

Putting more focus on multitasking

Habit is fine if person is working towards a single goal, say experts

By KEZIA TOH

WHEN he writes an essay, undergraduate Vincent Lee also listens to music as well as monitors his Facebook account and smartphone for updates and messages.

Asked whether he gets sidetracked by these activities, the 24-year-old said: "I would be bored if I had to focus on just one thing."

He feels he gets more things done. "I finish my assignment and connect with friends at the same time," he added.

But recent studies – such as one from the Chinese University of Hong Kong – have shown that heavy multitasking can be counterproductive.

Other studies also showed that those who habitually access information from several media sources at the same time were unable to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information for the task at hand.

Heavy multitaskers focused less well on a task requiring much attention, even when instructed to do so.

Psychologists here are not against multitasking – so long as one is working towards a single goal.

Psychologist Daniel Koh of private practice Insights Mind Centre said tasks that reinforce one another will "cause a greater impression, hence im-

proving memory".

For example, reading aloud and listening to the audio track of a story reinforce the learning of words, he noted.

But if the activities are for different goals – such as texting a friend while trying to finish homework – multitasking might not be a good idea, he added.

The effectiveness of multitasking also hinges on how good people are in focusing on the core task, said Dr Raymond Cheong from the Children/Youth Learning and Development Centre.

"They should learn to focus on one thing first – multitasking is taking what someone is already doing and making it better – to train them to become effective and efficient workers," he added.

Some educators – recognising today's trends – have chosen to make use of students' multitasking abilities to boost learning.

Since last year, Chinese-language teacher Joycelyn Ng from Guangyang Primary School has started teaching Chinese characters using aerobics.

Moving their arms to the music, they remember the strokes better, she said. "They take the active learning role and learn how to adapt fast, rather than just focusing on one task, which is to sit and listen to the teacher," said Mrs Ng.



A study by the National University of Singapore (NUS), published last year, revealed that teachers in the classroom now have to vie with students' mobile phones and laptops for attention.

The study found that students often felt the urge to reply to cellphone messages immediately while they also surfed the Internet on their laptops when lectures got boring.

The students said they were opposed to any move to curb multitasking with new media in classrooms.

Educators agree, saying that any form of control is futile. "There are and always will be students whose minds will rove, and today's multitude of gadgets gives them a lot to choose from to entertain themselves," said Dr Seshan Ramaswami, an associate professor of marketing education at Singapore Management University.

In his opinion, the best way to fight back is "to be a more engaging instructor who simply compels attention".

But the need to multitask seems an "increasingly inevitable part" of operating in today's world, said Dr Khng Kiat Hui, research scientist at the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice at the National Institute of Education.

She added: "It will be parti-

Myths of multitasking

Genuine multitasking has been described as a myth in books such as *The Myth of Multitasking: How "Doing It All" Gets Nothing Done* by business coach Dave Crenshaw.

The argument is that rather than completing two or more tasks simultaneously, a person just shifts from one task to another quickly.

For example, he switches from a phone conversation to a document on the computer screen, then to an e-mail and back again, believing that he is doing them simultaneously.

But juggling tasks and refocusing attention back and forth takes up time and may hinder progress.

ment to equip students with the skills that may help support learning and operating in environments with such 'information overload'."

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