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Better Late Than Never: How to Deal With Procrastination

Carol Kountz

If you have ever gone to the post office late on April 15 and witnessed people feverishly filing IRS 1040 returns at the last minute, you have observed a form of procrastination, or postponing something unpleasant until it is almost too late. It is common practice, and one that you have probably participated in to a degree. In teaching writing, I observe, we find this behavior pattern all too often—students who can't get a paper in on time; students who produce a shallow paper at the last minute; students who produce nothing at all. Is this behavior an inevitable part of composition?

Procrastination (the word is derived from the Latin *cras*, meaning tomorrow) and writing began to intrigue me, as a college composition teacher, a few years ago when I conducted a series of interviews with students who volunteered to talk about their feelings of writing apprehension. It was the students themselves who raised the subject of procrastination, and they did so almost proudly, as if it were a prestigious act. Gradually, I came to believe that this activity of postponing one's text production reveals something about the mysterious operation of the mind. It is helpful for the composition field to understand the psychological aspect of writing, although scholarly investigation of writing psychology has sometimes been neglected, either because we no longer trust empirical investigation or because it failed to account for cultural and social influences. As teachers and as writers ourselves, it helps us to understand such subjects as writing anxiety and the related topic of writing apprehension, the affective domain of writing, motivation, and disabilities like ADHD. By understanding procrastination, we can interpret it in several different ways: as a promise that the writer makes to the page to be fully prepared; as a safety precaution that the mind gives the writer by letting attention wander; as a warning or threat from the student to the educational institution that represents authority. When we give students a better awareness of these factors, we can address procrastination and alleviate some of their distress.

By procrastination I mean something less obvious than trouble complying with scheduling and

time limits. After all, nearly everyone has a degree of felt hesitation at starting a taxing project—we see it in ourselves—that we may call “normal.” Some postponement of writing is intentional; it tends to be treated as a nearly inevitable occupational hazard that automatically elicits sympathy. Sometimes, students delay writing simply for lack of time; a growing number commute to undergraduate classes day or night while working full-time to support themselves and their families. It is typical for such a person to reserve weekends or days off for homework, which means last-minute composing. Even students who live on campus and do not work may postpone writing because they need to develop time-management skills. Also, a person may be culturally or socially accustomed to treating due dates as relative. Usually, teachers discern these situations and address them in the course syllabus.

The type of delay that we need to recognize concerns writing habits that students rarely reveal. I learned from talking with students that some depend on feeling the presence of a creative impulse, like the muse, and will postpone any attempts to write until conditions are ideal to summon inspiration. Students cling to this trust in the unconscious to free themselves from apprehension. Yet this attitude gives writers license to disregard the rhetorical concerns of stylistic control, diction, and the needs of the audience. The more the writing feels inspired, the less willing the student is to accept suggestions. In such a case, however, the teacher will only be aware that the student refuses to re-write an assignment.

Still another group may avoid writing out of fear; in the most extreme form, they report being unable to write or even to think about writing. Yet these students may not appear anxious; they will conceal their fear. This may be dread of how an instructor or peer will respond to their paper or of what unacceptable self-image the paper may mirror back to the writer. It is a powerful censor. What you write can be an unwelcome manifestation of your failings or your impulses; what you write may transform you by taking you to a state of mind that

was not your planned destination. So, students delay. Some act deliberately negligent and may boast to us that they are slackers. They show pride in appearing virtually helpless to be punctual.

Surprising Benefits

Despite this clear need for procrastination remedies, the fact remains that delay of writing is not essentially bad; periods of delay may actually enhance writing. If this sounds counterintuitive, consider what some students do with their time. One student who reports needing a period of inaction before she begins to compose—"give it enough time," she says—actually uses this time for productive activities like reading related works, taking notes, getting her tools together, or talking to another person about the assignment. Another student refers to her preparation time as "a long percolating stage." She reports that she needs to wander in a daze while reflecting on or mentally outlining the imminent writing project. This helps her adjust her body as well as her mind to write.

What these people say confirms psychological theories: This period is beneficial, according to psychologist David Perkins in *The Mind's Best Work*; incubation provides "physical refreshment, fruitful forgetting, losing commitment to an ineffective approach, and noticing clues in the environment" (57). As we delay, we can mentally sift through our raw material and reserve the best parts. What is more, such repeated reflection speeds up the transfer of related information between the mind's modules, according to psychologist Steven Pinker (27). This swift mental activity corresponds to mood elevation, a productive state of mind for writing.

If preparation or incubation causes some people an inner transformation, it is necessary to let the emotions run their course. In fact, a refusal to experience change in writing and in oneself can put on the brakes. It takes time to come to terms with material we are only partly conscious of. Louise DeSalvo in her new book, *Writing as a Way of Healing*, writes persuasively that discomfort accompanies the initial sessions of expressive or narrative writing, genres similar to the assignments in many first-year college composition courses (94). History shows that Sigmund Freud once underwent a temporary writing paralysis that led to a major theoretical plateau. In 1897, the young Freud reported, "my reluctance to write is downright pathological" (253). Subsequently, he wrote, "I believe I am in a cocoon, and God knows what sort of beast will crawl out" (253). He underwent a period of reflective procrastination during which he analyzed himself and his family relationships; this finally persuaded him, controversially, as many now feel, to reject his original seduction theory, which blamed parents for

sexual abuse of children. Instead, he re-envisioned his findings as the influential theory of infant sexuality. When Freud was able to write again, he quickly produced the manuscript of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Whether we endorse Freud or not, we should note that as a writer he persevered through a blank period and did not give up despite his misgivings.

Even when they are not putting words on paper, then, students can think of themselves as productive. If we encourage classroom discussion about working habits, we can encourage students to do the following:

- to expect the impulse to procrastinate but recognize that it can be a creative stage of the writing experience;
- to see "percolating" as adjustment and inner or mental prewriting;
- to trust their hesitation but use their thought process to produce an incipient text.

Students are interested, I find, in discussing their working habits. Some who put off writing may feel guilty for shirking responsibility or blame themselves for doing something wrong. They will profit from hearing about other writers, like the students I use as examples in this article, and how some wait to begin a writing project. We can also teach students that it is not necessary for a writer to be overwhelmed by anxiety about a paper but to manage that stress by oscillating between considering the assignment and ignoring it. All the while, the idea incubates.

Another important strategy is to use our own reactions to diagnose, in a sense, these recalcitrant students, who can be difficult to reach. It may be that I find one such student pleasantly unconventional; with another, however, I may be baffled by his or her blank attitude; and in still other cases, I may even catch myself surreptitiously wishing for the student to fail. I think I am typical of many teachers, in college as well as K-12 classes, when I confess that I often feel guilty about how I have handled those students. With insight into procrastination, perhaps I could have helped some of them to write better or at least write enough to pass the course.

To do this, I monitor my responses in conferences—or we may have to settle for a five-minute talk in the hall after class. I sometimes sense myself losing objectivity toward the student. My reaction means that the student's state of mind is catching—in other words, I find myself beginning to adopt the student's attitude toward assigned writing. For example, anger I feel toward a student may mirror that student's unexpressed anger, which is her or his unconscious motivation for delay. In psychoanalytic parlance, my attitude is labeled "counter-

transference,” that is, unconsciously becoming the part that the student is playing. Lad Tobin has profoundly described his own classroom and conference experiences with such transfer of feelings in the second chapter of his book, *Writing Relationships*. Like him, by identifying our mental state, we can recognize what the student is undergoing and decide how to respond to it.

Ken, A Case Study

For example, several years ago, Ken (not his real name) got me joking and kidding with him in our conferences. We were meeting to brainstorm for the papers he had not yet written for his first-year writing course portfolio. With a likable student I may unconsciously adopt a childlike wish to be a carefree writer myself that day, mirroring the student's attitude. With Ken, the casual rhetoric of our conferences (once I even joked about his need for a kick in the pants) reflected my inadvertent participation in his resistance to authority. Yet here a peer relationship or friendship actually misled both of us by letting Ken hope for special favors from me and by tempting me to postpone warning him of the consequences he was facing. Both of us infantilized the situation, to the detriment of his learning, not to mention his grade.

Only with hindsight can I see how my feelings were unintentionally pulled out of line. If I had been able to name my emotion at the time, I could have chosen a different attitude, one that would help the student. I might have reached Ken if I had acknowledged his rebellion and adopted a serious persona based on confidence in my judgment and my pride in students' accomplishments. Obviously, I want, if possible, to motivate the student and convey my belief that what we teach has value and is worth learning.

Time is Relative

We should not always reject the hunch to be flexible with unruly students, however. We can exercise judgment in representing the bureaucracy of the institution—e.g., the format for a paper, the deadline, or the syllabus. Teachers tend to focus on individual change when broad educational change alleviates some individual situations. Although the field of composition studies generally agrees that regularly scheduled periods of writing are preferable to an eleventh-hour writing binge, writing is the type of unpredictable activity that does not always align itself with a schedule. For some students, writing feels like a distance to a destination, or a series of shapes that occupy space. Others worry that time will run out and no ideas will be left. The “dead” in “deadline” may sound an ominous note.

We do well to consider that the student who procrastinates without offering an excuse is sometimes showing wordless resistance to the power of the school. Disobeying is a symbolic, passive appropriation of that power, even a threat by the student. Recently, a non-traditional student was taking my first-year composition course for the third time, still trying to pass. His papers were late, if they came at all. He approached the class from a sense of defeat. It might give such students power again to offer them contract grading or a similar student-designed program.

I still feel gratitude for a former professor, Roland Greene, who told those of us enrolled in his writing-intensive course that it was most important to take as much time as we needed to do the writing—if necessary, we could turn in all of our assignments on the last day of class. That policy freed us as students to experiment with writing, and for that it is valuable. When I was preparing this piece, however, I read that statement to a colleague who instantly exclaimed that such a relaxed policy would do her a disservice. Like many people, she needs the pressure of a due-date to make herself finish a writing assignment. Extended deadlines, granting of extensions, permitting incompletes, waiving rules: No single policy will be appropriate for the writing process of each student. Every piece of writing has its evolution. Some fine teachers believe that paper deadlines are inherently good and won't grant extensions because it's not fair to the others in the class. I do offer leeway, however, and I find that some students use this liberty wisely, while others ask me to be more strict.

Students themselves can teach us how to address procrastination. What I learn from them suggests that we should open up discussion about procrastination and writing habits generally in our writing classes and among ourselves, to remove the onus from this infrequently examined aspect of writing. It may be that the reluctance our students feel about beginning to write is parallel to the footdragging I observe in myself when I know I should start to prepare my income tax return. Like an essay, a tax return requires me to collect information from myself as well as from outside sources, to concentrate for several hours on matters remote from the rest of my life, to follow complex instructions and observe a rigid format, and to be accurate and precise. And as with writing for classes, the tax return carries penalties for errors and tardiness—yet, as I know from experience, even the Internal Revenue Service grants extensions.

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