**Does Music Help You Study?**

**by Sheila Doraiswamy, October 8, 2012**

If you’re a student, I am almost willing to bet that you have music playing right now. Maybe it’s Drake, maybe it’s Mumford and Sons, or maybe it’s The Beatles. Whatever your preference, I’m sure you love listening to your favorite artists every chance you get--maybe even while you study. Is playing your favorite song an easy way to make that homework bearable, or are you hurting your performance?

Previous research has found numerous benefits to listening to music before performing a task--it improves attention, memory, and even mental math ability. It has also been found to alleviate depression and anxiety.

However, the more realistic scenario is that students will study or do homework while playing “background music.” A recent study at the University of Wales looked at how background music affects students’ ability to complete a serial recall (remembering items in a specific order) test.

Students were given a serial recall test in five different scenarios--

1. A quiet environment
2. With “steady state” speech. This means a single word (in this case, “three”) was repeated for the duration of the test.
3. With “changing state” speech. This means a variety of words (in this case, random digits from 1-9) were played during the test.
4. With “liked” music, meaning a song of the students choice (such as Lady Gaga, Rihanna, or Arcade Fire). Students brought in their own music, the only requirement was that it had to have vocals.
5. With “disliked” music, which in this case was a metal song called “Thrashers” by Death Angel (all students in the study disliked metal.

The researchers expected that the changing state speech would have the most detrimental effect on the students’ performance. Think about it like this--changing state is like having to do your homework while someone else is talking. Steady state is more like repetitive background noise (a noisy heater, for example), which is easier to tune out.

Surprisingly, the results actually found no significant difference between test scores with liked music, disliked music, and changing state speech. In other words, whether students enjoyed the music or not, having it on while they worked was just as distracting as hearing someone talk. Scores were significantly higher for tests taken in a quiet environment or with steady-state speech. In a subjective assessment of each scenario, students did say that the test with their liked music was “more pleasant,” but they did not find it any less distracting. The researchers hypothesize that they would see similar results if they were to repeat this procedure using a reading comprehension test.

But before you sadly put your iPod away, feeling that you’ve lost your only way of making homework bearable, consider this: Another similar study that tested liked music’s effect on attention found similar results, but the researchers also noticed something intriguing. The students who took a test with music did have a lower average score than those who didn’t have music, but the researchers noted that there was a lot of variation in the scores. This could imply that the effect of music can vary a lot from person to person, and they believe that more research needs to be done on how factors such as tempo, genre, or whether students are used to having music on, make any difference.

Furthermore, we should also note that these studies only looked at music with vocals, and not music that was purely instrumental. Research from the University of Dayton found that students performed better at spatial and linguistic processing if Mozart was playing in the background. So maybe having instrumental music can help performance, since it doesn’t have any distracting vocals. Again, think about it like you’re trying to work while someone’s talking to you (or just consider that maybe you’ll feel like singing along instead of doing your work!)

**Conclusion:**

So should you listen to music while you study or do homework? Unfortunately, the answer I have to give you is “it depends!” It seems like in general, music with vocals is distracting, while instrumental music might actually help your performance.

We will have to wait for more research, but for now I’d say if you want some music to lighten up that homework, go for some instrumental jazz, classical, or if you’re a movie-addict like me, try a movie score (the soundtrack of “The Social Network” got me through GRE prep).