Multitasking Among College Students: Are Freshmen More Distracted?

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ABSTRACT

Using a time-diary, the authors asked 935 undergraduate college students to report on their multitasking habits while engaged in four main activities: reading for fun, watching TV, reading for school purposes, and using the Internet. The authors examined student data to find out (a) whether their multi-tasking habits vary significantly by college classification and (b) whether they felt the time spent multitasking in one activity interfered with or displaced time spent on other activities. It was found that first year college freshmen multitasked significantly more than upper class students. However, students’ perceptions relative to whether they felt the time spent multitasking in one activity interfered with or displaced time spent on other activities did not significantly differ by college classification. These findings have important implications for understanding the multitasking habits among college students.

KEYWORDS
Classification, College Students, Distraction, Freshmen, Internet Use, Multitasking

INTRODUCTION

In this study, we conducted a secondary analysis of a time-diary survey data set to answer a new set of questions pertaining to the multitasking habits among undergraduate college students in one regional university. In our original study (Mokhtari, Delello, & Reichard, 2015), we asked 935 undergraduate college students from a regional four-year university to respond to an online time-diary survey, which asked them to report their perceptions about multitasking while engaged in four main activities: Reading voluntarily for fun, reading for academic purposes, watching television (TV), and using the Internet. Results showed that a majority of the students reported performing two or more tasks simultaneously, switching rapidly back and forth from one task to another. In addition, as a group, most acknowledged that multi-tasking interfered with their core academic activities and influenced their ability to do well academically.

The prevalence of multitasking among college students in the original study along with the prospect that multitasking has a potentially negative impact on their academic performance led us to take a second look at multitasking among these students and its potential impact on their school work. For purposes of this study, we re-examined the same dataset to find out (a) whether college students’ multitasking varies significantly by college classification (i.e., freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior) when reading for fun, reading for school, watching TV, and using the Internet; and (b) whether multitasking during one activity is thought to interfere with time spent on other activities among these students.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

In a generation of “always-on connectivity” (Anderson & Rainie, 2014), we are constantly subjected to an unprecedented number of interruptions. We take phone calls, read and text messages, look at social media, and watch television while eating, commuting, and performing other daily tasks. And for many of us, this leads to multitasking, performing two or more of these tasks at the same time (Mokhtari et al., 2015). For college students, who have grown up with information and communication technologies (ICTs), multitasking has become a common behavior (Junco & Cotton, 2012; Rosen, Carrier, & Cheever, 2013). Much of this is related to the increase in the use of Internet ready mobile devices. In fact, the typical college student spends an average of 1.4 hours on Facebook, sends an average of 96 text messages, and receives nearly 104 text messages per day (Junco & Cotton, 2011). Jacobsen and Forste (2011) reported that almost two-thirds of students surveyed reported multitasking with ICTs while doing schoolwork. Time Magazine referred to the generation of multitaskers who can email, download, and do school work as Generation M (Wallis, 2006). However, recent research has shown that the less time students in high school spent studying, the more they are distracted by other activities such as social media and the Internet when studying in their first year of college (NSSE, 2015).

There are many explanations as to why students multitask. As we continually perceive a shortage of time and an acceleration of the pace of daily life (Southerton & Tomlinson, 2005), multitasking has been touted as a means to get things done (Ellis, Daniels, & Jauregui, 2010). Other researchers have noted that students engage in multitasking for fun, entertainment, relaxation (Wang & Tchernev, 2012), and empowerment (Levitin, 2014). Some college students have even reported that they constantly check their smartphones to prevent boredom in the classroom (McCoy, 2015; Smith, 2015). Rosen et al. (2013) suggested that young adults have developed a compulsive, anxiety-laden behavior; they actually fear missing out on something if not constantly connected.

For college students, the daily disruptions from communication technologies do affect their time on task (Rosen, et. al, 2013). Levitin (2014) suggested that all of these distractions are “powerful and diabolical illusions” (para. 3) as multitasking increases the stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline, which lessens cognitive performance. Parry (2013) stated that by “rapid task switching,” we not only challenge our brain, we compromise learning. In fact, the report The American Freshman indicated that 30% of first time college students entering four-year institutions were “overwhelmed” with everything they had to do (Pryor, Hurtado, DeAngelio, Palucki, & Tran, 2010).

Yet, regardless of the impact that multitasking has, students have continued to perform two or more tasks simultaneously (Junco & Cotton, 2011; Mokhtari et. al., 2015). And, Tanner, Stewart, Maples, Totaro and Gaines (2008) found that although students do multitask, they are unaware of how much time they spend on any one activity. Students “may be sacrificing some aspects of their academics and study time, due mostly to contemporary technological distractions” (Tanner et al., 2008, p. 6).

Television Watching Habits of College Students

In today’s digital world, college students’ television (TV) habits are being redefined. Equipped with their mobile devices, students can now watch programming episodes instantly through online services (e.g. Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu) and/or record their favorite shows on a digital video recorder (DVR). However, research indicates that while most adults spend an average of 33 hours per week watching TV; college students watch about 22 hours per week (Nielson, 2014). Much of this decrease in TV consumption may be due to college students consuming TV content with new media (e.g. Smart Phones, iPads). In fact, it was found that 49% of U.S. college students use second screen devices while watching TV and the “activities on those additional screens would be more aptly described as multitasking” (Refuel Agency, 2013, p. 2).
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