Understanding the Procrastination Cycle
(in The Learning Curve, Winter 2013)

Meehan Rasch
USC Gould School of Law

and

David A. Rasch

Legal Studies Research Paper Series No. 13-14

June 17, 2013
If there is a single truism about human life, it is that change is constant. In technology, as in life, things move apace and shifts happen often. For members of the millennial generation, digital natives, technology and the rapid changes it represents are perhaps unremarkable; change is simply an accepted aspect of life and learning.

The rapid development of new technologies, while commonplace to some, may have far reaching ramifications for the legal academy. In the face of ever-increasing change, our institutions, classrooms and approaches must adapt or be adapted to new technology at record speeds.

At the same time, we must continue to deliver top flight learning experiences to all of the students who enter our doors.

This issue will address ideas about technology and mindfulness in the context of our classrooms and institutions and will examine the way we relate to technology as institutions and as individuals. We hope that this issue has something for everyone. Some of our authors present ideas about how best to use new technologies in the context of our courses, while others shed light on old technology-related debates that continue to merit robust discussion. Still others address teaching and learning issues that, while not directly linked to technology, do relate to the way we use and think about the basic technologies that have become part of everyday academic life.

At The Learning Curve, we believe that reflecting on the role of technology in our classrooms and our institutions is a worthwhile exercise—one that can enhance our classrooms, our institutions, and our lives. We hope that this issue will help you to think about and reflect on your own work as you begin a new calendar year and reengage with an academic environment primed to embrace new ideas.

Corie Rosen, on behalf of The Editors

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

Arthur C. Clarke
Understanding the Procrastination Cycle

Meehan Rasch
Legal Research and Writing Fellow, UC Davis School of Law; and

David A. Rasch, PhD

Procrastination is one of the enduring challenges of human existence, as well as one of the chief problems with which law students struggle. Understanding the cycle of procrastination can help law professors and advisors more constructively address students’ issues in this area—not to mention our own.

When a student puts off studying or working on an assignment, she experiences a moment of relief. It feels good to procrastinate because, for a while anyway, the procrastinator doesn’t have to face the many challenges that legal study presents; on the other hand, it also functions as a disconnect from true engagement with one’s work and present purpose. Unfortunately, patterns of putting off work are typically repeated and reinforced, and many law students procrastinate again and again, despite their best intentions.

Procrastinators may castigate themselves as being “lazy,” but that label is misleading. Laziness implies a degree of contented relaxation that rarely applies to law students. The procrastination state, on the other hand, is typically very dynamic and uncomfortable on the inside, even if nothing is happening on the outside.

Thinking of procrastination as a cycle or wheel helps one to understand how procrastinators unwittingly create and maintain certain patterns of behavior, and why they then feel unhappy and controlled by that behavior. Although each person’s cycle of procrastination is unique, several common features are included on this wheel of suffering. The more times students go around the wheel, the more they reinforce their own behavioral patterns. The steps become grooved and automatic, until eventually the wheel spins without conscious awareness.

Law students with longstanding bad habits are typically unaware of the mechanisms that control their behavior; they are ignorant of the fact that they are automatically re-enacting patterns of avoidance behavior designed to protect them from uncomfortable feelings of anxiety. Daydreaming, forgetfulness, rationalizing, confusion, and distraction are all aspects of this cycle.

[Diagram of the Procrastination Cycle]

WINTER 2013
Quick-fix solutions to long-standing procrastination are as effective as fad diets, especially if those solutions are part of the wheel itself (ex. self-criticism, unrealistic plans, binge writing at deadlines, internal pep talks).

Habits are resilient and efforts toward change must be carefully considered and executed in order to be successful. Law students can jump off the procrastination wheel at any point in the cycle, but it is important to respect the power of these patterns and set expectations and goals accordingly.

Law professors and academic support professionals can help students break the procrastination cycle by pushing students to examine their work habits specifically and objectively, with a spirit of curiosity and self-forgiveness. Many students shown the procrastination wheel above will recognize the patterns as their own. Professors can encourage students with procrastination issues to further notice how they behave day-to-day, considering the following questions:

- What are the things you typically do when you are avoiding your legal studies?
- Do you reward yourself for not working in any obvious or subtle ways? How?
- Do you do anything that makes your legal studying unappealing or aversive?

Advisors should encourage struggling students to begin with small steps that are only mildly uncomfortable because students are more likely to experience feelings of anxiety, overload, resentment, and dread if their goals and expectations push them too far beyond their comfort zones. Understanding the procrastination cycle offers students more power over their patterns, and every victory serves to slow the cycle.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING:


"Technology...is a queer thing. It brings you great gifts with one hand, and it stabs you in the back with the other."

Carrie P. Snow