Multitasking as a Graduate Student

By nature we can process different things at the same time. We can do multiple tasks on the same day. Usually we can prioritize different tasks according to our schedule. Our procedure to handle different tasks might be different and this is usually affected by our experience and the nature of the tasks.

As a PhD student I usually work on different projects. It is becoming essential for me to organize my time such that I don’t cramp myself with different duties. Usually, If I only have one task I start doing it early. For instance, if I have a submission after one week, regardless if it needs a lot of work or not, I start early. This allows me to improve my work and look at it from different angles. The quality increases dramatically when I start early as opposed to doing everything in just one day. Early scheduling increases your working hours but it gives the chance to work less in a day as well as resolve issues that might emerge. Furthermore, procrastinating things till the last moment might be catastrophic especially if you discover that the allocated time was not enough.

Usually, when working on different tasks you have to organize your time carefully. For instance, I might have a paper submission, presentation, coding and writing articles. I start first by prioritizing the things that are very important. But prioritizing doesn’t mean doing them first but allocating more span of time. For instance, paper submission will take a lot of time so I might take one week with two hours a day to work on it. On the other hand, writing an article might take two hours to finish. It is important to recognize these things earlier and allocate the time and effort. This allows me to work on different things on the same day. For instance, two hours writing a paper, three hours coding and half-hour to work on the presentation. The next day I might remove the less important thing which might be the presentation and work on the article.

Working on different things is important because it gives your mind some space for resting. The different tasks I mentioned have different properties. Writing a paper for instance requires a lot of mental power. While the presentation is easier, I might watch an entertaining video at the same time. It is essential not to work on many things that require a lot of mental concentration on the same day. Moreover, working on different tasks gives the impression of success because finishing one task will make you happier. A failure or closed door on one task motivates you to work on another task.

While working on different tasks is important it has its downsides. You have to be careful not to overkill yourself with lots of long tasks in parallel. For instance, working on three projects where each one takes more than a month might be a bad idea. Indeed, it depends on the capacity of the person because some people have the strength to do it. Others are forced because they are ordered to work on these tasks. If you have the chance, limit yourself by knowing your capabilities. Moreover, don’t work on multiple projects that consume a lot of mental and physical power. Try to keep balance between these things because it will wear you out.

Some people have different strategies when working on different tasks. One might prefer finishing one task at a time. But, from experience it is important that you know how much time each task will need. If the allocated time is less, it will have bad ramifications. That’s why I don’t prefer this approach. It might be interesting to consider a hybrid approach where you finish some tasks that are more important and work on less important tasks in parallel. Indeed, with experience you know your capacity and it is up to you to decide the best approach.