

December 13, 2017  
(December Letter)

Dear Samantha,

Thank you for sending your marketing assignment. I was particularly impressed with the way in which you handled the problem of your group: by trying to contact them a number of times, then turning to the instructor to explore various options.

As an instructor, I have assigned group work a number of times since part of the exercise is to reinforce the point that research is a collective endeavour. Figuring out how to work with others to this end, is an important skill to learn. Unfortunately, the traditional way in which teaching is organized (especially at upper levels) is as if it is a competition. As a result, students don't have a chance to figure out how to work with others – including those that don't seem highly motivated, have poor work habits, or are willing to rely on others to do most of the work. This is one of the reasons I was so pleased with your choice of the Recreation Administration program - since they organized so many of their activities as group work. I expect that you have learned many things from this experience - including how to deal with laggards!

One of the things I include in my group work assignments is the opportunity to provide me with feedback about how the exercise went – including an evaluation of others in the group (with respect to their contribution). I also ask them to provide me with information about their own contributions. This signals to the students that the group work is important and forces them to reflect on it. I discovered that there are actually a number of computer applications that instructors can use to record and evaluate such matters. I'm not sure if they were only available at Concordia, but they were interesting supports for such approaches. For example: <https://www.concordia.ca/it/services/peer-evaluation-system.html>

Concordia even has a program for evaluating group work. It's offered by the business school. They argue that it makes better managers. <http://www.concordia.ca/cunews/main/stories/2010/11/08/evaluating-group-work.html>

I noticed that other universities have apps and programs of a similar nature. <https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/developing-assignments/group-work/methods-assessing-group-work>

I think you will be surprised at the many things you have learned in your program. Often, they are things that don't have to do with the course content, but how to function in a learning or organizational context - like how to organize your time, manage multiple projects, deal with evaluation, adjust your expectations, and for some, how to manage in groups (who aren't family). I have been surprised how few students have had this group experience, so you have a big advantage. Make sure you include it on any CV or applications you make for employment or other initiatives.

Did you know that brain research suggests that one of the most important skills for learning is how to eliminate distractions? It turns out that being able to focus on a particular issue for a length of time is a key element. This is particularly important in the age of Facebook, Twitter, Musak, and TV, since they are all designed to grab our attention and distract us. My impression was that most of my students "studied" with phones turned on - if not TV and play lists. I find even my email to be a distraction when I am working on a project, so these other things just drive me nuts. I guess I'm just "old school"!

Fran and I are now busy getting ready for our Christmas trip to BC. I figured I was in good shape for this as we entered our final week. There were things to do, like finish off John's book, backup my files, get a few presents, finish making a few others, organizing packing, etc. Then on Monday, a 2-hour job on our garage door turned into a 7-hour one, and a leak in the bathroom ceiling turned into a plumbing crisis that had to be dealt with right away.

The plumbing problem became apparent when we noticed water dripping from the ceiling in the downstairs bathroom. After checking upstairs and downstairs I heard a hissing sound in one of the pipes in our upstairs bathroom. It was coming from the cold water pipe. I verified it by turning off the water and the hissing stopped. In addition, the downstairs dripping stopped so I decided just to leave it until our return in January. The result was another 2 hours gone.

Since I was totally exhausted from my work on the garage, this extra crisis was not welcome. It means that I will have to finish John's book in BC, I guess. This is just another of the "perks" of home ownership!

Today is my medical day. I began to lose some feeling in the soles of my feet and my hands so my oncologist sent me to a neurologist to get an assessment. Today I get a nerve test (EMG - electromyography) to see how well my nerves work. The oncologist thinks it might be related to my medication.

It's a strange feeling - like walking with sand in my socks. It doesn't interfere with walking, etc. so I don't think that the oncologist will change my medication but he wants to get an assessment to see what it might be about. It's like me spending time on the diagnosis of the water leak so that I can figure out an appropriate response.

The appointment with the neurologist was interesting. I first of all met with a technician who ran a bunch of tests with electrodes. They were attached to sticky tabs on my legs, feet, and hands then she would give me short bursts of electricity and measure how quickly my nerves responded and transmitted the electrical pulse. It was like the jolt I got then using the muscle machine at the physio-therapist many years ago - or like the jolt you would get from touching an electric fence.

After she was finished, the neurologist came in, checked them over, checked me using a bunch of "push against my hand" tests, then checked a few deep muscle responses. For these latter tests he used very thin needles (like acupuncture) that were hooked up to their machine to measure responses.

The most interesting part was that he used audio to conduct the tests. By listening to the sounds of the nerves firing he was able to diagnose the muscle health. It sounded like the crackle of a radio station that is not quite tuned. It varied as he asked me to move my foot and curl my toes - very entertaining!

In the end his most likely diagnosis was mild neuropathy, probably due to my cancer medication. He figures that there is not much to do unless it gets worse.

I figure that I will just have to imagine I am walking on a sandy beach wherever I go. It's not too hard to do so today since we are in the middle of our first snowstorm of the season - and walking in the snow is like walking on sand. Of course, the temperatures are very different!

See you soon.

Love,  
Bill