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Voices: Is multitasking really productive?

By Kaitlyn Russell, University of North Carolina Wilmington January 23, 2015 11:52 am

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Multitasking is no stranger to the modern college environment. Enabling students to cross off the never-ending list of to-dos, multitasking has mostly been perceived as a positive trait that has been enhanced through technology.

The Guardian recently published an excerpt of neuroscientist Daniel J. Levitin's *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload* in which he details the potential negative effects multitasking has on individuals, generating stress and lack of productivity.

“INSTEAD OF REAPING THE BIG REWARDS THAT COME FROM SUSTAINED, FOCUSED EFFORT, WE INSTEAD REAP EMPTY REWARDS FROM COMPLETING A THOUSAND LITTLE SUGAR-COATED

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TASKS”

“Multitasking has been found to increase the production of the stress hormone cortisol as well as the fight-or-flight hormone, adrenaline, which can overstimulate your brain and cause mental fog or scrambled thinking,” he says in the article.

While students are walking to class, they’re simultaneously checking e-mail, staying connected through social media or browsing the web. Multitasking has seeped into students’ daily lives, both personally and academically, and it’s not necessarily as productive as we may assume—in fact, it may be just the opposite.

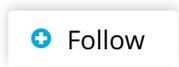
Matthew Housiaux, a junior journalism and history major at Augustana College, has cut back on multitasking because it was frequently making him less productive. Previously, he would try to listen to NPR while doing homework, but soon found it distracting.

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“I’d be trying to conjugate a verb in French while getting the latest scoop of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but that usually resulted in me learning nothing about either topic,” he says.

Levitin describes our desire to do as much as we can at every moment part of a ‘21st-century mania’ and Millennials are no doubt frontrunners in cramming tasks together.

Earl Miller, neuroscientist, said in the excerpt that our brains are not wired to multitask well; therefore, we are actually becoming “less

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efficient” when we simultaneously complete tasks.

Technologies, particularly smartphones, have made doing many jobs at once simplified, and a new normal for students. Accessible at any time, our phones function as countless roles.

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“Smartphones are obviously the key tool of the modern multitasker,” Housiaux says. “I do love having a device where I can read about current events, check my e-mail, text friends, send Snapchats, etc. — in fact, I would say that technology is the primary enabler of multitasking.”

Though, this constant flow of tasks is overwhelming to the brain. Levitin describes how focusing on more than one task at a time can cause information to “go to the wrong part of the brain,” resulting in the difficulty that many students experience while trying to study and having the Internet or cell phone at their fingertips.

“Instead of reaping the big rewards that come from sustained, focused effort, we instead reap empty rewards from completing a thousand little sugar-coated tasks,” Levitin says.

Still, multitasking is an essential component of a students’ life. Housiaux would prefer to devote his time and energy to one task as opposed to many, but does not find it realistic.

“In a given semester, most students will have a raft of tests, papers and projects he or she will

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have to complete — on top of other homework, readings, work, sleeping and maintaining some social life,” he says.

So, what can students do in the midst of the mania? Research recommends taking tasks one step at a time. By focusing on one e-mail, one assignment, one conversation, we can potentially be more productive and recall more information.

“Before smartphones, we would have had no way to check our e-mail and read about current events within the same scope of time,” Housiaux concludes. “Now that we can, perhaps we need to ask if we should.”

Kaitlyn Russell is a senior at the University of North Carolina in Wilmington and a spring 2015 USA TODAY Collegiate Correspondent.

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