

Savouring the Flavours of Delay

Timothy A. Pychyl
Carleton University

IT WAS A PLEASURE TO BE INVITED to participate in the recent panel on procrastination at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, particularly because I got to engage in a lively discussion, across disciplines, about my favourite topic. Procrastination has been my topic of research as a psychologist for over a decade. I've supervised many theses, published numerous articles, and co-edited two books on the topic. I also author a website, procrastination.ca, where you can access my "Don't Delay" blog for *Psychology Today*, *iProcrastinate Podcast*, or recent procrastination audioBoo (audioboo.fm). I even produce a cartoon strip entitled "Carpe Diem" with a friend who has the artistic talent that I lack. From a social-scientific perspective, I guess you would call me an expert. In lay terms, I'm certainly a geek that knows too much about a little thing.

Well, maybe that's not fair to me or the topic. Procrastination isn't a "little thing." First, it's an extremely common "thing" in our lives. It's so common in fact that at social gatherings people who speak with me about my research usually volunteer as willing participants, certain that they are exemplary specimens. In short, this little thing we call procrastination is everywhere, and it seems to trouble a lot of people. Second, procrastination isn't a "little" thing because it represents one manifestation of a whole

TIM PYCHYL,
Department of
Psychology, Carleton
University, is a 3M
National Teaching
Fellow whose passion
for teaching is
complemented by his
research on academic
procrastination. The
co-editor of *Counseling
the Procrastinator
in Academic Settings*
(American Psychological
Association), he
is focused on the
breakdown in volitional
action and self-regulation
failure.

collection of behaviours that we typically group together as self-regulation failure (for example, overeating, compulsive shopping, or gambling). Even without depicting this form of delay as a pathology, as Julia Wright and Theo Finigan argue we do, I still believe that procrastination holds no virtue. It is the unpalatable form of the many flavours of delay in our lives. Procrastination is that needless, voluntary, often irrational delay of an intended task despite the potential for undermining our performance and/or our well-being in the process. It's not a good thing.

It's important to recognize that all procrastination is delay, but not all delay is procrastination. That's the heart of the matter, I think. In fact, just acknowledging other types of delay in our lives—necessary delays, inevitable delays, and, yes, even sagacious delays—is important in addressing the many ways that procrastination has been addressed in this collection of invited papers.

In my brief commentary, I draw on a few ideas from each of the contributors to address some central aspects of procrastination as well as some common misconceptions. Of course, given the brevity of my reply, my approach is a bit light fingered, as I have chosen those things that leapt off the page to me. Although there are so many other good ideas in these papers that I would like to write about, I have chosen to focus on three themes: 1) The motivational power of avoidance, 2) the tension between “utility” and the affective aspects of self, and 3) the role of negative emotions such as shame and guilt.

In the end, I think you'll see that there is a great deal of agreement between us. We agree that *delay* is a necessary and important part of the creative process in our writing (in our lives). I'm just not sure that we need to carry the moral and emotional burden, misplaced as it is, of calling this delay procrastination. In fact, I think we need to become connoisseurs of the many flavours of delay and learn how to embrace and savour the delay in our lives (while shunning any notion of procrastination that is!).

Avoidance as Motivator

Theo Finigan, reflecting on his graduate studies and drawing on the writing of Mike Gane, acknowledged the “highly complex and at times unpredictable negotiations between productivity and its deferral” (6). Theo understands procrastination as a potential for action, not mere “idleness.” He's not alone in this assessment. Steven Bruhm confessed, with some humour at the conference, that another overdue piece of writing got finished *before* his contribution to the Congress. As he writes, “Perversely, masochistically,

shamefully, procrastination has that productive effect of producing in the absence of productivity” (23).

Yes it does, and Stanford philosopher John Perry writes about this as “Structured Procrastination.” John is a self-described procrastinator yet is a very successful academic with a reputation for getting things done. How can this be? He recognizes the liability that Steven laments shamefully, and yet without any similar feelings of perversion he harnesses the avoidance of one task in the service of another. As Perry puts it, “What could be more noble than using one character flaw to offset the bad effects of another?” By avoiding one task that appears to be urgent and important but is neither, we engage in other tasks on our to-do list. Both because of space constraints and because John Perry’s essay is probably the most read essay about procrastination on the Internet (see www.structuredprocrastination.com), I won’t describe the details any further. Suffice it to say that at least some of Theo’s struggles in his doctoral studies (a struggle that is common, not Theo’s alone) can be resolved by engaging in the more “practicable diversions” as he puts it, without sacrifice of self or dissertation. It is part of the process. At the very least, Theo can rest assured that the temporal aspects of our projects, of our lives, will provide motivation as well. As Steven wrote, “[W]hen the conference is coming so close that I’m beginning to feel hysterical, I write the paper” (21). The dissertation will be written, and no one ever said, not even John Perry, that structured procrastination is an easy road emotionally. It’s simply one way of harnessing avoidance motivation.

Utility and the “Affective Turn”

Both at the conference and in reading her paper, I was struck by Jennifer Blair’s notion of the “utile scholar-in-action.” Most importantly, from my research perspective, I found her analysis of this concept as a form of “utility” crucially important, as the behavioural economists of the world are now arguing that utility explains procrastination. We do things now that provide the most utility, putting off the rest. I think it’s an unfounded claim, at best limited to some forms of delay, but that’s beyond the scope of my writing. Instead, I want to bring our focus to one line in Jennifer’s essay where she so accurately captures the problem with this notion of utility. She writes, “Those who have taken the ‘affective turn’ will say that our attempts at utility are always in vain, because the fact of the matter is that we are made up of many internal and external interacting forces and that this primary condition of affect makes our actions and their effects indeterminable ... in a good way” (13–14). I couldn’t agree more.

From this
framework, *all*
delay becomes
pathologized as
procrastination,
but I think this
is the problem.

We are creatures with an evolutionarily old limbic system at the core of our nervous system that ensures that our emotional brain has quite a say in what we do in the service of these feelings. Simplistic notions of utility may work well for economic predictions on paper, but they do little to explain human behaviour. Each of the contributors speaks to this in some form or another, but Jennifer does this best when explicitly writing that “affect integrates us in the realm of potential rather than in the much more limited and benign realm of the already occurring and known” (14). It is this delay that begets Steven’s “habitual, compulsive detour.” It’s the delay that feeds our forgetting and our creativity, but it is not procrastination. We should welcome this delay, embrace it and celebrate it.

“You ... should ... be ... writing”—Shame and Procrastination

Julia Wright took us from the modern world of the ubiquitous computer and the nagging screen saver back to an idealized, earlier time in the lives of writers to help us conceptualize procrastination as a moral failure. In doing this, she argues that “Understanding procrastination as a moral failure, rather than a private loss, requires an understanding of work as a public resource and hence an ethical obligation—it requires, in short, the emergence of political economy” (18). And, although Julia makes this explicit, each of the other contributors echoes this argument and the resulting pressures as well, whether it be Theo’s consideration of funding, Jennifer’s notion of utility, or Steven’s focus on the inevitability of shame. Oh, the burden of moral failure. Even William James couched the “obstructed will” in these terms, writing, “The moral tragedy of human life comes almost wholly from the fact that the link is ruptured which normally should hold between vision of the truth and action” (547).

Julia’s argument is that procrastination as pathology is rooted in the failure to internalize a work ethic derived from a political economy. As she puts it, “It is not about inspiration or genius but our interpellation as hard-working subjects” (19). From this framework, *all* delay becomes pathologized as procrastination, but I think this is the problem. Only *some* forms of delay are truly problematic. Most of it is necessary in our lives as we negotiate the delicate balance of time, tasks, and priorities on a moment-to-moment basis. As Jennifer ponders, “[H]ow much I might be able to increase my potential productivity to make better use of the limited time available” (11). Doing that obviously involves choices, and this usually means something will be delayed in favour of something else. No pathology here, necessarily.

Concluding Thoughts

“Perhaps then there is no such thing as procrastination. Or, that ‘procrastination’ as we use the term is misleading” (22). In reply to Steven’s statement here, I say, “Yes, and no.” It is true that we use the term in misleading ways, as each of the contributors has shown in his or her own complex analysis. However, procrastination does exist as one form of delay. It’s just that in common practice, in Julia’s world defined by the “ought to’s” of the political economy, we do too often use procrastination and delay as synonyms as opposed to a fuzzy set of semantic cousins.

Despite my plea that we embrace, even savour, the many forms of delay in our lives, I do realize that there will be times when we get that dreadful taste of true procrastination, true self-regulatory failure, and, as Steven Bruhm put it, the “shame produced by procrastination” (23). How do we get that awful taste from our mouths?

A colleague and I just submitted a manuscript for publication today on self-forgiveness and procrastination (Wohl, Pychyl, and Bennett, under review). Our research demonstrated that a little kindness toward the self through self-forgiveness can reduce procrastination on a subsequent academic task by reducing negative affect associated with procrastination on the task initially. So, when you really aren’t engaged in a necessary, inevitable, or sagacious delay but, rather, you are irrationally delaying a task and it truly tastes like procrastination, be kind to yourself, recognize it’s part of the human condition to discount future rewards, to give in to feel good, and to delay action even when it’s not in our best interest in the long run. That little bit of self-forgiveness may help you approach the task in the future and without all the unwanted negative emotions like shame and guilt. You may even find your own creativity, a new idea, or even just the “necessary forgetting” that research entails and to which our contributors spoke to so clearly as part of the writing process.

Works Cited

- James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*, Volume 2. New York: Holt, 1918.
- Perry, J. *Structured Procrastination*. 1995. <http://structuredprocrastination.com>.
- Wohl, M.J.A., Pychyl, T.A., and Bennett, S. (under review). I Forgive Myself, Now Study: How Self-forgiveness for Procrastinating can Reduce Future Procrastination.

