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# Why Do Today What Will Be Even Better Tomorrow?

BY SIMON BOXALL

This edition of *The Oceanography Classroom* was to be on a topic I have been mulling over for the past two editions now. However, as I delivered my previous article perilously close to the print deadline, the editor suggested, tongue in cheek, that I should do an article on procrastination. The suggestion infiltrated my thoughts, and I have been procrastinating over which to run with ever since.

I would have said at the outset that I am guilty of procrastinating (but read on)—with a substantive workload, it is a question of prioritizing and getting everything done by deadlines. Douglas Adams (of *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* fame) once said: “I love deadlines, especially the whooshing sound they make as they pass by.” I guess there are four types of deadlines: (1) those that everyone dreams of and aspires to for a relaxed, well-ordered world, delivering well ahead of time; (2) those that run to the line but still deliver, more often than not, a good end result; (3) those that whoosh by with dire consequences; and (4) those where no one notices,

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as nothing was going to be done with the output anyway.

*Procrastinate* is a Latin term (see, even the Romans did it) from *crastinus*—*belonging to tomorrow*. For a true procrastinator, tomorrow never comes. *The Oxford English Dictionary* describes it as prolonging or deferring—often with the sense of deferring through indecision, when early action would have been preferable. There are a vast number of learned papers actually written about the subject. Freud described the Pleasure Principle as being one where unpleasant tasks are delayed in order to do more enjoyable things. He did go on to show that when under pressure, some people find the task more enjoyable and easier to complete. In the past, procrastination has also been linked to perfectionism. However, more recently, it has been associated with denial and a lack of both confidence and motivation. Oh dear!

I enjoy writing these columns, and certainly never see them as a chore or unpleasant. They make me think about my teaching philosophy and what makes our students tick. I also enjoy seeing my name in print and expressing views in a public forum, and whilst I strive for perfection, I know that I don't always achieve it. So, apart from the fact that I always work best under pressure, maybe

I'm not a procrastinator—just an overworked and pompous oceanographer. It is said that if you want to get something done, give it to a busy person. That person will run it to the line to fit everything in, but will deliver. It won't be ahead of the deadline, and if the person senses that the task is a purely bureaucratic exercise that will serve no true purpose (we have all seen lots of those), it might get shelved with no negative outcome.

When I write a lecture or an article, the actual task of sitting at my computer and writing is at the end of a much longer process. Take this article for instance—the writing takes a few hours but the thought process started six months ago, inspired by that email from the editor. When driving, sitting on a plane, and attending dull meetings, I mull over ideas, phrases, and areas of research for material in preparation. Those thoughts that were good and work make it to the final cut; those that don't make the cut disappear from mind fairly quickly. But I need a deadline to download those thoughts into an article or talk. The worst thing possible is to say: “when you get a chance, could you...?” Without a deadline, a need for a deliverable by a certain time, the chances are I could ... but won't.

Students are learning the art of the

deadline. They learn quickly which deadlines are stretchable and which are not. Excuses for missing deadlines are varied, and there are procedures for helping those who do genuinely fall behind for reasons beyond their control. Few students realize that university is the last chance for missing deadlines, even with a good excuse. Getting a grant application in three days late with a doctor's note doesn't work, nor does submitting an article after the edition has gone to press, and if one is preparing for a research cruise, then not having everything ready before the ship sails equals failure.

According to a study by Gallagher et al. (1992), half of all US students surveyed felt a need for counseling to help with procrastination, and virtually every student admitted to having procrastinated over at least one item of course work in a year. Students often complain that they have too much to do to meet all deadlines, and I often get complaints that they have two deadlines in the same week! Life after university will be a shock to some.

I do see traits that corroborate some of the definitions of procrastination. We all tell students to start projects and assignments early, to work steadily at them, and to complete the work in plenty of time. There is a degree of "do as I say, not as I do" here. A few students plan well ahead and are seen to be busy from the outset. The work they produce comes in well ahead of time and is usually good, though, interestingly, not always outstanding or novel. Some will appear to do a limited amount, have evident bouts of activity, and then submit a stunning and innovative piece. I

am always surprised by this behavior, even after 25 years of university teaching. Others will appear to do a limited amount and either produce an inadequate report or, more often than not, nothing at all. In spite of assessed work making up more and more of the degree grades these days, some students simply fail because they repeatedly don't submit anything. Even if they were late with no excuse, they would get some marks. This relatively small cohort of students needs guidance, and I'd question the high percentage in Gallagher's study. In most of these cases, the students are either in the wrong course or university just isn't for them. They often don't enjoy the work and, by definition, will put off doing it for something—anything—else. Some students start to get behind on one or two assignments, maybe due to an illness or other problem. The work builds up, and they effectively give up in despair as the problems escalate. I see this happen with one or two individuals most years, and, again, these students need guidance and possibly some slack in order to allow them to get back on track—either by repeating the year or with additional tutoring and mentoring.

There has also been a rationalization of the number of assignments students do over recent years. In our department, we collaborate as course coordinators to minimize clashes—but maybe taking the strain off could actually lead to less-inspired work rather than better, and ill prepare our students for the professional environment.

Bright students get into the habit of thinking through a problem. They have moments of innovation throughout the

day and store them up in their minds. They are not procrastinators—they are storing ideas and information that, when pen gets put to paper (or finger to keyboard), produce outstanding results. They will keep notes, and they will have understood the subject better for having thought it through. A diligent student who sits down the moment an assignment is given and starts writing will either write until the task is complete, in plenty of time, and submit early, or review and edit the work right up to the deadline. The get-it-done-and-in student will get good marks, the review-and-edit student will get great marks and, like the think-and-then-write student, will have understood the subject in more depth. That does then leave the true procrastinator, who will have clean shoes, a clean room, a clean score at Solitaire, and a clean mind unsullied by any thoughts of science. It is our role as educators and mentors to determine why. Are we not inspiring them, are they uninspired by their current degree subject, or are they just so far behind they need to reset the deadline backlog?

So after all that, I'm not a procrastinator; I just need pressure to deliver well. Having got that out the way, I should now write the original article that I had in my mind in plenty of time for the December deadline and stop putting it off ... starting tomorrow. ☑

## REFERENCE

Gallagher, R.P., A. Golin, and K. Kelleher 1992. The personal, career, and learning skills needs of college students. *Journal of College Student Development* 33(4):301–310.