

Academic Procrastination – One of the Barriers in Lifelong Learning

Silvia Barnová¹, Slávka Krásná²

Abstract

In the presented paper, the authors deal with the topical issues of lifelong learning with a special focus on academic procrastination as one of its barriers.

Lifelong learning belongs to the priorities of the European Union. According to the European Commission and EU Member States, it can be defined as such purposeful learning activities which lead to improving individuals' knowledge, skills and competences at any stage of their lives. It can be realized in the framework of formal and non-formal education, as well as informal learning. The authors of the paper pay special attention to academic procrastination in formal and non-formal learning environments, which is – as being a form of escape – an ineffective learning strategy and can be considered among the significant barriers in lifelong learning.

Keywords:

Lifelong learning
Procrastination
Academic procrastination
Coping

1 Introduction

The ongoing demographic changes bring necessary innovations into every sphere of the society and have a significant impact on the labour market as well as on the system of education.

Lifelong learning is a tool for an individual's personal and professional growth and education as such is considered among the best investments in human capital (see Matúšová, 2015). It helps individuals find their space in the dynamic society, adapt to the new conditions and requirements, and efficiently solve a wide range of problems. Education enables adults to perform various social roles, and to find or keep their place in the labour market.

Obviously, there is a strong need for lifelong learning, but especially adult learners have to cope with many specific problems and overcome various barriers when taking part in formal or non-formal education. One of them, as dealt with below, is procrastination.

2 Lifelong learning

Due to the undergoing changes in the labour market, lifelong learning plays a role of increasing importance – it has even become a necessity in the current society (Tamášová & Barnová, 2016; Geršicová & Barnová, 2018). It is especially true for adult education, more specifically for further education and re-qualification.

Lifelong learning belongs to the priorities of the European Union and it has a fundamental place in the educational system in the Slovak Republic as well. They realize that it is vital to create such conditions which

¹ DTI University, Ul. Sládkovičova 533/20, 018 41 Dubnica nad Váhom, Slovakia.
Corresponding author. E-mail: barnova@dti.sk

² DTI University, Ul. Sládkovičova 533/20, 018 41 Dubnica nad Váhom, Slovakia.

would ensure an easy access to high-quality information and provide study opportunities throughout whole life.

In Slovakia, lifelong learning is defined in the Act. No. 568/2009 Coll. on Lifelong Learning as all learning activities undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies. It can be realized in the framework of formal and non-formal education, as well as informal learning. The mission of formal education within lifelong learning is to provide everyone with an opportunity to supplement, widen and deepen their education in an organized and structured context, while non-formal activities are organized outside formal educational institutions.

Especially adult learners must face various problems during their studies. They often complain about the difficulty to find time for learning as it is demanding to synchronize their work, family life, friends, and hobbies with their studies. Another barrier which they have to overcome is procrastination.

3 Procrastination as a coping strategy

Procrastination can be defined as an act of needlessly delaying important tasks to the point of experiencing subjective discomfort (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984), in other words, an intended but unnecessary delay of performing an activity, shifting a task into later, even though it is clear that it will cause inconvenience for the individual in the future (Jones, 2016). It can be considered a short-time mood repair associated with positive emotions from avoiding a difficult or unattractive task, but later on, it can result in negative emotions in the form of feeling guilt and shame (Sirois & Pychyl, 2013).

The results of a research carried out by Day, Mensink and O'Sullivan (2000) show that procrastination is an issue in the whole population. Only as much as 1% of their research sample indicated that they never procrastinate. In the case of some individuals, procrastination is a personality trait (chronic procrastinators), while in others, it is a context-related feature (occasional procrastinators), e.g. academic procrastination. It is an emotional coping mechanism (Jones, 2016), a kind of escape from negative emotions thanks to which the procrastinating individual currently feels better. Even though procrastination is usually caused by a lack of will, motivation or perfectionism, it is often wrongly explained by the procrastinator's environment as laziness, lack of self-regulation or bad time-management. In fact, it is a complex phenomenon – a combination of behavioural, cognitive and affective components (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984). It must be pointed out that it is an individual's decision to procrastinate and to prefer one activity to another (Díaz-Morales & Ferrari, 2015).

3.1 Academic procrastination

Based on the above definition, academic procrastination can be considered a chronic or occasional intentional delay of a task till the last moment. Students are aware that they should – and sometimes they even really want to – complete a task, but they are not able to do so within the desired time (Wolters, 2003). So, they postpone it despite the fact that it will worsen their situation (Steel, 2007). Although procrastinators have a logical explanation for doing so, it is an irrational process as by delaying an activity, the probability of its successful performance decreases. Solomon and Rothblum (1984) see the causes of procrastination leading to the inability to perform a task successfully in a fear from failure, a negative attitude towards a task or laziness. Steel and Klingsieck (2016) point out that academic procrastination has a negative impact on students' academic achievement, but it also increases the risk of stress-related health problems. Due to the negative emotions following procrastination, problems in their private lives can occur as well (Sirois, Melia-Gordon, & Pychyl, 2003).

3.1.1 Active and passive procrastination

In contrast to the above, there are authors (e.g. Burns at al., 2000; Chu & Choi, 2005) who claim that academic procrastination is not necessarily a maladaptive or dysfunctional reaction having a negative impact on an individual's performance. According to them, the opposite is true – it can be a strategy used for gaining more time for careful planning of activities, gathering new important information, which not necessarily leads to negative consequences. On the other hand, it is questionable whether it can be considered procrastination as in such a case, individuals do not postpone the performance of activities, but they work hard on task completion.

As a response to that question, there is a group of authors (e.g. Lay, 1986; Burns et al., 2000) distinguishing between active and passive procrastinators. While, according to them, active procrastination is an effective use of time leading to high quality performance when an individual achieves best results under pressure, passive procrastinators do not complete the task because they prioritize other activities, e.g. they waste time on social media.

3.2 Factors related to academic procrastination

As research has shown, there are various internal and external factors that can influence an individual's tendency to procrastinate.

3.2.1 Self-confidence

Individuals with low self-confidence become chronic procrastinators more frequently than the self-confident ones (Ferrari, 1991) which can be explained by a fear of failure. Individuals with low self-confidence have problems in making decisions, which can be another explanation for delaying certain activities (Effert & Ferrari, 1989) for later or giving up.

3.2.2 Academic self-esteem

Academic self-esteem can be defined as students' belief in their capacity to fulfil the requirements placed on them and to complete tasks successfully. Students with low academic self-esteem tend to procrastinate (Senécal, Koestner, & Vallerand, 1995; Steel, 2007) and if they consider a task too difficult, they give up.

3.2.3 Taking responsibility and attribution style

Taking responsibility for own learning and results is closely related to the level of individuals' independence in setting their goals, identification and solution of problems, which could become barriers in achieving those goals. There is a link between taking responsibility and students' attribution style (Fontana, 1997). Gargari, Sabouri and Norzad (2011) define attribution style as a supportive mechanism which is there to provide an individual with a positive self-concept regardless of failure or success. They claim that the attribution style is decisive from the aspect of making decisions and their realization.

Students explain their failure or success by a wide range of factors. While some students provide an external attribution for the quality of their performance (good luck, bad teacher, etc.), other students evaluate it based on internal factors as they recognize the importance of their own actions (I worked hard.; I have not studied enough., etc.). Research results (Carden, Bryant, & Moss, 2004; Gargari, Sabouri, & Norzad, 2011) show that most procrastinators have an external attribution style.

3.2.4 Self-regulation and motivation

Self-regulation and motivation are significant factors influencing the likelihood to procrastinate. Legault (2016) emphasizes the decisive role of intrinsic motivation from the aspect of self-regulation as it can be associated with activities which are pleasant and attractive to students, bring them satisfaction, thus, the only goal is the activity itself. It has been proven that students with intrinsic motivation are less likely to procrastinate than those who are extrinsically motivated for accomplishing tasks (Senécal, Koestner, & Vallerand, 1995). Based on the results of available research (e.g. Klassen, Krawchuk, & Rajani, 2008; Senécal, Koestner, & Vallerand, 1995; Ferrari, 2001; Gargari, Sabouri, & Norzad, 2011), we can assume that problems in self-regulation increase the probability of the occurrence of procrastination.

3.2.5 Hope

Snyder (2002) defines hope as the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways. A research conducted by Alexander and Onwuegbuzie (2007) revealed a link between the level of hope and the tendency to use coping strategies of avoidance when adversity occurs in the context of academic environment. Pychyl (2008) puts this finding in relation to

procrastination and points out that every human action – including learning – is target oriented and procrastination is closely connected with achieving goals.

3.2.6 Self-handicapping

Self-handicapping is a manifestation of self-destructive behaviour which decreases the individual's level of responsibility and effort. It is a protective mechanism, a form of pro-active behaviour when individuals try to find excuses for their failure and, thus, preserve their positive image. Seemingly harsh circumstances are interpreted as a barrier in achieving high-quality results (Ferrari, 2001) in order to protect themselves from the negative implications of failure (Karner-Huțuleac, 2014). It can be assumed that self-handicapping is related to a fear of failure (Schraw, Wadkins, & Olafson, 2007). At the same time, students often leave space for an internal connection in case of success to show how smart they are as they have succeeded despite adversity (Karner-Huțuleac, 2014).

3.2.7 Self-forgiveness

Procrastination is often associated with feelings of guilt and regret. Self-forgiveness helps overcome the negative effects of procrastination and change motivation. Wohl, Pychyl, & Bennett (2010) claim, that if individuals are able to forgive themselves, they will procrastinate less frequently.

4 Conclusions

Lifelong learning provides adults with opportunities for personal and professional development. During their studies, they often realize that they have problems with accomplishing tasks within the desired time due to their difficulty or because of procrastination. The educational practice shows that, as a consequence, many of them give up and simply quit their studies. Although there is a body of research on academic procrastination, the social context of learning is changing and the evolving development of digital technologies has already caused a revolution in education, so, the results do not always correspond with the current situation. Therefore, there is a need for further research on the topical issues related to lifelong learning as well as academic procrastination.

References

- Alexander, E. S. & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2007). Academic procrastination and the role of hope as a coping strategy. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 42(7), doi: 1301-1310. 10.1016/j.paid.2006.10.008
- Burns, L. R. & Dittmann, K. & Nguyen, N. & Mitchelson, J. K. (2000). Academic procrastination, perfectionism, and control: Associations with vigilant and avoidant coping. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 15(5), 35-46.
- Carden, R. & Bryant, C. & Moss R. (2004). Locus of control, test anxiety, academic procrastination, and achievement among college students. *Psychological Reports*, 95(2), 581-582. doi: 10.2466/pr0.95.2.581-582
- Chu, A. H. & Choi, J. N. (2005). Rethinking procrastination: positive effects of "active" procrastination behavior on attitudes and performance. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 145(3), 245–264. doi: 10.3200/SOCP.145.3.245-264
- Day, V. & Mensink, D. & O'Sullivan, M. (2000). Patterns of academic procrastination. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 30(2), 120-134. doi: 10.1080/10790195.2000.10850090
- Díaz-Morales, J. F. & Ferrari, J. R. (2015). More Time to Procrastinators: The Role of Time Perspective. In M. Stolarski et al. (Eds.), *Time Perspective Theory, Review, Research and Application: Essays in Honor of Philip G. Zimbardo*. Springer International Publishing.
- Effert, B. R. & Ferrari, J. R. (1989). Decisional procrastination: Examining personality correlates. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 4(1),151-161.
- Ferrari, J. R. (1991). Self-handicapping by procrastinators: Protecting self-esteem, social-esteem, or both? *Journal of Research in Personality* 25(3), 245-261. doi: 10.1016/0092-6566(91)90018-L

- Ferrari, J. R. (2001). Procrastination as self-regulation failure of performance: Effects of cognitive load, self-awareness, and time limits on "working best under pressure." *European Journal of Personality*, 15, 391-406. doi: 10.1002/per.413
- Fontana, D. (1997). *Psychologie ve školní praxi*. Praha: Portál.
- Gargari, R. B. & Sabouri, H. & Norzad F. (2011). Academic procrastination: The relationship between causal attribution styles and behavioral postponement. *Iranian Journal of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences*, 5(2), 76-82.
- Geršicová, Z. & Barnová, S. (2018). Personal and Social Training as a Part of Class Teachers' Lifelong Learning. *Acta Educationis Generalis*, 8(2), 24-39. doi: 10.2478/atd-2018-0009
- Jones, O. (2016). *Procrastination is a strong emotional coping mechanism*. Retrieved from <http://bigthink.com/ideafeed/procrastination-is-strong-emotional-coping-mechanism>
- Karner-Huțuleac, A. (2014). Perfectionism and self-handicapping in adult education. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 142, 434-438. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.07.699
- Klassen, R. & Krawchuk, L. L. & Rajani, S. (2008). Academic procrastination of undergraduates: Low self-efficacy to self-regulate predicts higher levels of procrastination. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 33(4), 915-931. doi: 10.1016/j.cedpsych.2007.07.001
- Lay, C. H. (1986). At last, my research article on procrastination. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 20, 474-495.
- Legault, L. (2016). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. In V. Zeigler-Hill, & T. K. Shackelford (Eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Personality and Individual Differences* (pp. 1-4). Springer International Publishing.
- Matúšová, S. (2015). Rozvíjanie sociálneho kapitálu zamestnancov verejnej správy. In S. Matúšová et al., *Manažérstvo vzdelávania vo verejnej správe* (pp. 8-34). Bratislava: VŠEMVS.
- Porubčanová, D. & Pasternáková, L. & Gabrhelová, G. (2016). Celoživotné vzdelávanie v pedagogickej profesii odborného vzdelávania a problémy s ňou súvisiace. In *Dnešné trendy inovácií*. 6 (pp. 70-77). Lomža: State University of Applied Sciences.
- Pychyl, T. A. (2008). Coping and procrastination: The role of hope. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/dont-delay/200805/coping-and-procrastination-the-role-hope>
- Schraw, G. & Wadkins, T. & Olafson, L. (2007). Doing the things we do: a grounded theory of academic procrastination. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 99(1), 12-25.
- Senécal, C. & Koestner, R. & Vallerand, R. J. (1995). Self-Regulation and Academic Procrastination. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 135(5), 607-619.
- Sirois, F. M. & Melia-Gordon, M. L. & Pychyl, T. (2003). "I'll look after my health, later": an investigation of procrastination and health. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 35, 1167-1184. doi: 10.1016/S0191-8869(02)00326-4
- Sirois, F. & Pychyl, T. (2013). Procrastination and the priority of short-term mood regulation: Consequences for future self. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 7(2), 115-127. doi: 10.1111/spc3.12011
- Solomon, L. J. & Rothblum, E. D. (1984). Academic procrastination: Frequency and cognitive-behavioral correlates. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 31(4), 503-509.
- Steel, P. (2007). The nature of procrastination: a meta-analytic and theoretical review of quintessential self-regulatory failure. *Psychological bulletin*, 133(1), 65-94. doi: 0.1037/0033-2909.133.1.65
- Steel, P. & Klingsieck, K. B. (2016). Academic procrastination: Psychological antecedents revisited. *Australian Psychologist* 51(1), 36-46. doi: 10.1037/0033-2909.133.1.65
- Synder, C. R. (2002). Target article: Hope theory: Rainbows in the mind. *Psychological Inquiry*, 13(4), 249-275. doi: 10.1207/S15327965PLI1304_01
- Tamášová, V. & Barnová, S. (2016). Innovative trends and opportunities of education in public administration. *Slavonic Pedagogical Journal*, 5(2), 378-390. doi: 10.18355/PG.2016.5.2.378-390
- Wohl, M. J. A. & Pychyl, T. A. & Bennett, S. H. (2010). I forgive myself, now I can study: How self-forgiveness for procrastinating can reduce future procrastination. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 48, 803-808. doi: 10.1016/j.paid.2010.01.029
- Wolters, C. (2003). Understanding procrastination from a self-regulated learning perspective. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 95(1), 179-187. doi: 10.1037/0022-0663.95.1.179