

Benign, Distracting, or Damaging? New Research on the Impact of Ubiquitous 'Multitasking'

With the arrival of the cell phone, educators and institutions (including those in the workplace) increasingly feel the need to address the attendant issue of “multitasking.” Recently the issue of “texting” rose to the level of [“life and death”](#) with numerous states debating whether to ban its use while driving a moving vehicle. Many states already have banned even the use of a cellphone while driving.

The largest use of multimedia and multitasking is among the young, making the issue a concern of educators. Is it benign, slightly distracting, or harmful? The evidence of its dangers while driving is now [conclusive](#), but where’s the research for its implications in homework and the classroom? With Wi-Fi readily available on college and even some high school campuses, it’s not unusual for students to be listening to class lectures while both surfing the internet and texting friends. As a result, a growing number of teachers have banned cell phones and laptops from their classrooms.



Conversely, more and more colleges are making their classes [available as podcasts](#). If you think that trivializes the course matter, you might want to look at the course listings for the University of California-Berkeley (see iTunes U at the iTunes Store). Among other advantages, the availability of the lecture as podcast at least allows the distracted student to listen to a lecture multiple times, perhaps with fewer distractions.

Taking the question to a post-graduate level, as technology strengthens its grip on the workplace, individuals are increasingly asked to cover more and more ground that used to be the work of multiple employees. What are the implications? A slimmer workforce may make for smaller payrolls and higher profits but does it also lead to more mistakes that go unnoticed for too long because of the multitasking?

Abusers are losers

The answer to many of these questions can be found in a new study from three Stanford University professors (“[Cognitive control in media multitaskers](#)” in the science journal PNAS (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences). The study offers strong evidence that the biggest users/abusers of multitasking are also the biggest losers when it comes to intellectual performance. Just as worrisome is the finding that heavy users fared poorly in their performances even when distractors (laptop, ipod, iphone, etc.) were turned off, suggesting there’s a lasting negative impact from distracted-living, at least for brain-work.

One of the Stanford author-professors, **Clifford Nass**, brought his findings to KQED’s public radio “Forum” and took calls from listeners in the San Francisco Bay area for a program called

["Multitasking: Does It Work?"](#) (Aug. 28, 2009 / 55 min.). To download the program as MP3 audio, click [DOWNLOAD](#). or listen via the panel below.

Nass has been a professor of communication at Stanford since 1986, and founded and directs the university's Communication between Humans and Interactive Media (CHIME) lab. The findings in Nass' latest research reflects one of the earliest studies in "distraction and communication," done by the founding father of communication as science, **Wilbur Schramm**. Schramm's studies concluded that, among other things, the more distractions we have before us, the less we choose to read. More of that study can be found here at [Schramm study](#). An application of that study to present circumstances would be this: We are presently raising the most distracted generation of children in the history of the world. Any wonder why they are reading less than children of 50 years ago?