It may seem that multitasking is a natural part of daily human function. It’s true that, for instance, your eyes may be viewing this narrative while your ears hear what is happening around you. Your hands and fingers might be navigating this page as you read through the text. Your brain is able to discriminate what is important from the extraneous inputs your senses are receiving. It can instantly shift focus, delegating tasks to the background and back again. Even the process of writing this essay was an example of multitasking: my fingers typing, my brain thinking about what is to come, my ears filtering noises from other offices and students in the hallways. But is this really what most people mean when they refer to multitasking?

I believe that when most people think of multitasking today, they are thinking more about what technology is capable of doing. Since the late 1980s, computer operating systems have had the capability to run simultaneous processes. Since then, we’ve transferred this idea to our own brains,
won’t allow it. While I would love to be able sit and work on one thing from start to finish, I can’t just ignore all my phone calls, emails, and other requests. We are all expected to be constantly accessible and connected, so we have no choice but to multitask. Because of the sheer amount of tools and content available to our students, they face a similar overload, now and in the future, and knowing how to multitask is a vitally important part of being able to handle it all.

To efficiently multitask, we need to be able to critically identify the most important task for that instant, taking into account both work and personal factors, and work on that task until something more important arises, even if that important something is switching to another task while your current task develops in your head. Crucial to multitasking is developing the analytic and critical thinking needed to be able to, in a split second, identify if you should continue working on that current task or switch to something new. The only way to gain these skills is through practice—something that teenagers are getting in spades. By developing the ability to quickly jump between tasks, students are honing the very skills they need to successfully navigate an inundation of information.

—A former K–8 technology instructor, Chris Stefanski is currently the associate director of technology for the Paterson Diocesan Schools in New Jersey, USA. He assists both principals and teachers in helping the schools meet their educational technology needs.

By developing the ability to quickly jump between tasks, students are honing the very skills they need to successfully navigate an inundation of information.

Humans can’t focus on more than one thing at a time, unlike computers, which can run multiple processes with all of the needed “focus” on each one.

To do something well, we must be able to focus on that task and delegate other inputs to appropriate, lesser levels of awareness. The more complex the task, the more focus required. Driving a car is a great example. Extensive research shows the influence of drinking (which impairs focus), texting, and other distractions on one’s ability to drive. Just transfer that analogy to learning. There’s no way students can do it to their highest potential if their attention is elsewhere.

—Dennis McElroy is an associate professor of education and director of technology for the Graceland University Gleazer School of Education in Lamoni, Iowa, USA. He formerly worked as a high school science teacher, administrator, and technology consultant for the Iowa Department of Education.

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READERS respond

POLL RESULTS

Multitasking: Boon or Bane?
Respondents who believe the brain is incapable of multitasking engaged in a spirited debate with those who see it as a vital digital age skill.

Evolve or Perish
The impact of the digital world on digital natives is still unknown, as the human species has never gone through such an explosion of information. Overload is unavoidable, so the offspring of this new world have to acquire the skills necessary to deal with it. Maybe in the process, the human brain (which is “massively plastic”) will adapt to the new environment, reorganize itself, and become capable of multitasking.
Saadia Oulamine
Instructional Technology Specialist Candidate
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

To Each His Own
It depends on personality. I base this on my own homegrown scientific experiment: my two kids. One does his homework while YouTubing, watching TV, and texting; the other does it in silence with headphones on. Their interests and career trajectories will likely be quite different, but their grades are the same.
Nancy Segal
Director of Government Relations
Educational Testing Service
Washington, D.C., USA

At What Cost?
As a digital immigrant, although I am not “media multitasking,” I am able to prepare dinner, help children with their homework, schedule a doctor appointment, and make sure that my dog isn’t making a mess on my sofa. As a teacher, I know it’s critical to be able to navigate our multimedia world. More kids are spending more time using more media simultaneously than ever before. The question is, at what cost? How much are they learning?
Aggeliki Nikolaou
Architect/Secondary School Teacher
Rhodes, Greece

Let Go of Your Fear
We need to teach our students how to process and absorb information with other stimuli going on. By the time these students are adults, who knows what jobs or tech tools will be available to them. People need to let go of their fears of this shift in the next generation.
Rayna Froedman
Fourth Grade Teacher
Instructional Technology Specialist
Mansfield, Massachusetts, USA

Not Whether But When
The question is not whether multitasking is good or bad, but rather if we know when it is productive and when a more focused approach is needed. Students aren’t widgets but are different. Tasks are also different and require different [levels of] focus. The real skill we need to teach our students (and many of our colleagues) is when to multitask and when not to.
Dodie Ainslie
Coordinator of Instruction
Endicott, New York, USA

Skill for an Imperfect World
Focusing on one thing is the best way to complete a task. [But] very few people are able to work on a single item from start to finish without having to worry about distractions or other deadlines. My students have seven classes a day. I would have to ask how easy it is to focus on a single item when seven need to be completed, in some cases with overlapping concepts.
Dennis Dill
Educator
Lakeland, Florida, USA

Multitasking Fails
If you believe in the cognitive load theory, you know it is impossible to do [multiple] tasks simultaneously, and there’s a high likelihood of diminished performance in the quality of work. Here are some scenarios that emphasize my point: Have a student spell his name out loud while typing a Shakespearean sonnet, or send a 140-character text while explaining the steps to find his favorite song on an iPod.
Kenneth Shelton
Technology Teacher
Los Angeles, California, USA

Efficiency vs. Stupidity
There is a difference between stupid multitasking and efficient multitasking. Our news media constantly focuses on the dire effects of “stupid” multitasking, such as driving a car while texting. We have to put all this media into focus. Millions of people multitask everyday in a responsible and professional manner. The business world thrives on multitasking and rewards its workers with jobs and raises based on their multitasking efficiency.
Elaine Giugliano
Associate Professor
Rutherford, New Jersey, USA

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