

STUDENT'S TIME MANAGEMENT AT THE UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL

Timothy W. Johnson

This paper was completed and submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master Teacher Program, a 2-year faculty professional development program conducted by the Center for Teaching Excellence, United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, 2008.

DEFINITION

I believe most undergraduate college professors would expect their students to come prepared both for class and prepared to manage their lives outside of the class. I would postulate that most professors take this for granted. I know I did, especially here at West Point, where if you don't manage your time properly you suffer. Students should (and probably need to) possess the ability to manage their resources and time effectively as they enter college.

What I have learned, through my short time teaching, and the research supports it—is that those who learn to manage their time effectively have a higher rate of success while those who fail to manage their time fall behind.

The transition for most high school students to higher education and the increased workload is often unmanageable and can lead to high levels of stress and anxiety which can directly impact student performance. The question becomes what can be done to mitigate these stress levels and who should be responsible. Should the Math 101 professor be responsible for taking some of his class time to teach time-management skills? Is it an institutional responsibility? Is it a student responsibility?

BACKGROUND

This may sound like the ranting of a second year instructor, but I have noticed a 'trend' in my classroom over the past four semesters that has peaked my interest. I have had the luxury of teaching a double-block course and for the most part only using the first hour for instructions, thus leaving the second hour to devote primarily to interaction with the students. The 'trend' I have noticed involves the students that take advantage of this second hour to fully absorb the lesson notes and material, ask questions about what they just saw, and work on take-home problems in the classroom. These students tend to either excel in the course based on GPA and general understanding of the material or they are the ones that greatly improve their scores as the semester progresses. I attribute this 'trend' or phenomenon to the following:

1. These students are managing their time more effectively. They are not waiting to the last minute to complete required homework and graded events. With greater time the student has the ability to better comprehend the material by re-checking their work, pondering over the solution (does the answer make sense?), and also having

the ability to ask me (their instructor) more detailed questions about issues that may come up on the homework. The student that leaves his work till the last minute does not have the same opportunity.

2. The homework sets (in the courses I teach) are also structured to follow the sequence of lessons. The cadets that stay after normally complete that portion of the out-of-class assignment that is relevant to the material they just learned in class. The material is fresh in their mind and their ability to work through the problem without faltering is greatly enhanced.

3. The drawbacks on waiting to the last minute are also obvious. I am sure I could prove that prolonging out-of-assignments to the last minute only increases the amount of time you will spend on it (if you are serious about getting a good grade). Struggling to recall information learned several lessons ago in order to complete a problem are an obvious pitfall that slows down students as they attempt to complete their assignment. This also fails to reinforce the material learned in class and leads to finding a quick solution to meet a deadline, rather than truly learning the material.

4. This point may be specific to West Point, but it involves the waste of time associated with walking back and forth from the barracks to the academic areas between class periods. Staying the second hour saves a minimum of 20 minutes that can be devoted to class work and more importantly may alleviate the temptation to ‘hit the rack’ or get on your Facebook account.

5. Last, but maybe most important, is the face-to-face interaction with the instructor that does not occur in a typical classroom setting where in most cases the lesson plan controls and the instructor’s attention is divided among all members of the class. I make the analogy that the second hour is almost like having a private tutor; there to answer individual questions that may arise. In my experience, this ‘private tutoring’ is not widely used, but critical when it does. Take the case of the student who attempts to work through his homework problem but reaches a point of confusion. When the instructor can help get the student over the hurdle the time loss is minimal. The opposite is true, I believe, if the student is alone in his room. Imagine the student working on his homework the night before it is due. When that student is stuck, it is much harder to work through the problem—that student gets desperate and time is wasted.

CONTROVERSY

While I cannot provide any concrete, research-based, empirical data on this ‘trend’, the anecdotal evidence is there based on student feedback, student grades, and my general observations of conceptual understanding of the course material. The students that take advantage of this second hour make up roughly 25% of my current enrollment. Could it be that the ‘smarter’ students make up this 25% and are the ones to stay after class to take advantage of that second hour (i.e. manage their time more effectively) as opposed to theorizing that those that stay the second hour perform better in class. Sure, that is why research in this area is needed.

So do better time management skills matter? Of course, but the question becomes: Should time management be mandated at the under-graduate level? Can it be taught? Is it the role of an instructor? Is it the role of college administrators? Most colleges and universities have publications and brochures on effective time management as part of their introduction and transition packets for incoming students. But is that enough? Should individual professors bear some of that responsibility to teach our college undergrads about managing their time? Should they use valuable class time? All of these questions are important, but for me the most important question is how do I make the other 75% of students see the advantages of effective time management?

I do not want this to turn in to a paper on staying the second hour, because that relates, I believe, directly to the West Point experience, so I will make this a discussion of time management skills. Ultimately I will conduct this type of research, but for now the purpose of this paper is to serve as a literature review of the existing research on time management skills and its impact on understanding, comprehension, and performance at the undergraduate level.

REFERENCES

- Britton, B., & Tesser, A. (1991) Effects of Time-Management Practices on College Grades. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 83, n3, 405-410.
- Chickering, A.W., & Gamson, Z. (1999) Development and Adaptations of the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, vol 1999, Issue 80, 75-81.
- Cook, A., & Leckey, J. (1999) Do Expectations Meet Reality? A survey of changes in first-year student opinion. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, vol. 23, n2 157-171.
- Macan, T., & Shahani, C. (1990) College Students' Time Management: Correlation with Academic Performance and Stress. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 82, n4, 760-768.
- Young, J.R. (2002) Homework? What Homework? *Chronicle of Higher Education*, vol. 49, issue 15
- Zimmerman, B., Greenberg, D., & Weinstein, C. (1994) "Self-Regulating Academic Study Time: A Strategy Approach" In D.H. Schunk & B.J. Zimmerman (ed.) *Self-regulation of Learning and Performance*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

ANNOTATED READINGS

Britton, B., & Tesser, A. (1991) Effects of Time-Management Practices on College Grades. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 83, n3, 405-410.

This article concludes that there is a direct correlation between time-management skills and classroom performance. The study looked at both short and long term data from time management surveys and their impact on performance. This study also included students' academic level (through SAT scores) and found that intelligence was an independent variable that did not impact the correlation between time management skills and academic performance; "even if the relationship between SAT scores and grade point average has been underestimated, our analysis procedures ensure that SAT score cannot serve as a plausible explanation for the relationship between time management and grade point average." (Britton 1991)

Chickering, A.W., & Gamson, Z. (1999) Development and Adaptations of the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, vol 1999, Issue 80, 75-81.

The fifth principle (out of the seven) is Good Practice Emphasizes Time on Task. The main supporting point is "time plus energy equals learning" (Chickering 1999). This fifth principle explicitly states that learning to use one's time well is critical for student performance. The article also mentions that the undergraduate institution should play a role in developing student time management skills.

Cook, A., & Leckey, J. (1999) Do Expectations Meet Reality? A survey of changes in first-year student opinion. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, vol. 23, n2 157-171.

This articles looks at the transition for first year undergraduate students in the United Kingdom. It emphasizes that a good freshmen orientation can go a long way in easing the transition and part of the orientation program should involve learning effective time management skills. One of the biggest mistakes that first year students make is to underestimate the work load. In order to be successful the college student must develop effective time management skills. The article also implies that institutions should emphasize and support effective orientation policies.

Macan, T., & Shahani, C. (1990) College Students' Time Management: Correlation with Academic Performance and Stress. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 82, n4, 760-768.

This study relates time management to academic performance to stress levels in college students. It is important to note that a majority of the data collected was self reported. The study concluded that higher scores on the "time management behaviors" were indicative of a higher academic performance level and lower stress levels. Also interesting were the results that showed stress levels were lower because students felt "in control of their time" (Macan 1990). The "time management behaviors" of effective planning and setting goals (teachable aspects of time management) correlated to an increase in performance—which is ultimately a good sign that time management can be taught to provide a better and healthier undergraduate experience to students, both academically and mentally.

Young, J.R. (2002) Homework? What Homework? *Chronicle of Higher Education*, vol. 49, issue 15

This article focused on the poor study habits of students entering college and how those study habits practiced earlier in life are carried over to the college experience. The article cites a statistic that “19% of full-time freshmen say they spend only 1 to 5 hours per week preparing for classes” (Young 2002). The article also cites some creative solutions to the lack of student study time, for example, by incorporating study logs into classroom preparation. The study logs, however, often show that more time does not necessarily mean learning is occurring, “it’s not that they don’t study enough, but they don’t study well.” (Young, 2002) The article briefly makes the point that teachers should be teaching the ‘hidden curriculum’ of how to study, but they are not.

Zimmerman, B., Greenberg, D., & Weinstein, C. (1994) “Self-Regulating Academic Study Time: A Strategy Approach” In D.H. Schunk & B.J. Zimmerman (ed.) *Self-regulation of Learning and Performance*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

A main point of this article is that the proper use of time (time management) can be used as a performance outcome for the students’ undergraduate experiences. Time is and has been a very important factor in academic performance and the time spent on “academic ‘units’ is a better predictor of their achievement on standardized tests than IQ”. (Zimmerman 1994) The article also highlighted some recent studies that measure self-management of a course. In other words, students were allowed to take as much or little time on a certain course and then they were tested on the material. This study found that “high achievers displayed significantly more goal setting and planning than low achievers.” (Zimmerman 1994)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Obviously (and supported by these few references above) a student with good time management skills will do better, but will it make you a better learner? In my opinion it does. I know this is only a second year instructor ranting on what he sees in the classroom, and if I had more time I would have set out to research this on my own, but the most impelling thing I see separating learning from memorization, understanding versus surface learning is time management. I think the onus is on the student to manage his time, but I think instructors/professors/teachers should show their students how to be successful and give them every opportunity to be successful. Time management (‘the hidden curriculum’) should be taught both directly and indirectly even at the undergraduate level.

The literature (for the most part) supports this conclusion, but what I think it comes down to is the students having the time to put forth the effort. The second hour eases the burden of that effort, it allows for one-on one instruction, it allows the instructor to work with different learning styles. Why does it make a difference? Because if a student can get the out-of-class work done more efficiently that student will have time to read the text, get deeper into the material, and LEARN.