I READ Emily Hill, Philip M. Johnson, and Daniel Port’s article “Is an Athletic Approach the Future of Software Engineering Education?” (Jan./Feb. 2016) with mixed feelings.

From experience, I can confirm that emphasizing skills and practical tasks in combination with a certain degree of time pressure can make learning more efficient. Yes, this helps students reduce distraction and mobilize themselves. What confuses me is the article’s unconditional emphasis on only the positive role of time pressure.

The authors point out that “pressure is a part of a software developer’s life” and that many of their students said “the athletic approach helped them feel comfortable programming under pressure.”

The idea of comfortable programming under pressure provides an excuse to recollect the following complementary idea expressed in old engineers’ folklore:

If you have done your work quickly and poorly, people will soon forget that you did it quickly and will remember that you did it poorly. If you have done it slowly but well, people will forget that you did it slowly and will remember that you did it well.

Of course, in many cases certain degrees of time pressure are justified or simply unavoidable. But even such “right” time pressure isn’t achievable without a cost.

Time pressure generally tends to hinder creative thinking. In many cases, software development work is regarded as a noncreative activity. But in many other cases, its success depends on creative thinking.

And even where the work ordinarily is of the “mechanical” sort, creative thinking might become crucial to detect and resolve the “too busy to think” situations when they unfortunately happen. In such situations, which aren’t so rare, people are so busy doing their work the wrong way or solving the wrong tasks that they have no time to think about how to do the work the right way.

Excessive, arbitrary, or indiscriminate time pressure can lead to all sorts of mistakes, defects, drawbacks, or nonoptimal solutions with long-lasting negative consequences. Also, “wrong” time pressure in accomplishing separate tasks can lead to a longer time to achieve the endeavor’s final goals.

A reasonable and responsible attitude on the part of managers and development professionals implies their awareness of the possibility of wrong time pressure. And when such time pressure happens, some developers, instead of just trying to feel comfortable under pressure, should be ready to dare to inform their managers, competently and convincingly, why this pressure is wrong.

It’s hard to imagine that Hill and her colleagues are unaware of time pressure’s negative aspects. More likely, they apply their approach to education in a balanced-enough way but omitted these nuances from the article to avoid distracting the reader.

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