

An Investigation into the Nature of Academic Procrastination

M. Yavuz KONCA

Ataturk University
Kâzım Karabekir Education Faculty
English Teaching Department
Erzurum/Turkey
ykonca@hotmail.com

Öznur SEMİZ

Karadeniz Technical University
Faculty of Letters
English Department
Trabzon/Turkey
oznozr@hotmail.com

Abstract: Academic procrastination is the voluntary delay of the completion of an academic task within the expected or desired time frame despite expecting to be worse off for the delay (Senécal et al. 1995; Steel 2007) .

It is a dispositional trait that can have particularly serious consequences for students who are required to meet frequent deadlines.

Research claims that 80%–95% of college students engage in procrastination (Ellis and Knaus 1977) and about 50% procrastinate in a consistent and problematic fashion (Day et al. 2000), delaying essential school-related activities.

Some of the major causes of academic procrastination include fear of failure, inability to complete the task, a lack of time management or [study skills](#), stress, or feeling overwhelmed with their work.

[This paper discusses](#) the reasons why academic procrastination is a problem, why students procrastinate, and techniques for managing it.

Implications for teachers will also be discussed.

Keywords: academic procrastination, procrastinatory behaviour, motivation, college performance

Introduction

Procrastination is one of the greatest problems affecting academicians as well as students while achieving their academic performance. According to Ferrari (1995), difficulty in meeting schedules, submitting assignment late, delaying writing of notes, delaying tasks till assumed convenient time, being reluctant in performing tasks and waiting for dying minutes to accomplish a task are some of the various ways through which students procrastinate. Today, scientists all over the world agree that procrastination is an extremely complicated and influential act, which is more serious than can be imagined by those who have not experienced it themselves. Naturally, it is not so easy to help people overcome this problem of habitually postponing their work.

As in other parts of society, procrastination emerges as a serious problem among university students. Some university students show the tendency to postpone the work they are expected to do. The simple excuse for their postponement is that they are trying to find convenient time to act; some of them always feel hesitant or unwilling in doing work that should be done without any delay whereas some other university students hang around until the very last moment to study for examinations. The conduct sometimes develops to become a common practice or even a habit. In the end, this habit may become a chronic behavioral disease that these students suffer from throughout their lives.

What is Procrastination?

The term procrastination originates from the Latin word "procrastinare" which means, "to put off until tomorrow. ("pro-" prefix meaning "favour for" + "crastinare" derived from the Latin combination "crastinus" formed by Latin "cras" meaning "tomorrow" + "-tinus the Latin suffix forming adjective"(Random House Dictionary, 1987; p.1543). Procrastination is the act or practice of continually, and in a sense habitually, putting significant tasks off until the last minute rather than doing them in a way that gives the individual sufficient time to complete the task without having to rush, and this practice can have unfortunate effects on an individual. Academic definitions of procrastination vary depending on the scientific field or approach. For instance, according to the approach considering procrastination as a psychological pain: "Procrastination is delay in conjunction with **subjective discomfort** (e.g., Solomon & Rothblum, 1984). One other approach states that procrastination is an Intended Action "when we delay beginning or completing an **intended** course of action (e.g., Beswick & Mann, 1994). Another view is that there is irrationality in procrastination and so "Procrastination is the **illogical** delay of behavior (Sabini & Silver, 1982). A common definition, in reference to the published research can be made stating that procrastination is the experience of psychological discomfort or distress as a result of failing to complete, or indefinitely postponing, a task or activity (e.g. Ferrari, McCown & Johnson, 1995; Johnson & Bloom, 1995; Solomon & Rothblum, 1984).

History of Procrastination

Milgram (1992), claiming that societies that developed industrially need various commitments and time limits, is known to have written the first concrete historical investigation on procrastination, and this study encouraged further studies on procrastination (Steel, 2007). As a matter of fact, undeveloped rural societies are not so badly affected by procrastination. In their book, Ferrari, Johnson, and McCown (1995) took a similar although lighter position. They argued that procrastination had been present throughout history but that it only gained truly disappointing implications with the arrival of the industrial revolution in 1750s. Before then, procrastination was viewed neutrally and could be interpreted as a clever course of both action and inaction. Having considered all the facts, it may be said that, the belief that procrastination is a modern trouble may, to a certain extent, be true. Because self-reports of procrastination have indicated that it may be on the rise (Kachgal et al., 2001). Despite this increase, historical references have indicated that views about procrastination have been reasonably constant over the ages: It is and has long been a prevalent problem. (Steel, 2007).

It is interesting that while searching classical texts we are shown the way to informative references to the natural perception of procrastination. Hesiod who is known to be one of the first recorded Ancient Greek poets and who is known to have written around 800 B.C., provides one of the earliest possible citations. Regarding procrastination he says: "Do not put your work off till to-morrow and the day after; for a sluggish worker does not fill his barn, nor one who puts off his work: industry makes work go well, but a man who puts off work is always at hand-grips with ruin. (Works and Days, 1.413)"

Considering this consistency of belief, extending to a time about three thousand years ago, we are forced to regard procrastination as a typical human weakness. Hence, the fact that procrastination was not dealt with by scientists sooner is somewhat surprising and paradoxical. Again in about 450 B.C., Thucydides, who lived between c.460-400 B.C. also remarked about procrastination. He was an Athenian general writing much on the Athenian war with the Spartans, including various aspects of personalities and strategies, Thucydides was also a historian and he considered procrastination to be the most criticized of character qualities. To him procrastination was useful only in delaying the commencement of war so as to allow preparations that speeded its conclusion to be made. (*Histoires*, 1.84.1). Going back to year of 44 BC, we see Marcus Tullius Cicero as the consul whose position was the highest political office of Rome and as a very well-known spokesman who spoke against several political antagonists, such as Marcus Antonius, who later had him murdered. In one of a series of speeches criticizing Marcus Antonius, Cicero declared: "In the conduct of almost every affair slowness and procrastination are hateful" (*Philippics*, 6.7).

Roman Emperor Marcus Annius Verus Antonius Aurelius, who reigned in 161-180 A.D. and who was a Stoic philosopher, commented on procrastination saying: "Think of all the years passed by in which you said to yourself "I'll do it tomorrow," and how the gods have again and again granted you periods of grace of which you have not availed yourself. It is time to realize that you are a member of the Universe, that you are born of Nature itself, and to know that a limit has been set to your time. Use every moment wisely, to perceive your inner refulgence, or 'twill be gone and nevermore within your reach."(*Meditations*,2.4).

The English novelist John Lyly, who was supported by Queen Elizabeth I and who was well-known for his work titled *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit*, a book that relied heavily on proverbs for its content *and which he wrote in 1579* (as cited in Gales' quotations, 1995), wrote in that work "Delays breed dangers; nothing is so perilous as procrastination"(p.513), a comment proving that procrastination was considered to be an illness in those days.

Starting from the industrial revolution, The famous English Writer Samuel Johnson (1751) described procrastination as "one of the general weaknesses, which, in spite of the instruction of moralists, and the remonstrances of reason, prevail to a greater or less degree in every mind." A contemporary of Johnson, Phillip Stanhope (1749/1968), Earl of Chesterfield, advised, "No idleness, no laziness, no procrastination; never put off till tomorrow what you can do today." (Steel, 2007).

Why Do We Procrastinate?

The question Why We Procrastinate is a so frequently asked. Although the answers vary greatly, some excuses included in the answers appear to be expressed more often than can be imagined. Numerous reasons may be listed to describe the excuses for procrastination. Some major ones have been proposed by various researchers. The grouping below made by Timothy Quek (2009) seems to be worth quoting :

4.1. Disorganization

It is a commonly accepted truth that procrastination and disorganization are fundamentally associated. Yet not all disorganization should be admitted to be the same. In fact, procrastination-oriented disorganization occurs in four primary areas.

4.1.1. A poor distinction between urgency and priority.

In the beginning of the urgency-priority phase, procrastinators tend to concentrate on "comfort" tasks that are most convenient, interesting, or within reach. Here, it is apparent that priority is sacrificed for convenience. As these tasks are being focused to, however, other tasks begin to pile up, and soon an excess of tasks come very badly to need being given attention. An untidy heap of new and old tasks becomes marked as urgent, and the procrastinator is obliged to drop current tasks to attend to the urgent ones. In a sense, what is urgent has become priority. This disorder goes on as tasks divide into three categories which become badly in need of attention and which are increasingly difficult to distinguish, that is to say, priority/urgent; priority/non-urgent; non-priority/urgent. In the meantime, the charm of the non-urgent, non-priority comfort tasks still attracts the procrastinator to do them. What comes out as the result is that the procrastinator becomes subject to the domination of the urgent, he becomes unable to set up appropriate priorities, and constantly seeks reprieve from these stresses by attending to tasks that are neither urgent nor priority!

4.1.2. Distractibility.

The problem of distractibility is closely associated with the tendency of procrastinators to attend to comfort tasks. It is not surprising to find procrastinators explaining that a task is left unattended to because "something else came up". Setting better emotional boundaries (e.g., saying "No" to yourself) in order to stay on task usually helps to limit attention to the multitude of off-task behaviours that we know as distractions.

4.1.3. Forgetfulness.

Unfortunately, no amount of prioritizing or boundary drawing can prevail over disorganized forgetfulness. Characteristically, procrastinators assume that they have an exceptional memory and they often claim that they remember even though they appear to have forgotten ("Of course, I remember. I was just about to do it"). They fill up their pockets and purses with many slips of "reminder" paper, and they usually seem to be using more than one appointment book or none at all (both practices have the same effect). A step in the right direction is to acknowledge a problem with forgetfulness, although it must never be used as an excuse for inaction.

4.1.4. Lumping.

Finally, a major part of procrastination- oriented disorganization comes in the form of "lumping" or "chunking", that is, the errant perception that most tasks come as an inseparable whole (a "lump") that cannot be subdivided and dealt with systematically. The harried teenager who thinks of "cleaning my room" as a massive single-lump task would likely procrastinate over cleaning his room.

4.2. Fear

Many researchers believe that one of the major causes of procrastination is fear. Fear-induced procrastination generally expresses itself as avoidance and the intense desire to either delay performing a task or wait for its expiration so that it no longer has to be dealt with. Most of the time, one task is related to another, and the cluster of avoided tasks grows over time. As outstanding tasks mount, the procrastinator becomes resigned, depressed and inactive. The internal struggles of fear-motivated procrastination are usually of two types: the rational versus the irrational ("I know that I should, so why can't I just do it") and discipline vs. discomfort ("I planned to do it, but when the time came, I just didn't feel like it."). Attempts at resolving these conflicts must start at the level of dealing with the fear rather than with logic or greater discipline.

4.3. Perfectionism

Almost all researchers accept perfectionism as the first and greatest of all reasons for procrastination among the academicians. Most procrastinators do not think of themselves as perfectionists. "If I'm a perfectionist, I would get things done," they say. Not necessarily. In fact, perfectionism can lead to "starts and spurts" performance, meaning that an individual goes on a cleaning spree, or attacks a task with great energy and then falls back in exhaustion after having exasperated, irritated, or alienated everyone around. Perfectionism has also been found to be strongly related to depression and an extremely critical spirit (either self or other critical). What is perfectionism, then? Perfectionism is a form of rigidity or inflexibility that is marked by three major characteristics:

- (i) The intense desire to jump in and do things yourself because others just can't do it right;
- (ii) the insistent attitude that you wouldn't even start on something if you can't do it well; and
- (iii) the profound need for closure, indicated by agitation or discomfort should something be left "hanging".

Procrastination may also be an indicator of a more serious physical or psychological problem that would respond positively to treatment. Often, such procrastination is not observed by the one procrastinating, but by others close to that person. Extreme anxiety, severe clinical depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, attention deficit disorder with or without hyperactivity, and illnesses that are related to memory loss are examples of such dysfunctions that may lead to procrastination.

Each of these characteristics "forces or drives" the perfectionist to procrastinate. For perfectionist procrastinators, the first step in dealing with procrastination is acknowledging and disliking the three basic tendencies mentioned under perfectionism. Then practical solutions can be applied systematically.

Types of Procrastination

Considering what currently available data obtained through research conducted so far have proved, procrastination may be classified as chronic procrastination and non-chronic procrastination or temporary procrastination. Various forms of chronic procrastination have been proposed by some researchers. In general, researchers usually grouped procrastination under three titles each of which has its own set of characteristics (Ferrari et al., 1995). They are commonly known as:

a) arousal procrastination, also known as **thrill-seeking**, where individuals wait until close to the deadline in order to promote a thrill seeking experience, and

b) avoidant procrastination, also known as **fear of failure**, where individuals wait to complete a task in order to reduce potential disclosure of personal inabilities.

c) decisional procrastination, also known as **indecision**, where individuals are indecisive as to whether to do the work or when to do it (Díaz-Morales & Ferrari, 2007).

One specific form of procrastination occurs when a student experiences psychological distress from the postponement of school-related tasks (e.g. writing a paper, studying for an exam; Solomon & Rothblum, 1984, 1988). According to Rothblum and her colleagues, academic procrastination has been reported in a significant proportion of students tested, with up to 40% experiencing excessive levels. In addition, academic procrastination appears to be related to test anxiety, to various other symptomatology related to anxiety, and to external attributions of academic success (Rothblum, Solomon & Murakami, 1986). Depression, lack of assertion (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984), indecision, and low self-esteem (Beswick, Rothblum & Mann, 1988) have also been associated with academic procrastination.

Effects of Procrastination

Procrastination has a way of ruling our lives if we do not bring it under control. It may lead to extreme laziness if it is not dealt with at early stages. To be more precise, procrastination ends in laziness if it is not controlled. There are many different tests used today to measure academic procrastination. Among them are the questionnaire developed by Van Eerde (2003) which has nine questions for each of the five categories for a total of 45 questions and the test, developed by Solomon and Rothblum (1984) as cited by Onwuegbuzie (2004) called the PASS (the procrastination Assessment Scale-Students) which has six different categories, but with academic questions instead of personal ones. "Stemming from an intricate interplay of psychological variables, in its chronic form, procrastination may become maladaptive and eventually result in psychological dysfunction (Ferrari *et al.*, 1995).

Solving the Problem of Procrastination

Based on her view that irrational fears form the basis of academic procrastination, Rothblum (1990) has suggested that behavioral treatment techniques be applied to treat academic procrastination such as those used in the treatment of phobias. Various ways of overcoming the problem of procrastination are recommended by many researchers (Diaz-Morales, J.F., & Ferrari, J. R., 2007; Johnson, J. L. & Bloom, A. M., 1995; Kachgal, M. M., Hansen, L. S., & Nutter, K. J., 2001). For instance, choosing to do one task while temporarily putting another on hold is simply setting priorities, which allow people to cross things off their to-do lists one at a time. It is also suggested that the steps below be followed and attempts be made to overcome or at least to minimize the problem of procrastination (Timothy Quek, 2009)

(a) Determine what you are afraid of

In fear-motivated procrastination, it is necessary to identify the fear to begin with. For example, a person trying to find a job over an extended period of time may have developed a fear of being rejected...yet again. A high school student drags her feet in completing her class project because of a fear of obtaining another failing grade. Another example may be that an accounts analyst finds it an unpleasant task to complete even one assignment towards his certification exam because of his fear of the material itself. This last example may in fact have to do with his lack of ability in his chosen field! Briefly, both the fear and the sources of that fear must be confronted before the behaviours expressed by procrastination can be addressed. Often, a trained counsellor would be able to help in identifying the sources of fear and their effects on self-esteem, then provide some direction in dealing with these problems.

(b) Get yourself an appointment book.

And please...don't go overboard with this idea. Procrastinators often start ambitiously. (Remember the problem of "lumping"?) They run out and buy the most expensive bells-and-whistles appointment book, invest in an elaborate electronic daytimer, or photocopy reams of get-your-life-together organizers readily available on the market. You hear the reasoning, "Hey, if it's gotta be done, it's gotta be done right!" (Do you hear the perfectionist?) Eventually, the massive effort comes to an anticlimactic halt when they "run out of steam", and discouragement sets them three steps back after having dashed two steps forward. It is far wiser to purchase a simple appointment book, preferably one that is about the size of a small paperback that has a one week spread when the book is opened. Appointment books help to address the problems of disorganization and even poor memory.

(i) First, learn to use it every day: Write down things you are going to do or that you have already done. Look ahead into the next week, if you like, but don't plan your life for the next year. To help you use the book more, write in important telephone numbers and addresses as you acquire them. Carry it around with you all day. Make its presence with you a habit.

(ii) Second, learn how to plan ahead realistically: Break down tasks into tangible stage goals, and provide these goals with appropriate deadlines. Then write these deadlines into your appointment book.

(iii) Third, provide yourself with daily "to do" lists that you write into your book: Even small, easy-to-do or habitual items could be added to the list. Check the items off as you go along. The point is to register accomplishment tangibly as you move through the day.

(c) Dechunk

Breaking a task down into manageable chunks ("dechunking") usually removes the threat of having to do a large task all at once. Sometimes, a task may be underestimated as costing very little energy and time when it really takes up a good chunk of your energies. Learn to break tasks down to 15 minute chunks to begin with. As you get more practised at it, increase the size of your chunks. It would be very helpful to use your appointment book to plan your dechunking.

(d) Break Free

Procrastination has a way of ruling our lives if we do not bring it under control. Many resigned procrastinators simply confess, "I'm just lazy" and hope that the explanation suffices. Not for a long time..Laziness is procrastination out of control. It takes a great deal of wisdom and effort to break the clutches of procrastination, but the results are often worth the while.

Conclusion

The rate of procrastination in society, especially among the university students and academicians, is high Kachgal, M. M., Hansen, L. S., & Nutter, K. J. (2001). This could obstruct the promotion of intellectual excellence in the academic environment. It therefore becomes necessary for the academicians to evolve effective management of their time through proper time scheduling, avoidance of procrastination and reduction of time wasters. Future research should re-examine existing evidence on correlates of procrastination in light of Council's (1993; Council et al., 1996) work on context effects. The present study reported a significant relationship between procrastination and irrational thinking when context was controlled; it is important to determine if other relationships will hold with similar controls for context. Considering the study conducted by Bridges, K. R., & Roig, M. (1997), *subscale problem avoidance is seen as a key factor related to academic procrastination. Counselors' efforts at reducing procrastination have focused on improving students' study habits and teaching them time management skills* (Solomon, L. J., & Rothblum, E. D., 1984). However, research has proved procrastination not to be merely a deficit of time organization and study skills, but it involves a complex interaction of psychological variables. Rothblum (1990) has suggested applying behavioral treatment methods in like in the treatment of phobias. The approach that psychological treatment technique be applied should be made use of not only by the therapists and counselors but also by teachers of such disciplines as language teaching as well mathematics and science where procrastination greatly affects academic performance (Bridges, K. R., & Roig, M., 1997). This point has significant value considering the fact that procrastination is becoming more frequent among graduate students and academicians.

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