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Slow Down To Speed Up

Although I've been reading since about the age of six, I had to relearn how to read when I was in my late 30s.

I lost my ability to read and concentrate during the years that I worked as a newspaper reporter and editor. That means I spent my days in the cacophonous hothouse of a newspaper office. Police radios blared constantly from the center of the room, televisions and radios from the corners. Newspaper offices had no cubi-

brain, quiet my entire system so that I could just read. I struggled at this for several weeks before I finally took an alarm clock into my office and set the alarm for 10 minutes. When I could read without fidgeting for an entire 10 minutes, I set the alarm for 15 minutes. I kept doing that until I could read comfortably for an entire hour. Once I got to that point, I savored the long hours I could spend alone in my office just reading, thinking, and writing.



cles in those days, just desks shoved together in groups of six or eight or 10. Reporters and editors and photographers were in each other's business all the time. We shared information constantly, either intentionally or unintentionally because of the crowded working conditions. Editors shouted and reporters shouted back. And everybody worked fast, all the time, every day.

Then, I was named a Michigan Journalism Fellow, which allowed me to retreat to the University of Michigan for a year of learning. For the first time in my professional life, I had an office with a door on it.

The yearlong journalism fellowship is an enormous gift to a newspaper reporter or editor because it allows recipients to indulge in exploring topics of interest to them and important to their readership.

The only problem was this: I didn't know how to study and read deeply. I had been a newspaper rat for 20 years. I knew how to locate what I needed — quickly. I knew how to read it — quickly. And I knew how to write it — quickly.

So, the first piece of learning during that fellowship year was learning how to quiet my

I thought about all of these experiences again as I read several articles in this issue, especially Nicholas Carr's piece about "the juggler's brain" and the portions of Beverly Koopman's article about the child who said he could think better away from the classroom than in it. I really understand that kid.

Operating in an Internet-cableTV-Facebook-Twitteresque world is a lot like living in a newspaper office 24/7. When information is flying at you from a dozen or more directions, the first instinct is to duck and get out of the way. Nobody can pay attention to everything all the time. Our analysis of any situation may be quick, but it may also be shoddy.

Even as schools explore the wealth of opportunities made possible by the new technologies, we need to build in opportunities for silence and reflection. Some of us are blessed with the ability to be creative under stress. But I think most of us need a little think time in order to do our best work and our best learning.

Doing everything quickly may get the job done faster. But, often, taking the time to slow down may ultimately be the best way to help us speed up. —JR