

Title:

University students' self-regulation of time management

Theme:

ADVANCING ACTIVE LEARNING

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UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' SELF-REGULATION OF TIME MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This study reports university students how to manage time to reach their goals. These students are members of a time management self-help group at a university in Hong Kong, who have different degrees of experience in using weekly schedules to manage their time. Interviews were conducted to understand the process of their development.

A TWO SENTENCE SUMMARY TO BE PUBLISHED IN THE CONFERENCE PROGRAM

Students in the time management self-help group have been challenged to use weekly time schedules to monitor the use of time. Interview data reveal that their development of time management skills involves at least four stages.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent studies on university students' time management skills have indicated that the amount of time students spend on their academic study may be far from adequate (e.g., City University of Hong Kong, Student Development Services, 2000a & b; NSSE, 2004 & 2006). Some surface learning behaviours which may have aversive effects on students' study have been observed. It is not uncommon for students to come to class without adequate preparation and to submit assignments that are not carefully revised. Some students even skip classes in order to complete their assignments or for last minute cramming for tests (e.g., Zimmerman, Greenberg & Weinstein, 1994). To help students to overcome these problems, a variety of interventions on setting goals and planning time have been conducted.

Research studies on the effects of time management interventions have obtained inclusive findings. While some programmes on time management strategies do not seem to make a significant impact on participants' time management behaviours (e.g., Bost, 1984; Macan, 1996), academic results (e.g., Trockel, Barnes & Egget, 2000) and work performance (e.g., Claessens et al., 2007), other studies found significant improvement if participants were required to do some follow-up work, such as completing activity diaries to indicate how they spent each of the half hours of the day (e.g., Orpen, 1994; Slaven & Totterdell, 1993). Favourable results were also found with time management interventions within university courses in which continuous application and reinforcement were arranged (e.g., Zimmerman, Greenberg & Weinstein, 1994) or within a course on learning to learn in which problem-based learning was used to create a highly supportive environment for self-regulated learning (e.g., Kwan & Ko, 1999b, 2002, 2003 & 2004).

To help first year full-time students of the school of Education and Languages at the Open University of Hong Kong to better manage their time, two workshops on setting goals and managing time are conducted at the beginning of the first term. In order to provide students with continuous support, a time management self-help group has been set up to help students self-regulate their use of time since January 2009.

Students join the group on voluntary basis. They discuss why they entered university and set long- and short-term goals. From their list of goals, students specify the tasks and sub-tasks they need to complete to achieve their goals. They then make year and semester plans to indicate the deadlines for these tasks. Based on their year and semester plans, students make their weekly plans to budgeting their time for the tasks and other activities. In the process, three components

related to time regulation: a goal manager, a task planner, and a scheduler are included (Britton & Glynn, 1989).

Students meet once a week to share with group members their success and problems in monitoring their time to achieve their goals. Students find participating in the group very empowering, particularly in developing their mind set, time management, study habits and strategies (Kwan, 2009).

THIS STUDY

The aim of this study is to understand the process of students' development in time management to draw implications for refining the arrangement of this self-help group and formulating related supports.

The participants were three of the students (Student A, B and C), with different degree of experience in using weekly time schedules. They were selected to this study because they have participated frequently in the group meetings. *Student A* is a mature student who has work experience. She has just returned to university and is studying first year in a full-time undergraduate degree programme in English Language Studies. She joined the group in October 2009 and has formulated about 24 weekly time schedules since then. She has never stopped making weekly time schedules.

Student B is a second-year student in a full-time undergraduate double-degree programme in English Language and Education. She joined the group in October 2009 and has formulated about 20 weekly time schedules since then. At the beginning, she skipped making time schedules from time to time due to the frustration she experienced in following the time schedules.

Student C is a third-year student in a full-time undergraduate double-degree programme in English Language and Education. She joined the group in January 2009 when the group just started. She has been using weekly time schedules for about 52 weeks since then. From time to time, she skipped making time schedules when she found following the schedules difficult and when life became turbulent. She would resume making time schedules when life becomes more stable and when she feels she has control over her time.

The three students were invited to a 30-minute individual interview. Some major questions include:

- Comparing your time management skills when you joined this group in 2009 to those of now, do you think you have made any improvement? In what ways?
- Can you describe the steps for planning a typical weekly time schedule?
- How much time did you spend on making your last weekly schedule? Did you remember how long did it take you to make your first weekly schedule when you joined this group?
- Reflecting on your development in time management since 2009, how would you describe your learning process? Do you think there are stages in your development? If yes, what are the stages?

RESULTS

After performing an initial analyse of the interviews, some main themes are identified and reported below.

1. *Improvement in time management*

All three students reported that they had made some improvements in managing time.

Student A is self-disciplined and always plans things she needs to do. After joining this group, she has been more aware of the need to set academic goals for university study. By using weekly time schedules, she has started to include class preparation and revision in her to-do-list for the week. Through experimenting the use of weekly plans, listening to the sharing of peers in the self-help group and the feedback on her assignments, she has realised that she needs to develop study strategies like memory, reading and others. By seeking help from the facilitator and peers, she has made good improvement in these learning strategies.

She has also developed high motivation to manage her time. Since she has been using a to-do-list format, she just completed the tasks she set for herself. She has focused on the “plan” and “do” process in the plan-do-review cycle. She has not engaged much in the “review” process in an explicit and systematic manner.

After joining the self-group, her self-efficacy in studying has improved a great deal. She also found that planning time schedules has helped her clarify her priority in life.

Student B is an active learner who takes good responsibilities for her learning. After joining this group, she was aware of the need to set concrete academic and career goals. By using the semester plans and weekly time schedules, she has become even more active in studying and created for herself a more balanced university life. In terms of

self-regulation process, she has been performing all components in the plan-do-review cycle.

Student C is an active and responsible learner who has determined to be a good English teacher. When she joined the group she had set some academic and career goals but was not sure about the effective ways for achieving these goals. Through using the semester plans and weekly schedules, she has taken concrete actions. From time to time, she re-examines her goals and considers developing these goals further. In terms of self-regulation process, she has performed the full “plan-do-review” cycle. She takes the review component very seriously. Whenever she found she was not able to complete the tasks within the timeframe, she would identify the reasons and think about modifying her approaches to tasks and the new skills she would need to develop.

2. *Steps for planning weekly time schedules and amount of time required for planning*

To plan a weekly schedule, **Student A** prints a copy of her class timetable from the university internet. Based on that, she makes a list for important tasks which she needs to complete during the week. She spends about 5 minutes to do all of these. She has been spending similar amount of time to plan her weekly schedules since she joined this group.

For **Student B**, she first formulates a semester plan in which all the academic tasks are broken down into sub-tasks such as collecting information, writing the first and final drafts. Deadlines are set for these sub-tasks in the semester plan. When making her weekly schedules, classes and other regular activities such as class preparation, revision, doing physical exercises and sleeping are set first. The sub-tasks are then put in the weekly schedule with estimation of time for completion. When Student B was first invited to plan her weekly schedules, she just spent about 10 minutes. Since thorough consideration could not be done in 10 minutes, she was unable to follow her weekly schedules. As a consequence, her motivation for planning schedules decreased. After her own reflection and listening to the sharing of peers in the self-help group, she decided to spend more time (about 30 minutes) to plan her weekly schedules in a more detailed manner. For each day, about two hours are set aside as flexible time slots to cater for unexpected events which may make a sudden demand of her time.

When making her weekly time schedules, **Student C** first refers to her academic goals for the year and some important tasks (related to her professional development as a teacher) which she must complete. Tasks are then analysed and broken into several sub-tasks and put into the semester plan. For planning a weekly schedule, regular activities are put in before the sub-tasks and others. Time is budgeted for each task. After implementing her weekly schedule, she evaluates her plan and the actual implementation. Gaps, problems and possible

solutions are identified. She writes a reflection at the bottom of the weekly schedule and refers to it before making a new weekly schedule. During the time management self-help group meeting, she shares her successes and problems and seeks help from members.

At the beginning, she spent about 50 minutes to make her schedules. The planning of the weekly schedule consumed a considerable amount of her time. Also, at that time, her estimation of time for each of the tasks was not that accurate, making her time schedules difficult to follow. Her motivation for formulating weekly schedules dropped considerably. She did stop planning weekly schedules for a few times. However, through participating in the time management self-group and listening to the successful experience of peers, she has gradually convinced herself that making a weekly schedule is a systematic way to plan her time to achieve her goals. She has become more efficient in making her weekly schedules recently. It takes about 30 minutes. She finds it is worth to make a weekly plan.

3. *Developmental stages in time management*

Student A expressed that her development can be summarised as building study and strategies. Before joining this self-help group, she did not have any goals for her study. When she had time, she would do some revision. When she was busy, she would skip revision. She believes that she has experienced three stages in her development. During the first stage, right after joining this self-help group, she tried to include some necessary academic tasks such as doing revision in her weekly schedules. In the second stage, she found doing these has gradually become her habits. In the third stage, she found that she did not have adequate time to complete the tasks she set for herself. In order to produce assignments of reasonably good quality, her basic needs such as sleeping and leisure time are deprived. These experiences have made her realize that planning time is useful but at the same time she needs to improve her study strategies and language competent.

For **Student B**, her experience could be described as finding her own way to manage her time for university study and life as well as where to focus her effort. Before joining the self-help group, she did not have the habit of planning time. After joining the group, she started to set concrete academic goals and plan her time accordingly. Since she did not have good time planning skills at the beginning, she had difficulties in following her time schedules and felt frustrated. After stopping for a few times, she has realised that she needs to plan her time. One of her major solutions is to schedule two hours per day to cater for unexpected events. She has developed a better understanding of herself such as her high energy time and amount of time she needs for sleeping.

Student C described her experience as internalizing the time management principles and developing personalized strategies. There should be three stages in her

development. At the first stage, she adopted the basic scheduling strategies suggested by the facilitator. Through experimenting she gained valuable experience, including frustrations.

At the second stage, she tried to make modifications to cater to her personal needs. An example of this is to speed up the process of making a weekly schedule. She tried to fix her activities at certain period of time during the week so that she did not need to make her weekly schedules starting from zero. Some confusion was experienced during this stage since she could not complete the tasks within the assigned time. She was not sure if she needed to increase the estimated time in the schedule or to find new strategies for the tasks to increase efficiency and effectiveness.

At the third stage, her strategies for planning a weekly time schedule have been more or less fixed. She has developed quite accurate estimation of time for academic tasks. Her focus has been finding more effective ways to do the tasks. A reflection section has been added to her weekly time schedules to record her thinking and development for her later reference.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

After examining these interview findings, I have three observations to share. First, in order to be successful in time management, students need to have high motivation and determination. The three students in this study decided to join this group since they wanted to improve their time management. They are very committed members of the group thus they have participated almost every meeting. This perseverance is a prerequisite for the success in time self-regulation.

Second, the self-help group is an appropriate environment to provide students with the support they needs in developing self-regulation in time management. Even for these highly motivated students needs a great deal of support. Two of the students in the interview have indicated that they had stopped planning weekly schedules due to the frustrations in implementing their schedules. Students need emotional and technical support from the group to continue their journey. From the experience sharing by peers, students are made aware of the importance in managing time and are inspired to carry on. By sharing their problems in the group, they develop better skills in solving problems and higher self-efficacy.

Third, there seems to be at least four stages in university students' development in time management: pre-development stage, adopting stage, personalizing stage and advancing stage. Before joining this self-help group, students are general in the *pre-development* stage. They may not have concrete goals for university, career and life. They do not seem to be aware of the required tasks (e.g. revision) for successful university study. They just spend their time in a

relatively relaxed manner. They may do revisions when they have time. Some of them do not think doing preparation for class is necessary and even possible.

During the *adopting* stage, students join this group and have some ideas of setting long- and short-term goals. They are invited to try out a new strategy, using weekly time schedules to monitor their use of time. Due to their limited experience in task analysis, prioritizing, and time budgeting, as well as their inadequate understanding of their own ability, plenty of problems are to be encountered and to be solved. Some of their values are challenged and clarified. Frustrations are common during this stage.

In the *personalizing* stage, students gain some understanding of the purpose and principles of time management and ready to modify their schedule to suit their personal needs (e.g., scheduling revision tasks during morning to achieve better results) and to try some efficient ways for making a weekly schedule (e.g., schedule the particular activities in the fixed slots of time for every week to establish routines).

Once students have gained a thorough understanding of the purpose and principles of time management and have developed good mastery of time budgeting, they reach the *advancing* stage. Students at this stage focus on finding and developing effective strategies to complete tasks as well as ways to improve their self-regulation. They understand that their long-term and short-term goals should be revisited and developed continuously. The tasks and their time allocation should be based on their goal list. They are well aware of the major purpose of time management is managing self and life.

By analysing students' development, I am convinced that students' motivation is very important for the success of self-regulating time. Formulating concrete goals is crucial for that motivation. As university teachers, we need to help students understand that having long- and short-term goals and learning to self-regulate their use of time will make a difference in their university education and life.

Students' development in this study seems to show the stages which have been described. More research should be done to gain better understanding on students' development in time regulation so that we can provide the most appropriate support for students.

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