Emotion-Oriented Reflection During Academic Writing: A Contrasting Case Analysis of a High and a Low Procrastinator

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Abstract: Academic writing is a core learning task in the social sciences and humanities. At the same time, academic writing is prone to procrastination. In this paper, we compare how a low trait procrastinator and a high trait procrastinator differ in their affective results and reported procrastination behavior during their first collaborative academic writing process. Focusing on two cases, we investigate how they self-reflect about their academic writing process. We find that the high procrastinators have a more negative affect and report more procrastination behavior. In general, the academic writing process comes for both cases with similar emotional experiences and difficulties. However, we find that the low procrastinator reflects more elaborate, especially regarding emotions during the process, coping strategies for dealing with difficulties, and the role of collaboration partners and social aspects. This detailed analysis may help to develop specific support tools for students to avoid unpleasant emotions that may start a vicious cycle of procrastination behavior in academic writing.

Keywords: academic writing, reflection, epistemic emotions, procrastination, contrasting case analysis

Introduction and theoretical background

Academic writing is one of the core skills that higher education students need to master. However, one of the core challenges related to writing term papers is procrastination (Klingsieck & Golombek, 2016). Consequently, there is a need for supporting students during academic writing, not only in their development of academic writing skills but specifically in preventing / reducing procrastination. This paper aims at providing detailed insight on how two students experience and think about their crucial first academic writing process, that could be helpful for the development of means of support.

Procrastination means a voluntary delay of an intended course of action despite the expectation to be worse off for the delay (Steel, 2007). Usually, procrastination occurs in relation to a specific task, such as academic writing. However, studies on long-term observations and twins have shown that procrastination is to some extent also a stable personality trait, independent from specific tasks and closely connected to consciousness (Steel, 2007). Consequently, students' experiences and needs for support may differ based on their general proneness to procrastination. In the context of academic writing, procrastination has been found to be linked to poor academic performance and reduced well-being (Steel, 2007). This is not surprising as procrastination results in a lack of time for successful self-regulation processes, including coping with difficulties (Zimmerman, 2001). As a result, procrastinators show higher levels of anxiety (Lay & Schouwenburg, 1997). However, anxiety and unpleasant emotions as well as aversive attitudes are, in turn, major causes of further procrastination behavior (Steel, 2007).

Most research on emotions during learning processes so far has focused on anxiety, resulting in a lack of scientific knowledge about other unpleasant emotions and especially about pleasant emotions and their role for learning. Many different epistemic emotions of pleasant or unpleasant nature can occur and influence information processing and learning behavior. Surprise, curiosity, and enjoyment as well as frustration, confusion, anxiety, and boredom are the most important ones according to Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia (2014). However, we know little about how they occur during the process of academic writing.

Based on this line of argumentation, the in-depths investigation of students' experiences with academic writing will be guided by the question: *How do a student with low and a student with high procrastination traits differ in how they experience their first collaborative academic writing process?*

Methods

The study reported in this paper is part of a larger design-based research project that investigated in several cycles how a support tool for academic writing (the online research log) affects procrastination and positive emotions towards literature-based inquiry. For the contrasting case analysis, we will focus on two students who participated voluntarily in a field study that was connect to the main introductory courses during their first semester in an B.A. program on Educational Science at a German university. The students reflected about their academic writing process in the online research-log over several weeks by rating their epistemic emotions on a five-point Likert

scale and writing prompted reflection texts. We selected the students with the highest (Hanna) and the lowest (Lucie) trait procrastination scores and complete reflection data.

Findings

Looking at Lucy's and Hanna's emotional ratings throughout their writing process, the overall pattern is the same for both: pleasant emotions decreased during the inquiry process and raised again towards the end of the project. We find the opposite pattern for epistemic emotions with a negative valence: they increased during the inquiry process and mostly disappeared towards the end. However, for Lucy, the decrease of positive and the increase of negative epistemic emotions happened earlier in the process and in a stronger way compared to Hanna. The positive epistemic emotions were also higher at the beginning and the end of the inquiry process for Lucy than for Hanna. Hanna, however, started with higher negative emotions than Lucy. Only anxiety differed strongly between the two students. While anxiety followed the same trend as other negative emotions for Hanna, it was on a constantly high level for Lucy throughout the whole academic writing process.

The verbal reflections also show similar macro-patterns for the two students. Both struggled a lot with time management and both reported complications with collaboration during the inquiry process because of differences in working styles between the project partners and because partners did not complete tasks the students had expected them to take care of. Both students mentioned also issues with writing. Throughout the inquiry process, both students reported several successes when they were able to finish sub-tasks of their academic writing process such as finding a topic for their term paper. However, there are striking differences in how the two students did their reflections. In general, Lucy, the low procrastinator wrote much more than Hanna, the high procrastinator. Beyond the mere amount of reflection text, there are three main differences between the two students. (1) The way they address emotions: Lucy addresses a variety of emotions throughout her reflections and connects them to her experiences and future plans for the academic writing process. The connection between her written reflection and the emotions she reported in the questionnaire is clearly visible, while Hanna had only a very small variety of emotions, mostly of positive valence that seem not connected to the written reflections. Hanna mentions constantly to be content with the process. (2) The way they address social aspects and collaboration: Lucy and her partner met regularly throughout the whole academic writing process and worked synchronously together; she often uses "we" in her reflections and reports social strategies and aspects of coordination. Hanna, in contrast, stays much vaguer but seemed to have distributed work with her partner early on and mentions several coordination problems. (3) The way they address difficulties and coping strategies: Lucy reported a variety of problems but also coping strategies, while Hanna focused mostly on time management as her core problem.

Discussion and conclusion

This contrasting case analysis can only give first hints and further investigation with a larger sample is necessary before any reliable conclusions can be drawn. However, our findings point in the direction that it is a challenge to prevent procrastination in students who are generally prone to procrastination and that these persons are specifically at risk to struggle with academic writing. While prompting the low procrastinator to reflect about her process seemed already very beneficial for her, the high procrastinator did not fully use this opportunity and stayed on a very superficial level. While low procrastinators may benefit from such minimal interventions, students with higher trait procrastination levels may need additional support and instruction about how to reflect beneficially and how to structure academic writing processes, especially when they take place in a collaborative form.

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