

Learning how to learn, or, how a MOOC of all things taught me how to deal with procrastination.

Very recently I was introduced to the concept of a MOOC. Being of the starter type, mind you, no the finisher, I enthusiastically jumped into this whole new world of knowledge starting multiple courses on a broad range of subjects at the same time. Of course I was not able to finish any of them except for either the simplest or the very short ones. Any course that required any form of effort or perseverance soon became a chore and was subsequently discarded.

Learning how to learn – by Dr. Terrence Sejnowski and Barbara Oakley

So a couple of weeks ago this new MOOC came up on the homepage of Coursera titled: “Learning how to learn: Powerful mental tools to help you master tough subjects”. I was interested by this course even though I never had much problems with studying by itself I did wonder if it might give me new insights perhaps on how to finish more courses in the future. I quickly glanced over the prerequisites (none, check), course duration (short, check) and weekly study load (3-4 hours a week. With other MOOCs this means that you only need to watch a few video lectures and promises a smooth sailing experience. Anyway, check). I clicked the big blue button labeled “Join for free” and now needed to wait for the course to start, thinking not much of it.

The Course

This is one of the better-built MOOCs I have seen so far. The production values are high and the concepts are presented in a crystal clear matter using metaphors and analogies that help you understand immediately. I ended up spending a lot more time on the course than was advertised due to reading everything the course suggested, ordering and reading the accompanying book¹ and doing all the assignments multiple times to make sure I my understanding was good enough.

What did I get from this course that really is making a change:

1. **Plan not only the start of your study time, but also the end.** – This concept was completely new to me. However, the second I heard it it made complete sense. I always have something “useful” to do; checking and answering my work e-mail, engaging in work activities, coursework, planning new projects. I can easily fill my time from wake till sleep with stuff and still I was always looking at this enormous

¹ A mind for numbers, Barbara Oakley, Tarcher/Penguin, 2014

pile of work that still had to be done. Limiting your working and studying hours, and making sure you still have time to just watch a movie or hang out, is liberating in a way. This means some of the work that needs to be done not only can be but also *needs* to be delegated to other people. To my surprise this seems to be working out quite well. Do I always abide by this rule? No. Did it change my perspective getting things done? Yes.

2. **Focus on the process, not on the product.** – Another one that clicked instantly. My to do list is always full, meaning I always have things that can be done that are easier or quicker to finish than the somewhat larger projects on the list. This results in ending up with a list that is comprised mainly of large projects that all cause a lot of stress and often end up being done right before a hard deadline at the expense of sleep and quality. By focusing on the process, that is, simply focusing on the labor that needs to be done and simply doing it big projects quickly turn into manageable chunks of time and can be crossed from the list in time and without any pain. The pomodoro technique² proves to be very effective in aiding this.
3. **Sleep is important.** – This might be obvious but sleep used to be the first thing that I cut myself short on when pressed for time. Learning about how the brain works, diffuse mode and the actual purging of toxins from your brain during sleep has made me realize that this is never a good idea. Sleep helps you stay in shape.

There are many more points that I could have made. The importance of exercise, the memorizing method of recall, spaced repetition. These are all methods I was already familiar with though, while I feel the three outlined have really made a difference.

Thank you Barbara and Terry for putting this course together.

² “The Pomodoro Technique® is a time management method. This Technique helps you to transform time into a valuable ally by helping you accomplish what you want to do and charting continuous improvement in the way you do it.” -

<http://pomodorotechnique.com/>