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Inspiration in England

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Classes greatly reduce the amount of unstructured time available for study. They also take place during our brains' most productive hours.

In my Philosophy of Math class, we learned much about the role inspiration plays in any creative process. Inspiration is the vital element of any successful enterprise. Inspiration, however, cannot strike a "burned out" mind [1]. While feeling "burned out," Richard Feynman writes that his attempts to do research are fruitless. Similarly, I rely heavily upon inspiration to do math problems. A few weeks into the semester, however, I already feel "burned out." While college life in America burns me out, I found while studying abroad that college life in England inspires me.

The difference is rooted in Pomona College's academic structure. American college practices place much pressure and limits on students. For example, Pomona students take four classes per semester, often in a wide variety of topics geared towards fulfilling general education requirements. Managing four very different courses is stressful. Each course demands attention, so we are restrained from focusing all of our time on something we find interesting. Another confining convention is the large amount of time we spend in class. Classes greatly reduce the amount of unstructured time available for study. They also take place during our brains' most productive hours.

The grading system creates a stress that dulls inspiration. Of course, in both England and America students receive final grades for their course of study. However, at Pomona, every piece of work I turn in is graded and represents a fraction of my extremely important GPA. Knowing that a specific project is worth exactly X% of a course grade often heightens the stress associated with the work. This quantification also allows students to calculate the bare minimum effort needed for a particular grade. For example, after a classmate calculated that a 0% math paper grade would not hurt her average, she decided to not write it.

The scheduling and grading practices develop a negative attitude towards schoolwork. College becomes a function of balancing and minimizing input to maximize grades. The simple objective of learning is not important. For example, in some of my math classes, we are given seven homework problems, five of which we have to complete. When I start the assignment I often concentrate on choosing which 5 of the 7 are the easiest. My fellow classmates and I do not discuss which problems are the most interesting, but which problems are the easiest or take the shortest amount of time to finish. I would never go beyond what was required and complete an extra problem.

My college schedule, like other Pomona students, includes classes, an internship, plus other activities, which means most work must be done in the evenings. By this time, however, we are no longer as energetic as we were earlier in the day. In this state of mind, I completely dread doing anything that might overexert my brain. I have to force myself to start work, often after much procrastination. One glance at a math problem set almost makes me physically ill. The surprising thing is that once I get started on the set, I remember how much I enjoy it. My state of mind at the end of my day just prevents me from remembering how rewarding work can be.

This enjoyment, however, is completely confined to the academic compartment of my life. At Pomona, we experience a strong boundary between our academics and recreation. Therefore I am not allowed to let any excitement I feel about math to leak into the "fun" sector of my life. Once, I shared my excitement about an abelian group theorem with a friend. After teasing me for "getting abelian" on him, he remarked that my enthusiasm was "cute" and subsequently changed the subject. On another occasion, a friend commented that "we're such nerds" because we started discussing philosophy during a social occasion. Our negative view towards academic work keeps us from letting it enter other parts of our life.

The structure of college life at Oxford University greatly affected my attitude towards academics. One helpful change was that we did not receive grades

during the term. We received feedback in terms of comments, but not quantification. In addition, we did not take four demanding classes, but experienced the tutorial system. We took one main tutorial and two less demanding tutorials. We met with our tutors only once a week, leaving the bulk of our time unstructured. This arrangement called for much more work to be done independently.

The difference in scheduling revolutionized our work habits. We still had sports and activities to lend some structure to our days, but compared to Pomona, we were very rich in unstructured time. For the first time in years, I had free days. This time took the pressure off and allowed us to have fun with our studies. Although I was not in class, I still spent this time on academics. Preparing for each tutorial meant spending many hours in the college library, so we had to work during the day. For some reason, working in the morning and afternoon was much better than working at night. Our minds were fresh and not tired from a long day of classes. Learning independently also required active participation rather than passive listening. Consequently our work stimulated our brains, so our time spent in the library preparing for tutorial was much more fruitful than the time spent in class. I also did not feel spread thin between my classes. Having a main tutorial saved me from juggling my attention between courses. The tutorial structure also offered us a more relaxed structure regarding curriculum. In some cases, our own curiosity played a major role in determining the content of our tutorials. Our tutors took advantage of the fact that we would develop interests and directions of our own. We could immerse ourselves in our studies without performing a balancing act.

When I shared the seemingly odd fact that a valid conclusion could be drawn from false premises, my friends actually listened and thought of examples.

Although we knew we would have grades at the end of the term, the fact that we were not graded along the way helped us to have fun with our studies. The lack of immediate grades removed the immediate concern with quantified achievement, refocusing our goals on learning. At first I was completely disoriented because I did not know where I stood in my classes and had no idea what standards a good grade required. As a result, I could not just do the bare minimum. This changed the way I approached my assignments. For example, my tutor gave me a Logic assignment that included a few extra challenging proofs that I was not required to do. Surprisingly, I worked very hard to figure out the challenging problems. At Pomona, I would not have done them.

Our different outlook toward work also changed our attitudes toward play. The line between work and fun blurred. Although much of our work was done in the library, our brains did not turn off when we closed our books. During tea time in the Junior Common Room, dinner, evenings at the college bar, or late nights over kebab van fare, we did not cease to share our thoughts and new ideas from our tutorials. Our sharing sessions often developed into passionate debates. These discussions inspired us to learn more about our interests and go beyond the minimum for our tutorials. Sharing my enthusiasm for logic wasn't regarded as "cute," but was taken seriously. When I shared the seemingly odd fact that a valid conclusion could be drawn from false premises, my friends actually listened and thought of examples. I have fond memories of discussing how it could be so that A implies B is true when A is false and B is true. Not only did our discussions help my work, but they affected my friends. My friend Sierra remarked that our Logic discussions helped her to understand LSAT questions. My friend Devon decided to take a Logic course when we returned to Pomona. Instead of feeling burned out on the subject of Logic, I felt excited about it.

Basically, the Oxford structure allowed us to enjoy studying. It removed stress (such as constant grading and time constraints) where stress was counterproductive. We had much more flexibility in terms of time and curriculum. Without the rigidity of Pomona College, I found inspiration instead of burn out.

REFERENCE

[1] Feynman, Richard P. and Ralph Leighton, "Surely you're joking, Mr. Feynman!", New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1985.