Anthropology professor Monica Smith investigates multitasking as ancient ability in new book

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Correction: In the original version of this online headline, multitasking was misspelled.

Browsing Facebook during lecture. Writing a paper while listening to music. Texting during dinner.

Multitasking is a way of life for most people, especially for busy college students.

While some students may blame modern technology for their busy college lifestyles, anthropology Professor Monica Smith said multitasking is nothing new.

Her recently published book, “A Prehistory of Ordinary People,” maintains that multitasking has been around for ages and is here to stay.

“Not only is multitasking not a modern development, it is also a very, very ancient ability and part of what makes us human,” Smith said.

Instead of seeing multitasking as a modern curse, Smith praised it as a unique human capability.

As civilizations developed, evolution and human invention added new levels of complexity to social interaction, according to Smith. For example, when our ancestors developed the ability to walk on two feet, their hands became available to engage in other activities, such as tool making. With so many tasks to complete, our ancestors no longer focused on one activity, but rather moved from one activity to the other.

Smith decided to write “A Prehistory of Ordinary People” as a precursor to her study of urban living. She is interested in how cities work from the perspective of the ordinary person and has spent the last 10 years conducting research projects related to the subject in the ancient city of Sisupalgarh, India. Before delving further into her study of urban life, she decided to take a look at the lives of people before cities.

One of Smith’s colleagues, Michael Schiffer, said he regards Smith’s approach to the origins of multitasking as highly creative.

“There’s just nothing like it written before. She’s focused on ordinary people doing ordinary things – that is quite a departure from a lot of the theoretical trends in archeology,” said Schiffer, an anthropology professor at the University of Arizona.

Schiffer said he believes the book is extremely accessible and appeals to audiences outside the fields of anthropology and archaeology.

Dario Salvucci, co-author of the book “The Multitasking Mind,” said he agreed with the basic tenets of Smith’s theory. He also emphasized the importance of multitasking.

“Multitasking is an innate human ability that pervades our lives much more than we give it credit for,” said Salvucci, an associate professor for the department of computer science at Drexel University.

In her study, Smith often referenced an article written by Salvucci and his colleague on the subject.

Although Smith primarily focused on the positive aspects of multitasking, she also recognized the constraints of multitasking in the modern era, especially when it comes to dangerous habits such as texting while driving.

“The negative aspects of multitasking are much worse nowadays than they were in the past. I certainly would not
want to advocate that multitasking is always good – it’s not – but for routine, fixed-pace activities, it works,” Smith said.

Ultimately, however, the aim of her new book is not just to praise multitasking, but rather to broaden the public’s perspective on the subject by examining it in an evolutionary context.

“Multitasking in the modern era is at a whole new level of complexity, but it’s really built on the basic skill sets that people already had,” Smith said.

“What is truly amazing is that we can trace the development of this ability through evolutionary history.”