

Negative Personal Habits and their Psychological Effects in University Studies

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Abstract

Engineering pedagogy students often underestimate some behavioral models which might disrupt smooth running of the educational process. We conducted a study to shed more light on the background of student time management and procrastination. Our results point to some student personality traits to promote chronic delay lifestyle.

Keywords:

Personal habits, procrastination, study performance, time management, student attitudes

1 Introduction

Human motivation can be considered a driving force that compels or reinforces an action toward a desired goal. It has roots in physiological, behavioural, cognitive, and social areas. There are numerous factors that may weaken the student academic performance; procrastination may be held for one of these.

Motivation is a complex psychological behaviour that affects everyone to some degree or another. With some students it can be a minor problem; with others it is a source of considerable stress and anxiety [1]. Procrastination is only remotely related to time management (procrastinators often know exactly what they should be doing, but they cannot do it), which is why very detailed schedules usually are no help.

It is a common and pervasive problem associated with a range of negative outcomes across a variety of life domains that often occurs when students are faced with tasks that are seen as aversive. It refers to the act of replacing more urgent actions with tasks less urgent, or doing something from which one derives enjoyment, and thus putting off impending tasks to a later time. Sometimes, procrastination can be a sign that students are working on the wrong thing. It can also be a sign that maybe they need to step back, take a deep breath, and recharge before tackling the task again tomorrow.

Students sometimes mean that barely completed in time, the task (for example a seminar work) may actually earn a fairly good grade. Whereupon the student experiences mixed feelings: pride of accomplishment (sort-of), scorn for the professor who cannot recognize substandard work, and in some cases guilt for getting an undeserved grade. But the net result is mental reinforcement: the procrastinator is rewarded positively for his poor behaviour [2]. As a result, the counterproductive behaviour is repeated over and over again.

Procrastination not only affects student grades, but also academic performance, thereby creating academic and career problems [6]. It prevents students from reaching their objectives and goals; it inculcates a sense of discomfort, as things may start accumulating. Procrastination keeps a student wedged in problems and tasks that prevent them from moving ahead in life; students find it difficult to focus on performing other tasks till they have completed the one in hand, which further affects quality of work in other spheres of life [6]. Results indicate that procrastination is not solely a deficit in study habits or time management, but involves a complex interaction of behavioural, cognitive, and affective components [3].

Approaches to procrastination are not only viewed as inherent characteristics of particular students but may be adopted by students in response to their learning circumstances. Possible causes as mentioned by many authors [4, 7, 8] may be:

- perfectionism - a student's standard of performance may be so high for a task that it does not seem possible to meet that standard
- fear of failure - on contrary, a student may lack confidence and fears that he/she will be able to accomplish a task successfully
- confusion - a student may be unsure about how to start a task or how it should be completed
- task difficulty - a student may lack the skills and abilities needed to accomplish a task
- poor motivation, laziness - a student procrastinates because he/she finds the task boring or lacking in relevance
- difficulty with concentrating - a student may have too many things around that distract him/her from doing a task
- task unpleasantness - a student may dislike doing what a task requires
- feelings of a frustrated victim - the procrastinator often feels like a victim: he/she cannot understand his/her behaviour or why he/she cannot get work done like others. The whole thing is a frustrating mystery. The reasons for personal behaviour are hidden from him/her
- lack of priorities - a student may have little or no sense about which tasks are most important to do.

Academic procrastination might be regarded as a personality or situational trait that can have particularly serious consequences for students, whose lives are characterized by frequent deadlines [4]. It is a typical behaviour avoidance process when students try to avoid an activity, promise to get to it later, and often use an excuse making to justify the delay. It is often reinforced by success after last minute cramming, thus strengthening the belief in this approach as a viable strategy. Ellis and Knaus (2002) propose that procrastinators seek to exonerate themselves, thus maintaining a positive self-image and avoiding punishment, by deflecting blame through actions such as fraudulent excuse making and rationalizing. After a longer delay, psychological science is beginning to understand the complexities of procrastination. Some authors underline that procrastination is mostly associated with long-term unpleasant feelings [2] and a source of personal stress among university students, undoubtedly because of the aforementioned deadlines [1]. Already a 1992 study proclaimed that 52% of surveyed students indicated having a moderate to high need for help concerning procrastination [5]. In some experiments it is estimated that 80% – 95% of college students engage in procrastination, approximately 75% considering themselves procrastinators [4]. Other declare lower percentage due to different methodology used [7, 8]. Approaches to procrastination are not only viewed as inherent characteristics of particular students but may be adopted by students in response to their learning circumstances.

2 METHODOLOGY

The aim of our study was to find out whether and to what extent academic procrastination exists within a group of post-graduate respondents. 162 mature-age students of engineering pedagogy, at the Czech Technical University in Prague (90 male and 72 female, aged 31-39) participated in the 2016 and 2017 survey. We were interested in deeper insight into technical student beliefs about causes of procrastination which might influence study success or failure. All the students were well informed about the psychological concept of procrastination as they had passed the introductory courses of psychology.

We used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to improve an evaluation by ensuring that the limitations of one type of data are balanced by the strengths of another. In the first phase we used the Lay Procrastination Scale (1986). It is a 20 items, a self-reported five point Likert scale (extremely uncharacteristic = 1, moderately uncharacteristic = 2, neutral = 3, moderately characteristic = 4 and extremely characteristic = 5). Higher score revealed greater use of procrastination by the students. Total score on this measure ranges

between 20 -100. The scale has a high reliability. Cronbach's alpha for the local study sample is generally reported to be α .85.

In the second phase interviews were conducted with the students who performed the highest procrastination scores. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were considered to be the most appropriate method for exploring attitudes of interviewees as this could provide opportunities for us to probe for more details.

3 RESEARCH RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

From 162 respondents tested by the Lay Procrastination Scale, 20 scored as medium procrastinators (12 male and 8 female), and 12 as heavy procrastinators (9 male and 3 female). Parallel to the scale respondents were also asked to self-report their virtual position on a fictive procrastination scale (1 – low procrastination, 2 – moderate procrastination, 3 – average procrastination, 4 – frequent procrastination, 5 – heavy procrastination). Medium and heavy procrastinators reported – in harmony with the questionnaire results – their self-perception as procrastinators. 2 exceptions were noted: 2 heavy procrastinators self-reported frequent procrastination instead of heavy procrastination. Non-procrastinating students self-reported mostly moderate procrastination. These results are lower compared to the latest findings [5, 6]. It may be caused by higher age of respondents who both work and study and must keep higher control over their time management.

In the qualitative phase of our study, 12 interviewees (heavy procrastinators) were then asked to describe the situations in which they tended to procrastinate and why they did so. After subjects had agreed to the procedure the researchers arranged interviews, which ranged in length from 30 to 45 minutes. Having explained the purpose of the study we asked the interviewees about their experiences and perceptions of practicing procrastination.

In capturing and understanding the meaning of the interviews, the recorded audiotapes were transcribed with the consent of the interviewees. Although interviews allowed us to explore issues in greater depth, the success depended on the skill of the interviewer and the interview process itself, as personal interaction was involved. To get better contact and sincerity of responses, part of the interview had a form of a truth game.

In the second part of interview students were asked to reflect their personality background which leads them to a procrastinative behaviour. Such a reflection should be aimed at a search for internal reasons (proper personality traits), and external excuses avoidance (task difficulties, inadequate teacher demands, etc.) This part of the interview was held at the game of truth level – a variation of a well known college student fun game.

The interviewees were asked 3 questions:

„Do you think laziness is a real cause of your procrastination?“

„Are you convinced you are capable to cope with difficult intellectual tasks?“

„Have you ever tricked (cheated) in order to avoid an unpleasant study commitment?“

In their answers to the first dare question all the students admitted to some extent laziness, in 6 cases they named laziness a main cause of their procrastinative behaviour. But at the same time they „excused“ their laziness by some „external“ causes (strict demands, excessive work load, short time for preparation etc.).

The second dare question targeted the intellectual self-concept of students. None of the students admitted the proper lack of intellectual abilities - ...“it is not a case that I do not understand what the task is about...“ Such an attitude seems appropriate as post-graduate students have enough self-confidence after having graduated from a demanding technical study programme. A negative personality trait seems socially more desirable to them compared to possible intellectual deficit (no one wants to play a “stupid”)

Last question touched the moral integration concept of interviewees: in this case all admitted some „minor“ tricks in order to get the study benefits, but they refused to be involved in serious cheating. Again, no one wanted to be accused of lower moral integrity.

In the third part of the interview the respondents were asked to suggest some things that potential procrastinators can do to control excessive procrastination. They were supposed to chose from a list of 15 possible actions. These were five most frequented reccommendations pointed by students:

- to prioritize the tasks they have to do

- to find a good place to work on tasks
- to eliminate distractions that interfere with working on tasks
- to complete a task once started
- to reward oneself whenever completed a task

4 CONCLUSIONS

Procrastination and inability to control the daily programme might affect student performance as has been evidenced from the survey. App. 20% of the students surveyed admitted they procrastinated because they've done it so long it's become second nature to them. The probable reason why postgraduate students perform procrastinational behaviour seems to be connected with their experience with previous study (they know the "tricks" how to succeed in accomplishing their study duties). During interviews with procrastinating students, motivational aspects and some personality traits mostly backed procrastinational behaviour. The students often indicated laziness as a direct cause of putting off impending tasks to a later time, but at the same time proclaimed they were capable to cope with a difficult intellectual activity. They emphasized the role of accurate planning of difficult tasks and elimination of as many distractions as possible to oppose chronic delay lifestyles.

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