Slaves to multitasking

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WHEN I am teaching and my students are typing away on their laptops while smiling at the screen in front of them, I know that they are more likely to be on MSN than to be with me. Every few minutes, their eyes would dart up and they would nod their heads as if what I had just said needed their approval.

Why do people bother to come to class if they are intent on doing a half-dozen other things at the same time — playing Solitaire, checking out MSN, e-mailing and writing out a last-minute answer to an assignment question they should have done weeks ago?

Our multitasking habits are a bane indeed. I can no longer have a cup of coffee with someone without feeling as though I am contesting for her time. I have dinner with Aileen while Candace calls me on my cellphone and Aileen takes that moment I'm on my phone to SMS Val, as Val feeds her daughter while working on her computer. How many times have you excused yourself to go to the restroom, only to return to a friend busy SMS-ing, and then wondered if he preferred to be elsewhere?

Is it not a crazy thing to meet friends, then spend half the time on the cellphone with someone else? When I point out to friends that I have better things to do than to watch them SMS, they assure me they can multitask, not knowing that I do mind the waiting — and they do not multitask that well anyway. In this day, we can no longer get the full attention of people even when we meet them face to face.

Our multitasking habit creeps into other areas of life. Because we are not accustomed to concentrating on a single task for an extended period of time, books today are different in layout from the books of a decade ago. The young today can no longer read the good old courier font. They need a snazzy layout, headings in bold Comic Sans, every few lines and cute balloon columns with fanciful bullet points. Depth of analysis is lost on this generation. What they want are bite-sized pieces of information — like how the Time-Out chocolate now comes in convenient popcorn-like pieces.

We have also lost our ability to make simple commitments. We play it by ear when we want to meet. We know we can reschedule the appointment because the other person is always contactable via the cellphone. Gone are the days when we would mark our diaries and expect to keep our appointments because there was no way to change them at the last minute.

And whatever happened to waiting to speak with someone? A decade ago, when I wanted to call a friend, I would wait for her to get home. The waiting would allow me to process my thoughts. And when we talk, I would be sure she is not also playing on her cellphone.

Now, if I am irritated with someone, I would just shoot her a rude e-mail, delete it from my trash can and pretend I have not done anything bad. Postmodern connectivity facilitates an instant torrent.

I have lost the character-building habit of being forced to cool down because someone I am angry with is not within target range.

With MSN, IM, ICQ, SMS and Blackberry, the line between acquaintances and friends has blurred. We find it easier to use these modes of communication than to call someone up. While we would not have contacted someone we were not so familiar with on the phone, these alternative modes facilitate superficial social contact. So we end up with breadth in our relations, but little depth.

A decade ago, I was learning how to e-mail on an ugly black screen. Eight years ago, my mom got me a pager. Growing up without postmodern connectivity, I am troubled by the different world the young today grow up in. What I have mentioned are little things in themselves, but if we continue in this way 24/7, the effect on us would be insidiously greater than we realise.

Have you not realised only too late when your computer is hit by a virus, and you lose all your e-mail addresses, that your reliance on the e-mail-address function on your computer has robbed you of the ability to recall addresses? We used to remember people's telephone numbers, now we are totally dependent on our cellphone's contact list? And our reliance on the calculator means we cannot do mental sums when splitting a restaurant bill. So what else are we allowing ourselves to be robbed of?

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