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Emotional Management over Time Management: Using Mindfulness to Address Student Procrastination

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When Claire started tracking which students were heavy users of writing assistance at the Educational Resource Center (ERC) at Boston University, an intriguing pattern appeared: based on tutor notes, repeat visits by the same student often correlated with procrastination behaviors by that student. In other words, a subset of students who came in for repeated brainstorming and planning sessions continued to delay the actual task of writing. Curious about this behavior, Claire reached out to Heather, who works at BU's College of Arts & Sciences (CAS) Center for Writing.[1] Although the CAS Center for Writing does not keep notes on students in the same way as the ERC, Heather had anecdotally noticed a similar pattern. A review of research on procrastination sheds light on why students might continue to struggle to complete assignments even with repeated tutoring sessions. Despite the stubbornly entrenched cultural belief that procrastination is a failure of time management (Burka and Yuen), recent psychology research suggests that procrastination might actually be a way that some individuals cope with negative emotions. This research indicates that procrastination is generally understood to be related to self-regulation, the ability to exert control over one's behavior, thoughts, and emotions (Steel and Klingsieck). One strand of self-regulation research emphasizes the emotional component of procrastination, proposing that it is "a dysfunctional response to undesired affective states" (Eckert et al. 10). ("Dysfunctional response" refers to behavior that detracts from optimal functioning, rather than behavior that is abnormal.) In other words, procrastination occurs when people contemplate what they perceive to be stressful or unpleasant tasks. Seeking to avoid negative emotions, a person might delay their work despite the long-term consequences (Tice et al.), hoping that their future self will be more capable of handling the task. Procrastination can thus be

understood as a form of "short-term mood regulation" that undermines long-term efficacy (Sirois and Pychyl 115).

We believe that these psychological insights are valuable for those working with procrastinating students. In our experience, writing tutors working with procrastinators often emphasize time management and offer logistical advice, such as outlining, organizing sources, or compiling to-do lists, but these strategies unwittingly mirror the stereotype that procrastination is about laziness or disorganization, rather than emotion. It might be more productive, we suggest, to teach tutors about the affective roots of procrastination and design tutoring techniques with the affective causes of procrastination in mind.

More specifically, we propose that mindfulness shows promise as an approach to tutoring chronic procrastinators, particularly those with whom tutors have built relationships through the procrastinators' repeated visits. In its simplest form, mindfulness means awareness: paying attention to the present moment without judgment (Kabat-Zinn). Defining mindfulness as "present-centered, non-reactive self-awareness and nonjudgmental acceptance of thoughts and feelings as they occur," Fuschia Sirois and Natalia Tosti found links between procrastination and low mindfulness (239). It seems to work this way: procrastinators are more likely to be judgmental of themselves and their experiences. Such judgment sparks negative feelings; as a result, procrastinators may temporarily mitigate their discomfort by delaying the work that gave rise to these feelings. Yet procrastinating then makes them feel increasingly stressed and self-critical, necessitating further mood repair and perpetuating a cycle of procrastination (Sirois and Tosti). On the other hand, as Rimma Teper et al. have suggested, practicing mindfulness can improve emotional self-regulation: as we learn to simply pay attention to our emotions and thoughts—rather than jumping straight to judging those thoughts and feelings—we become more sensitive to subtle affective changes and can better control our responses.

Writing tutors already practice mindfulness when they listen carefully, react neutrally, and respond thoughtfully to the essays they read. We suggest that tutor training could further develop these practices and remind tutors of their specific relevance for habitual procrastinators. Of course, tutors are not therapists and should not be expected to diagnose or independently support students dealing with emotional distress.[2] Accordingly, we offer several practical, focused strategies to help writers acknowledge what is on their minds without tutors' overstepping the emotion-

al boundaries of what is appropriate in their relationships with students.

IDEAS FOR ASSISTING STUDENT WRITERS

Habitual procrastination is more than a nuisance; it undermines students' academic success (DePaola and Scoppa) and increases stress and illness (Tice and Baumeister). To help procrastinating writers improve their emotional self-regulation, resist procrastination, and achieve their writing goals, we suggest the following techniques:

Use the rapport-building process to encourage students to become more aware of their emotions.

Rapport-building and establishing a plan for the session are typically the first tasks that tutors undertake during a tutorial. Writing tutors are trained to "establish rapport" and "set at least a tentative agenda" so that they can address particular students' concerns as well as form sufficient interpersonal familiarity to work well with the students (Ryan and Zimmerelli 12, 11). These early moments in a session can also serve another important purpose: clarifying how students might struggle with procrastination and encouraging them to reflect mindfully on how procrastination relates to their emotions about writing. If students suggest that they are struggling to get started or move forward, tutors can ask additional questions that encourage them to reflect on the feelings that lead them to avoid writing, such as "Describe how you get started with a writing assignment—is it a struggle? Is writing generally a pleasant task for you—why or why not? How do you feel when you aren't able to complete your work in a timely fashion?"

In our experience, a few leading questions are often all it takes for students to make meaningful connections between their emotions and their work habits. Claire once worked with a graduate student who spoke passionately about his ideas but struggled to write between appointments. Claire asked the student why he had such a hard time getting started on work in which he was deeply invested. The student responded that he was afraid to write something his advisor might think was stupid. When encouraged to elaborate, he added that he thought he had good ideas, but he was self-conscious about his ability to express himself because English was not his first language. This conversation increased the student's self-awareness as he explicitly connected his habitual procrastination to his insecurities about English. Claire reminded him that if he would bring in a draft, they could work on his language before his advisor saw his work. In subse-

quent interactions, the student still struggled to meet all of his own ambitious goals for productivity, but he started bringing in partial drafts rather than empty pages.

Promote nonjudgmental acceptance of the stress writing can elicit.

Writing tutors can encourage students to accept stress as a natural part of the writing process. If a tutor hears a student denigrate her anxieties about writing (e.g., "I hate how I let writing make me nervous; I can't ever get the words just right."), the tutor might acknowledge that writing assignments stress many writers and inform the student that such negative self-judgment about feelings of stress can make future writing even harder. The tutor might also consider sharing personal experiences with self-judgment. When faced with self-critical procrastinators, we tell them that in order to get started on a project, we often need to remind ourselves to turn off our judgmental voices and give ourselves permission to write a "bad" draft.

Tutors can also help students identify irrational beliefs that underlie their procrastination. If students explain that they procrastinate because they believe they will feel more capable of doing the work later, tutors can interrogate that assumption in a friendly way: "What would need to happen for you to feel ready to do your work? What conditions would help you to do your work without feeling distracted or discouraged?" Answering such questions may help writers articulate the conditions they need to write—perhaps a quiet space or adequate sleep—and may lead them to change their work habits. When we ask students questions like these, we are reminded of how often students are attempting to work under terrible conditions, such as in front of a television or while totally exhausted, without recognizing that such conditions likely contribute significantly to their frustrations with writing. Moreover, asking questions like these may help students recognize that they have convinced themselves they cannot work without an idealized set of conditions. For instance, a student who does not want to try to get started on her paper unless she has a polished outline, has met with the professor, and has completed all of her other academic work, sets herself up for failure. Tutors can help such students brainstorm which writing conditions are less realistic. Such conversations may also help some students realize that they may never be struck with a desire to write, so they might as well just start now. We both can attest to how freeing it can be to recognize that "feeling like it" is not a prerequisite for sitting down to work.

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Help writers practice healthy self-regulation by using the tutoring session to write.

When meeting a student who was struggling to start a paper on Frankenstein, Heather asked him to write three different potential thesis statements in fifteen minutes. Afterwards, the student said that this exercise relieved some of his anxiety about trying to craft one perfect thesis statement and encouraged him to try out different ideas. A tutor can help a writer set small writing goals like this one to complete within a single session. After the student completes the task, the tutor can ask them to reflect on how they feel after reaching one small goal. As mindfulness author Dinty W. Moore suggests, it is valuable to reflect not only on "what voices arise in your head to discourage you [from writing]" but also on what it feels like after "enduring the doubt and discomfort and remaining on the job" (60). Tutors and students can brainstorm how to apply this technique beyond the tutorial: a student at home might set a timer and work for short intervals or define small goals and take breaks after completing each one.

Ask students to reflect on how technology can distract them from writing and affect their emotions.

Some of our students complain that technology abets their procrastination. It can be easy to avoid negative emotions associated with writing through distractions like social media, videos, mobile apps, or online games. Writing tutors can ask students how they allot energy to different technological tasks throughout the day. By thinking mindfully about these tasks, students may realize which ones deplete their energy for their writing assignments. This question might also help students identify ways they avoid writing, such as completing easier tasks like answering email first. Tutors can then help students develop strategies to prioritize writing, perhaps by creating a daily schedule in which they set aside uninterrupted writing time or by designating specific times of the day to check social media.

Faced with a student who confides a tendency to delay by browsing the internet, a tutor might encourage them to pause before navigating to Netflix or Facebook, notice the impulse, and then consider whether they really want to continue. If this strategy proves difficult, students can download software that blocks access to certain sites for designated amounts of time. We have found that students are receptive to learning about software that helps them with self-control, and we regularly point to options like Nanny and StayFocusd, Google Chrome extensions that allow users to limit or block their access to time-wasting sites.

We also encourage tutors to point students to tools that more actively promote emotional reflection. One example is the Google Chrome extension Momentum, which allows users to create a daily to-do list and designate one task as most important. Each time a user opens a new tab, they are reminded of this important task. Momentum does not prevent users from navigating to another website; it simply gives them a moment to consider whether they really want to do something unrelated to achieving their writing task.

CONCLUSION

In order for writing tutors to confidently employ techniques like those above, we suggest that writing centers address mindfulness in their tutor training. Indeed, Jared Featherstone, Associate Director of the University Writing Center at James Madison University, already incorporates mindfulness in tutor training: his Tutoring Writing course introduces tutors to mindfulness by asking them to practice carefully reflecting on their reactions while reading students' texts (Patena). Writing about their experience in this course, one tutor-in-training says, "Thinking about how and where we had—or hadn't—focused our attention [as we read student essays] helped us to appreciate the importance of mindfulness and nonjudgment as we approach student writing…. I see the fruits of its emphasis on sensitivity and nonjudgment every time I work with students in the Writing Center" (2). As these comments highlight, Featherstone's exercise is intended to inculcate mindful habits in tutors themselves: tutors learn to stay present and nonjudgmental as they read essays and engage with student writers. Through exercises like this one, paired perhaps with readings about mindfulness, writing center administrators can educate tutors in the kind of focused, nonjudgmental attention to the present that the techniques we suggest above require from both tutors and writers.

Not all writing centers have semester-long training courses, but we have found that tutors can also learn about mindfulness in less expansive ways. For instance, at the CAS Writing Center, Heather leads a one-day orientation instead of teaching a course, but she still had success using a short reflective writing exercise in which tutors describe their emotions at different stages of the writing process. After completing this activity, tutors discussed how the students they work with might have similar or different emotional experiences when they come to the writing center. Then the tutors brainstormed techniques for responding appropriately. At the ERC where Claire worked, tutors participate in biweekly

meetings that double as pedagogical development, and Claire assigned short readings on mindfulness and led discussions on how it might relate to tutoring. Tutors were then encouraged to appropriately apply these ideas during tutoring sessions. When tutors reflected on their experiences, some were more interested than others in how mindfulness might apply to tutoring—interestingly, those tutors who actively practiced yoga or who studied religion seemed more enthusiastic and confident about applying techniques inspired by mindfulness research. On the whole, though, the response from tutors has been positive; several said that just knowing about the link between emotional self-regulation and procrastination has helped them be more patient with repeat visitors who did not seem to advance on their own. Discussing the research reminds tutors that students who procrastinate are not typically just ignoring advice to get started because they want to do something more fun.

Mindfulness can serve as a powerful tutoring strategy, allowing procrastinating students to recognize the negative emotions leading them to avoid writing. But tutors must also remember that discussing difficult emotions can cause students to disclose personal struggles such as addiction and mental illness. Indeed, concerns about a student's well-being sometimes arise even when the student is not explicitly asked about their emotional state. If writing centers don't already have established policies for what tutors should do if they are concerned about a student, they should develop them, and all writing center administrators should explain such policies to tutors. In less severe situations, however, we advocate that tutors consider mindfulness strategies as techniques that may help students work through the negative emotions hindering their writing.

NOTES

1. The ERC offers writing assistance appointments to all students on campus, including undergraduate and graduate students, native English speakers, and L2 writers. By contrast, the CAS Center for Writing specifically serves undergraduates enrolled in Writing Program courses.

2. We would encourage all centers to communicate a clear policy to tutors about what they should do when a student exhibits distress. Many writing centers tell tutors that they should immediately speak to a writing center administrator if they are concerned about a student's well-being.

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