



Comparing active delay and procrastination from a self-regulated learning perspective

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have proposed that the act of postponing academic work may be divided into a traditional definition of procrastination, viewed as maladaptive, and adaptive forms of delay. Adaptive forms of delay may be more consistent with certain facets of self-regulated learning. The current study investigated this issue by examining whether the relations between aspects of self-regulated learning and active delay may be distinct from the relations these aspects of self-regulated learning have with procrastination. Among 206 undergraduates, procrastination was positively predicted by mastery-avoidance goals and negatively by metacognitive strategy usage, whereas active delay was negatively predicted by avoidance goals and positively by self-efficacy. Furthermore, students who reported higher levels of active delay also received better grades. These findings provide support that active delay is a distinct form of delay from procrastination that may be more positive due to its associations with some adaptive self-regulatory processes and academic achievement.

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Pinpointing the exact definition of procrastination and how it should be operationalized is an area of on-going debate (Schouwenburg, 2004; Schraw, Wadkins, & Olafson, 2007; Simpson & Pychyl, 2009; Steel, 2007, 2010). One defining aspect of procrastination agreed upon is that it involves an act of delay. However, the definitions of procrastination vary by researchers with some including the negative emotions that result from task postponement (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984) while others highlight the irrational nature of delay (Steel, 2007, 2010). The operationalization of procrastination has also varied. For example, measures of procrastination have been found to capture several different negative dimensions of procrastination (Díaz-Morales, Ferrari, Díaz, & Argumedo, 2006). In addition, particular procrastination scales (i.e., General Procrastination Scale; Lay, 1986) have been thought to represent the existence of certain types of procrastinators (Ferrari, 1992), although recent findings challenge this notion (Simpson & Pychyl, 2009; Steel, 2010). Further adding to the complexity in understanding the exact nature of procrastination, some have argued that delaying work can sometimes be adaptive (Schraw et al., 2007). Recent findings support the existence of a more adaptive form of delay, active procrastination, by its associations with positive psychological variables and academic outcomes (Choi & Moran, 2009; Chu & Choi, 2005).

However, researchers argue that the concept of active procrastination is an oxymoron because the psychological definition of procrastination is not only conceptualized as an act of delay but also as a form of self-regulatory failure. Therefore, active procrastination is not procrastination but rather a form of purposeful delay (Ferrari, 2010; Pychyl, 2009). The existence of active procrastination has also been challenged, in part because the General Procrastination scale was found to be a poor measure of arousal procrastination, a type of task delay motivated by a preference to work under pressure for arousal-based reasons (Simpson & Pychyl, 2009; Steel, 2010). Active procrastination, however, includes additional dimensions of delay besides a preference to work under pressure. Furthermore, findings do provide support that students report postponing work because they perceive that they work better under pressure (Schraw et al., 2007; Simpson & Pychyl, 2009).

Combining the ideas that there are indications that adaptive forms of delay exist and that the psychological literature has deemed procrastination as inherently maladaptive, in the current study we have decided to use the term *active delay* rather than active procrastination. This type of delay is more purposeful and less debilitating than traditional forms of procrastination (Chu & Choi, 2005). Thus, to distinguish active delay from procrastination further, we will investigate whether active delay is more consistent with adaptive self-regulated learning processes such as self-efficacy and learning strategy usage.

1. Distinguishing procrastination and active delay

Contrasting the irrational nature of procrastination, researchers have acknowledged that postponing a task can sometimes be an intentional

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and rational decision (Schouwenburg, 2004; Simpson & Pychyl, 2009). Examples of potentially adaptive types of delay include when individuals postpone a task because they have prioritized other more important tasks or when more information/resources are needed before the target task is executed (Ferrari, 2010). Other adaptive reasons for delaying work reported by students are to enhance motivation, to reach a state of cognitive flow, and to maximize learning in a minimal amount of time (Schraw et al., 2007).

To measure some of these purposeful aspects of delay, Choi and Moran (2009) developed an instrument representing four dimensions of active procrastination. The first dimension is an intentional decision to delay to make better use of time, which contrasts with the intention–action gap associated with procrastination (Steel, Brothen, & Wambach, 2001). The second dimension is preference for pressure. Unlike the negative emotions associated with postponing work experienced by procrastinators (Rothblum, Solomon, & Murakami, 1986), individuals who actively delay believe they work better under pressure and feel motivated by the challenge of completing a task close to a deadline. This dimension reflects motives similar to Ferrari's (1992) proposed arousal procrastinator. The third dimension represents an ability to meet deadlines despite task postponement, which differs from procrastinators who lack perseverance and are unable to complete work by a deadline (Dewitt & Schouwenburg, 2002). The last dimension captures satisfaction with outcomes despite postponing work, which is not likely the case for individuals who procrastinate since they have a tendency to perform poorly on academic tasks (see Steel, 2007).

Studies have found that individuals who actively delay differ from procrastinators in their levels of self-efficacy, perceptions of time, and in several personal outcomes (Choi & Moran, 2009; Chu & Choi, 2005). For example, active procrastinators are more similar to non-procrastinators in their levels of self-efficacy, time control, and purposive use of time (Chu & Choi, 2005) compared to traditional procrastinators, who perceive their use of time as less personally meaningful (Vodanovich & Seib, 1997). Finally, unlike traditional procrastination, active procrastination was related to low levels of stress and depression and high levels of emotional stability and academic performance (Chu & Choi, 2005).

Despite findings suggesting that this measure captures a form of delay distinct and more adaptive than procrastination, further research is needed to determine the extent that it is self-regulatory. Choi and Moran (2009) did not find active procrastination to be associated with conscientiousness but proposed that active procrastination “is driven by a strong self-regulatory process” and may have significant associations with goal orientations as well as other social cognitive variables (p. 209). Therefore, the current study will examine this construct from a self-regulated learning perspective.

2. Self-regulated learning and procrastination

2.1. Motivational beliefs and procrastination

Perhaps due to procrastination being characterized as a type of self-regulatory failure, a logical direction research has taken is to examine this phenomenon within a self-regulated learning framework. Common motivational beliefs examined within a self-regulated learning perspective are achievement goals and self-efficacy (e.g., Wolters, 2003).

Achievement goals reflect four different purposes for engaging in achievement behaviors: mastery-approach (learning content), mastery-avoidance (avoiding misunderstanding), performance-approach (demonstrating superiority), and performance-avoidance (avoiding appearing inferior; Hulleman, Schrage, Bodmann, & Harackiewicz, 2010). Mastery-approach goals are associated with adaptive processes and outcomes (see Hulleman et al., 2010) and are found to be negatively related with procrastination (Eun Hee, 2009; Howell & Buro, 2009; Howell & Watson, 2007). Performance-approach goals are associated with both positive and negative processes and outcomes (see Hulleman et al., 2010) and have

emerged as either uncorrelated (Wolters, 2004) or positively correlated with procrastination (Howell & Watson, 2007; Wolters, 2003).

Mostly there is consensus that avoidance goals are associated with maladaptive outcomes (see Hulleman et al., 2010). Mastery-avoidance goals have emerged as positively associated with procrastination (Eun Hee, 2009; Howell & Buro, 2009; Howell & Watson, 2007), whereas performance-avoidance goals have emerged as either positively associated or not associated with procrastination (Eun Hee, 2009; Howell & Watson, 2007).

Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) has also been examined in relation to procrastination. High self-efficacy for a task is considered a positive motivational belief due to its strong associations with numerous positive motivational processes and academic outcomes (see Usher & Pajares, 2008). Findings typically suggest that higher levels of self-efficacy are associated with low levels of procrastination (see Steel, 2007).

2.2. Learning strategy usage and procrastination

Another component of self-regulated learning is the utilization of learning strategies (Alexander, Graham, & Harris, 1998). Learning strategies are commonly operationalized with measures that capture the use of cognitive strategies (i.e., rehearsal) and metacognitive strategies (i.e., monitoring). Researchers examining procrastination within a self-regulated learning framework have found both cognitive and metacognitive strategy usage negatively associated with procrastination (Howell & Watson, 2007; Wolters, 2003, 2004).

3. The current study

No studies identified to date have examined active delay within a self-regulated learning framework. Therefore, we examined whether the relations between aspects of self-regulated learning (i.e., achievement goals) and active delay would be distinct from the relations these aspects of self-regulated learning have with procrastination. Since procrastination typically is associated with less desirable motivational beliefs and lower strategy usage, we hypothesized that active delay would relate to adaptive motivational beliefs and greater learning strategy usage. A second aim of this study was to determine whether employing active delay would be associated with higher grades.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

Participants were 206 (74% female; mean age = 24.4; S.D. = 5.5) college students enrolled in a section of a human development course across three different semesters. The sample was ethnically diverse: Hispanic (26%), Caucasian (28%), African American (22%), Asian/Asian American (20%), and Other (4%). Each course section utilized the same syllabus and curriculum, and we controlled for semester in the analyses.

4.2. Procedure

Participants completed an online survey consisting of demographics and Likert-scaled items adapted from previous scales with good reliability and validity measuring the main constructs. Items on all measures except for the procrastination measure were rated on scales ranging from 1 (not at all true of me) to 7 (very true of me). All items pertained specifically to students' human development course. Students' course grades (out of 100) were also gathered.

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