TEACHING DISTRACTED MINDS

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Teaching as the Art of Directing Attention

“Teaching’s essential task consists in heightening the ability to notice what is remarkable and important in what we are looking at.”

Yves Citton

The Ecology of Attention
Stewards of Attention

“Within the human cognitive system, attention is a precious, limited resource. . . So as designers of learning experiences, we should also think of ourselves as stewards of students’ limited stores of attention.”

Michelle Miller
AN ANCIENT PROBLEM
“People who are passionately devoted to the flute are unable to pay attention to arguments if they hear someone playing a flute, since they enjoy the flute-playing more than the activity that presently occupies them.”

_Ethics_
“Don’t chuse your constant Place of Study by . . . the most various and entertaining Scenes . . . [A] variety of Objects which strike the Eye or the Ear, especially while they are every in motion or often changing, have a natural and powerful tendency to steal away the Mind too often from its steady Pursuit of any Subject which we contemplate; and thereby the Soul gets a Habit . . . of trifling and wandering.”

*The Improvement of the Mind* (1741)
Forecasts for 1907

“These two figures are not communicating with one another. The lady is receiving an amatory message, and the gentleman some racing results.”

Punch
Shallow Minds?

• “Calm, focused, undistracted, the linear mind is being pushed aside by a new kind of mind that wants and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, often overlapping bursts—the faster, the better.”
WHY ARE WE DISTRACTED?
Directed attention “requires effort, plays a central role in achieving focus, is under voluntary control (at least some of the time), is susceptible to fatigue . . . any prolonged mental effort leads to directed attention fatigue.”

Stephen Kaplan
The Limits of Student Attention

Student engagement with streaming videos
Based on Guo et al., 2014

Approximate percentage of video watched by students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video length (minutes)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-6</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-40</td>
<td>0</td>
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The Pull of Novelty

“At our core we are information-seeking creatures . . . This notion is supported by findings that molecular and physiological mechanisms that originally developed in our brain to support food foraging for survival have now evolved in primates to include information foraging.”

The Distracted Mind
Endless Novelty

“As infinite distractions compete for our attention, companies are learning to master novel tactics to stay relevant in users’ minds.”

Nir Eyal

Hooked
“We need to think of paying attention as an achievement, something that you’re able to do [i.e., and not that you do effortlessly . . .] multiple steps are needed to ensure that you end up aware of the stimuli you’re interested in, and not pulled off track by irrelevant inputs.”

Daniel Reisberg, *Cognition*
FROM DISTRACTION TO ATTENTION

Policy Structure Renewal
POLICY

Shaping Attention Norms
Attention Norms

• What attention norms are shaping your course experience?
• What attention norms do you want to shape the course experience?
• How can you establish those norms?
In one study, students who were not using a device in a class lecture, but were seated within view of a peer with a device, performed 17% worse on an exam based on that lecture material than students who were not within view of someone else’s device.”

Ashley Waggoner
Denton
Invite Student Feedback

Enlist your students to help you create an environment that sustains and supports attention. Your students will have experience with multiple policies and practices, and can help give you new ideas.
Use Warm Language

“We are all challenged these days by the ways in which our digital devices can steal our attention away from our immediate surroundings. Our technology policy is designed to support our attention to one another and to the course material.”
Attention Norms

What attention norms do you want to establish in your spring courses? What attention norms do you need to re-shape?

How will you re-shape or establish those norms?
The Art of Supporting Attention

- Program
- Scene Changes
- Acts
- Intermissions
Transparent Structure

• What Are We Doing?
• Why Are We Doing It?
• What’s Next?
Inspired by Index Cards
Designing for Attention

Mini-Lecture (15min)
Writing Exercise
Group Worksheet
Video Clip
Low Stakes Assessments

Assessments help students recognize where to direct their attention in a course. When your students are navigating multiple courses, as well as a universe of potential distractors—such as a global pandemic—your assessed work draws their attention to where it matters.
Low-Stakes Engagement

Identify the most important engagement activity that you want your students to complete each day or each week, collect it on paper or electronically, and have it make a minimal contribution toward the students’ grades.
Renewing Our Attention to the World

Instructions for living a life:

Pay attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it.

“Sometimes”
Mary Oliver
Signature Attention Activities

- Signature Attention Activities are designed to re-awaken your students to the wonder of your discipline and its connection to their lives or the everyday world. How can you help them see the course content, the classroom, or themselves in startling and intriguing new ways?
SAA: Art History

Students viewed the same painting every week at the Worcester Art Museum, and wrote a new response to it every single week.
Take turns reading the selected text aloud with your partner(s). The Bible is meant to be read out loud. *Go slowly!* I mean REALLY slowly!! Don’t worry about getting through the whole text. It’s better to ask many questions about one verse than to read fifty with little thought.”
SAA: Everyday Object Analysis

• What Is It?
• So What?
• Now What?
Generating Signature Attention Activities

What pedagogical activities would awaken (or re-awaken) students to the fascinating wonders of your course content?

How could you make such pedagogical activities a part of your daily, weekly, or monthly course planning?
To pay attention: this is our endless and proper work.

The Classroom as Attention Retreat

Mary Oliver