few moments.

First, though, you may remember that I promised to post video messages on Mondays and Wednesdays. What I’ve found (and I could have thought of it beforehand!) is that it makes more sense to wait until you’ve completed your work on Wednesday for me to provide comments, because then I can give the whole class some feedback and provide concluding thoughts. So, from now on, the videos should appear at some point on Thursday, and then again late on Sunday, to start the week off.

OK, some thoughts on the discussion boards. The general theme is, of course, that successful online students have to be well-organized, self-motivated, and able to communicate in an online environment. Typically, more reading and writing is involved, though I do not think that this means that people have to be excellent writer: They simply have to find a way to communicate clearly in writing. This may mean making effective use of emoji, images, and gifs if necessary (to communicate subtler affective points, for example if they mean something to be a joke, or a constructive suggestion instead of personal criticism). Similarly, people do not have to become dedicated readers. Often, people who like to read will spend too much time reading. For work purposes, being able to quickly find what is important to know and skim or skip the rest is often more important.

In your comments about recommendations that are not useful, and how to deal with those, I found several themes.

Most important, maybe: Different students experience different situations: Some have plenty of time and in fact expressed a sense of boredom alone at home; others have jobs, or siblings around, or other responsibilities that require more explicit planning and that make it more difficult to focus. Some have plenty of space, others have to find a corner where they can get work done. And others again are distracting themselves and need to find ways to self-discipline. So, there are no one-size-fits-all solutions, but I encourage you to look figure out how you can get yourself to focus and get stuff done. For example, some people may find that rituals such as setting up a work corner or doing something else before and after work helps. For example, every morning after breakfast, I clean up my office space, get a cup of tea, put on my headphones, and turn on music that does not distract but screens out any external noise. I know of people who put up signs at home when they work (“men at work” or the like) and put them down when they’re done.

The pomodoro technique is really important when I need to do work that is mildly unpleasant and that requires me to focus. I set a timer for 25 minutes and work until the alarm rings; then I take a five minute break, and then I continue for another 25 minutes (in fact, I use the free Pomo Timer app on my mac to do so).

Generally speaking, to be successful in anything, it turns out, is partly related to our mindset. If we accept that we can learn something, that we can improve what and how we are doing things, then we are usually more successful in our learning. On the other hand, if we believe that there are some things that we are good at and others that we are simply bad at, we tend not to learn very effectively‑even those things that we believe we are good at. There is pretty good research to support this distinction: The first way of thinking is called a growth mindset; people who hold it believe that they may not be perfect, but they can improve or grow. The second way of thinking is called a fixed mindset since it implies that our mental capacities (and other capacities) are fixed and cannot be improved. So, please remember this the next time you say, “I am bad at math” or “I don’t learn well through reading.” As a matter of fact, these things are not true and you can become better at math and learn better in new kinds of ways.

In that spirit, I think that the current enforced online environment presents us with an opportunity. I believe that your professional prospects are likely going to be work places that require fairly high levels of education, leadership positions, and the like. Particularly after the current crisis, these work places are likely to make more use of remote work. And taking online classes helps you learn to be effective in such online environments.

Another theme that I believe was behind a number of your responses is that of community. You signed up for in-person classes, for a college experience that puts you in contact with other students. This is more difficult to achieve online, but it’s not impossible. One way to work towards building more community in class can be to hold some activities optionally in a synchronous manner. This would mean that you can choose whether you log onto WebEx or Zoom during class time, or whether you prefer to participate in an activity asynchronously via discussion board. I will look into offering this option.

Another idea is to find common times when you and other students work on class matters. You could easily coordinate this through the Clubhouse discussion board. You can be in touch via Skype, Google Hangouts, or the like. You can even get your own free Zoom account (there are some restrictions on how long sessions can be on free accounts). I will try to be online during class times and keep my student hour zoom running during those times, so that you can get in touch with me if needed or if you’d simply like to.

For the rest of the week, keep working on find resources on court decisions about how governments can respond in times of crisis, and keep working on your Time Management Worksheet if you haven’t completed it yet. Stay tuned!