2017

"It's my closest friend and my most hated enemy": Students Share Perspectives on Procrastination in Writing Classes

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This article presents the results from an IRB-approved study that researched student perspectives on procrastination. Qualitative and quantitative data from over 200 surveys administered to first-year writers illustrated multiple reasons why students procrastinated, and these reasons are much deeper than a strong desire to do something else. Results indicated that when students perceived a lack of engagement with their topic (whether the engagement was actually there or not), they were more likely to procrastinate. In addition, students who had fewer choices in their writing assignments, such as topic choices or format choices, were more likely to procrastinate and avoid the work. The article concludes with student-based solutions for procrastination in writing courses. These student-based contributions to the conversations about procrastination can help writing teachers re-think actively engaging students as writers and involving them in the writing process.

Keywords: procrastination, composition, student engagement, first-year writing

The subject of procrastination is a common topic in most first-year writing classes and other courses that require writing. Many professional and non-professional writers use procrastination as a key element of their writing process, and students often report feeling the need for pressure, such as an upcoming deadline, in order to get going on their writing projects. As a writing instructor, I became curious about students who were hindered rather than helped by procrastination, but who nevertheless continue to procrastinate.

As I reviewed the literature on procrastination, I noticed that most of the material was based in psychology or focused on self-help approaches. Most studies approached procrastination as a negative and attributed it to poor behavior choices (Sims, 2014; Rhodewalt & Vohs, 2005; Zimmerman, 2000). Many of the studies used student writers as data points: the researchers were studying the phenomenon

of procrastination and focused on that phenomenon (Seo, 2008; Chow, 2010; Gropel & Steel, 2008). What was lacking for me was an approach that placed the student perspectives front and center. I wanted to hear more about the student and their perspective, especially in terms of the writing course. So I designed a study to listen to student writers to understand their experiences and understandings of the concept of procrastination in the writing classroom. They are, after all, the ones going through the writing class, so why not listen directly to their experiences in order to understand the concept of procrastination through their eyes?

This project will review the current literature about procrastination, share the results of the study conducted, and provide suggestions for other faculty members. The suggestions come directly from the students' own feedback about procrastination and their writing process.

Literature Review

An agreed-upon definition for procrastination in an academic setting is the intentional "deferring or delaying of work that must be completed" (Sims, 2014). This delaying of work can manifest itself as "putting off studying when there are more 'lucrative' distractions available or as cramming in assignments at the last minute" (Sims, 2014). In first year writing classes, waiting until the last minute often goes hand-in-hand with writer's block (Rose, 1980). Students report being blocked from production, so they wait until there is no time left to force their drafts. Elbow (1987) explains that sometimes having too much knowledge of the teacher as audience can contribute to forced or delayed writing experiences. In these cases, writers report being able to "work best under pressure" because they need that pressure to overcome troubles or negative self-talk (Fernie & Spada, 2008). According to Fernie and Spada (2008), the results of procrastination can be negative, including low grades, health concerns, and emotional toil.

However, procrastination is not always labeled as a negative behavior. Chu and Choi (2005) describe two types of procrastinators: passive and active. The passive procrastinators exhibit many of the signs mentioned in the previous paragraph, along with the negative results of task incompletion, pressure, and emotional toil. Passive procrastinators need a "threat of serious negative consequences for failing to perform" (p. 261). However, active procrastinators purposely decide to procrastinate and are able to manage their work in a timely manner. According to Chu and Choi (2005), active procrastinators "like to work under pressure," and they become more "challenged and motivated [which] immunizes them against the kind of suffering common" for passive procrastinators (p. 247). These time pressures have been linked with the ability to "generate more creative ideas" (p. 246). Procrastination also has been linked to other positive short-

term benefits, such as less stress and fewer illnesses (Tice & Baumeister, 1997). One study even showed that procrastination can be considered a temporary stress-relieving coping strategy (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994). Finally, structured procrastination can be a fantastic method for getting things done. According to Perry (2012), structured procrastination "converts procrastinators into effective human beings" that can accomplish a variety of tasks (pp. 1-2). The structured procrastinator creates a system that exploits the natural avoidance behavior of procrastination. By creating a to-do list that includes a variety of tasks, including important ones, the procrastinator can avoid what he or she wishes by doing something else. Perry (2012) explains that this behavior can result in a high level of output as the procrastinator rarely is idle; instead, the procrastinator simply wishes to avoid being forced to attend to certain activities.

Other researchers contend that procrastination is undesirable, explaining that procrastination indicates poor self-regulation, which is defined as "thoughts, feelings, and actions that are planned and cyclically adapted to the attainment of personal goals" (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 14). Other undesirable causes at the root of procrastination include task-aversion (Milgram et al., 1995), low frustration tolerance (Harrington, 2005), and performance anxiety (Seo, 2008). Sadly, many students self-sabotage by using procrastination as a type of "defensive strategy"; they can attribute failure to a lack of time instead of a lack of intelligence or skill (Rhodewalt & Vohs, 2005). I would also toss in time management, as many students are balancing work, family, and school. In these cases, procrastination could be inevitable. Researchers have noted that lower socioeconomic status students experience procrastination more (Chow, 2010), and procrastination happens with younger people more often than older people (Gropel & Steel, 2008). One study noted a link between heavy instances of procrastination and Facebook users (Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010). Pigg (2014) concludes that perhaps a lack of a conducive workspace could be the cause for procrastination.

As is evidenced by the literature review, there is mostly a negative focus on much of the research conducted on procrastination. As such, I decided to conduct this study to listen well to writing students to better understand their experiences (not all of which were negative) with procrastination. I had two research questions:
- What do students say about procrastination in general?
- What do students say about procrastination in their writing courses?

Methods

After attaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I distributed a 13-question survey (see Appendix A) in the first-year sequence of writing courses at a small public southeastern four-year college with an enrollment of just over

3000 students. The survey included qualitative and quantitative elements, with questions such as "Where in the writing process do you tend to procrastinate the most?" and "What are some reasons why you would procrastinate?" The survey took about 15 minutes of class time, and in every class, the students laughed when I announced the research topic. At the conclusion of the collection process, there were 253 completed surveys.

After collection, I completed a thematic analysis of each response for the 13 questions. According to Glesne (2006), thematic analysis is "a process that involves coding and then segregating the data by codes into data clumps for further analysis and description" (p. 147). This analysis is one of "the most widely used means of data analysis," and it allows researchers to organize the data into manageable sections (p. 147). For this study, I organized the data by question first. For each question, I conducted multiple readings, created a transcript of the answers, noticed and color-coded themes, named the themes, and selected quotations that were emblematic of each theme. I share detailed results below for some of the 13 questions, with tables of results for the closed questions, such as "yes/no." Question six was omitted as it focused more on time rather than procrastination, and question eleven was omitted as many students did not respond to this question at all.

Results

Question 1: Students began the survey by being asked to define procrastination in their own terms. Most responded with procrastination being "putting off" (38%) and/or "waiting" (47%). Other interesting responses to this question included: "it is life," "Lack of initiative," "an emotion," and "waiting until you are older and therefore wiser."

Question 2: Writers were asked to identify some possible reasons why they would procrastinate. Students reported a lack of time or scheduling too many hours for work. Over 50% mentioned anxiety or fear of a task. Students said they disliked the task and would rather be watching Netflix/television. One student remarked that he or she tends to "overthink things and being pressed for time forces" the thoughts to gather. Finally, several students indicated that if there was a large amount of time before the deadline, there was no reason to start early ("If it is due in 3 weeks, why do it now?").

Question 3: Students were asked to identify several reasons why they would not procrastinate. They indicated that if they liked or were interested in the subject, they would not procrastinate. If steps in the writing process were graded, they would not procrastinate. Other reasons listed were if work was done during class

time, if there was participation in a study group, if money were involved, and if the task was weighted heavily.

Question 4 asked students about discipline-specific concerns: "In what classes do you tend to procrastinate the most?" The seven most common responses are collected below:

English/Composition/Writing	133
Math	59
History	27
"All of them"	20
Chemistry/Biology	19
Psychology	12
"Any class with papers"	11

Question 5: Students were asked if there were times when procrastination was beneficial. Results were split between positives and negatives. Students reported that procrastination was beneficial because it helped to forced them to focus." They said procrastination could help them prioritize and stay away from overthinking. One student said, "I'm rushing just doing it last minute and thus feeling less stressed." Other students reported that there were no benefits, saying that their work was "low in quality," they experienced "panic attacks," and they decreased the amount of time they had to "think things through."

Question 7: This question asked students where they tended to procrastinate the most. The top results identified drafting, editing, and the entire process:

Drafting	136
The Entire Process/All of it	21
Editing	16
Thesis/Topic Choice	10
Research	8
Outlining/Organizing	4

The other stages of the writing process were mentioned less often, with 8 students mentioning researching, 10 highlighting thesis/topic choices, and outlining/organizing mentioned only by 4 students. Finally, one student responded

with "No process. All done in one shot. I know revision[1] is important, but as I revise, I feel insufficient."

Questions 8 through 10 were yes/no questions about a specific aspect. Not every student responded to each of these questions, so there is a small variance in the total number for these three questions:

Question 8: "Have you ever procrastinated because you were afraid of the task?"

Yes	No
160	91

Question 9: "Have you ever procrastinated because you thought you couldn't do the task well?"

Yes	No
191	60

Question 10: "Have you ever procrastinated because you didn't feel engaged or interested in the task?"

Yes	No
242	7

Question 12: Writers were asked what had to happen to make them "not procrastinate." Students wanted to "be incentivized" by being more "engaged in the task" or by having "more interesting professors." Students said that spreading out an assignment kept them from waiting because something was always due. Being on the "verge" of failure or actually having a failing average would make them avoid procrastination. Students reported that they needed to feel "fear" to the "point of physical sickness" to start working on a paper, and several mentioned the importance of their mother: "Mom fussing at me" and "Mom whooped my ass two days ago. No joke." Finally, "money" and the realization of "how much it will cost to retake a class" played a part in procrastination avoidance. Others said it was not possible to avoid any procrastination and that it was a part of their identity: "Nothing. I'm a procrastinator. It is who I am."

Question 13: The final question was an open-ended question that provided students with the space to say anything else they wished about procrastination. The responses were a mixture of positives and negatives. Positive comments about procrastination were that it was a "gateway to relief we often search for" and that

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[1] This statement was the only time the word, "revision," was used by students taking the survey.

it was "just natural." There were middle-of-road comments, such as procrastination being how "most students survive," and even requests for professors to "talk about procrastination" in their classes. The negative responses were "don't do it," "it is a horrible habit," "it is evil," "It is the devil," and that it is "a disease." The disease metaphor was used by many students, who said the disease controlled their "life," it was "contagious," it was like a "drug that once you procrastinate, you always procrastinate." One student even related it to an incurable venereal disease.

Discussion

The data provided by students in this study could help instructors tailor classes to better assist students in their writing process, for while the majority of students surveyed did exhibit procrastination, they were also willing to make several suggestions about how their writing course could help them avoid the negative aspects of procrastination, such as failure to submit work. Students provided numerous suggestions throughout their survey responses, some of which have been supported by composition research as far back as 1980 with Rose's discussion of writer's block and procrastination and Elbow's (1987) work regarding student engagement:

- Break up the writing into smaller segments.
- Avoid long stretches of class with nothing due.
- Select topics that are directed/chosen by students.

However, some of the material highlighted by students has not been discussed as heavily in composition literature. In particular, the time demands students face, as well as the requests to problematize procrastination, can provide interesting insight for composition instructors. Students frequently mentioned the time pressures they are under. Such pressures are nothing new: Berg and Seeber (2016) in their book, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*, discuss time challenges that both students and professors face in an academic environment with its culture of "overwork" that is often seen as a strength (pp. 2, 7, 30). Berg and Seeber (2016) suggest ways to slow the pedagogical work, and their concepts can easily be applied to a composition classroom to handle the concerns highlighted by this research in procrastination. For example,

- Faculty can start composing and creation work during class time, even if the activity lasts for just a few minutes. While most composition faculty have plenty to discuss during class time, dedicating even just five minutes sometime during the class meeting time can help students who procrastinate early in the writing process. Because over half of the students in this study highlighted starting as a major point of procrastination, getting started during class time can address this concern. Then, students can leave class

with this major block addressed, even minimally. Students mentioned in their responses that spreading out an assignment can help them avoid procrastination because they do a little bit at a time during class time. Five minutes a week could go far to help these students.

- Secondly, time can be dedicated to the concept of revision (see Appendix B for a sample revision activity to use during class time). After collecting the data for this study, I was stunned that there was little discussion of revision in the responses from students, especially for question 7 which asked about the writing process. The reasons for this lack of revision could include time constraints (Berg & Seeger, 2016) and/or current writing instruction practices that emphasize a one-shot production with highly formulaic processes (Brannon et al., 2008; Campbell & Latimer, 2012; Scott, 2009; Gray, 2014). Spending time in class to discuss and conduct revision can address this weak (or completely omitted) stage in the writing process for students.

A second concern includes the students' requests to discuss and study procrastination. Faculty and students can place procrastination squarely on the table for discussion during class time. The concept can be problematized and studied as a component of the writing process. Faculty can ask students to write, read, or talk about procrastination or persistence. These discussions do not need to take extra time in class; they can become the material for the class. For example,

- Many composition classrooms explore definitions, and faculty can select composition-specific topics for assignments, such as the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing that calls for "Persistence," which is defined as "the ability to sustain interest and attention to short- and long-term projects" (Council of Writing Program Administrators). Students can select a concept relating to procrastination or persistence to define both formally and informally. Their exploration into this topic becomes a way to personally reflect on the concept of procrastination.
- Students and faculty can more explicitly talk about how to do "well" and not be "afraid" during the writing experiences. Because almost 66% of the students mentioned fear as a reason for procrastination, blunt discussions about how to do well and not be afraid of a new task can help. These discussions can occur as part of a narrative assignment (describe and analyze a time when you were afraid of a literacy task), or they can be included in commentary about the assignment itself, such as suggestions for success, sample approaches/papers, or suggested processes.

- Principles from Perry (2012) about structured procrastination and active procrastination from Chu and Choi (2005) can be discussed during class time or as homework readings to help students apply positive effects from procrastination to their writing process. For example, students can create to-do lists that break out multiple aspects of a writing process (craft a starting paragraph vs. write the entire paper). Active procrastination can be engaged by using multiple deadlines in a course for smaller tasks (ex: the introduction is due on Monday vs. the entire draft is due on Monday), so students can feel the push of a deadline, which can motivate students according to this research study.
- Finally, faculty can talk about goal-setting and review texts that focus on this concept, such as *Better Than Before* (Rubin, 2014). Students can reflect on their goals and how the day's activities connect back to their goals. If procrastination does involve a weak system of self-reliance, as the psychology-based research suggests, more emphasis on goal setting and deliberate activities that contribute to these goals could be helpful.

Conclusions

While the study results did concur with much of the already published literature on procrastination in terms of negativity, the student perspectives provide a unique lens on procrastination in the writing process. Future studies could provide even richer data on the subject and address some of the limitations of this current study, such as the use of a limited population of students from one institution or the lack of more in-depth collection of data, such as the use of focus groups or one-on-one interviews.

If we listen well to the student participants, we can make some small changes to composition courses to address some of their concerns and pitfalls, such as avoiding long stretches of class time with nothing due. If something as simple as adjusting due dates, dedicating a few minutes of class time to invention work, or highlighting options for revision could potentially impact student success, I am all for it.

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Appendix A: Survey

1. How do you define procrastination? What does it mean to you?

2. What are some reasons why you would procrastinate?

3. What are some reasons why you would NOT procrastinate?

4. In what classes do you tend to procrastinate the most?

5. Are there times when procrastination is beneficial to you? Explain how.

6. Do you manage your time devoted to schoolwork well?   YES   NO
   SOMETIMES

7. Where in the writing process do you tend to procrastinate the most? Why?

8. Have you ever procrastinated because you were afraid of the task?
   YES   NO

9. Have you ever procrastinated because you thought you couldn't do the task well?
   YES   NO

10. Have you ever procrastinated because you didn't feel engaged or interested in the task?   YES   NO

11. Have you ever failed a class due to procrastination?
    YES   NO

12. What has to happen to make you not procrastinate?

13. Is there anything else you want to say about procrastination?

Appendix B: Revision Activity

Revision Strategies (shared by the UNC Charlotte National Writing Project)

Select one and apply it to your current draft

1. Write two new introductions.
2. Write two new conclusions.
3. Add dialogue where you just have description of an event.
4. Rewrite your conclusion as the introduction and then write a new conclusion.
5. Describe a place alluded to in the paper using all five of your senses.
6. Create an opening that starts in the middle of the action.
7. Describe a person mentioned in the paper.
8. Describe a personal experience related to an argument in the paper.
9. Argue from the opponent's point-of-view.
10. Write an argument as a narrative.
11. Write a narrative as an argument.
12. Describe your argument to a friend as if you were having coffee together.
13. Write a formal argument in a stream of consciousness.
14. Write a formal argument as a poem or song.
15. Create a youtube video version of your paper.
16. Put your draft aside and write a quick list of the points you want to make. Go back and see if your list matches your current draft.