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ENHANCING STUDENTS' ATTENTION IN THE CLASSROOM

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT

Workshop Objectives

- Reflect on and suggest innovative teaching methods to foster intellectual engagement.

- Understand cognitive and social factors affecting students' attention.

- Explore the challenges of attention in humanities and social sciences classrooms.

- Discuss pedagogical approaches to improve attentiveness.

- Develop discipline-specific classroom practices to foster sustained student engagement.

ON ATTENTION

1. What is Attention?
- Attention is the cognitive process of selectively focusing on one aspect of the environment while ignoring others.
- It is essential for perception, memory encoding, learning, and problem-solving.
- Attention operates in limited capacity: humans can consciously attend to only a few items at once.

2. Types of Attention
- *Sustained Attention*: Maintaining focus over time (vital for reading, lectures, writing).
- *Selective Attention*: Focusing on relevant stimuli while suppressing distractions.
- *Divided Attention*: Attempting to focus on multiple tasks simultaneously (often results in cognitive overload).
- *Executive Attention*: Regulating and shifting focus in goal-directed tasks.

3. Attention Span & Learning
- Research suggests attention wanes after 10–15 minutes of passive activity such as lectures.
- Breaks, varied stimuli, and interaction help reset and extend attentiveness.
- Active engagement—asking questions, problem-solving, discussion—improves attention duration.

4. Digital Distractions and Cognitive Costs
- Frequent task-switching (e.g., checking devices) impairs working memory and long-term retention.
- Digital multitasking leads to 'cognitive switching penalty': it takes time to reorient attention after each shift.
- Students exposed to habitual digital distractions show reduced academic performance and comprehension.

5. Attention and Emotional States
- Anxiety, boredom, and stress reduce attentional control and motivation.
- Positive emotions and curiosity increase attentional engagement.
- Classroom climate, peer dynamics, and inclusive teaching significantly impact attentional readiness.

6. Implications for Teaching
- - Chunk content into shorter segments to align with natural attention rhythms.
- - Use retrieval practices (quizzes, polls) to reinforce focus.
- - Encourage metacognition: have students reflect on when and how they lose/gain attention.
- - Normalize silence and slow time for deep thought and discussion.
- - Design learning spaces and norms that reduce digital and social distractions.

Key Concepts
- Attention spans are short; students may disengage every 10–15 minutes.

- Cognitive load, multitasking, and digital distractions undermine retention.

- Social pressures, fear of missing out (FOMO), and classroom climate shape attentional habits.

Strategies for Focus
- Segment lectures into digestible 10-minute blocks.

- Use retrieval practice and low-stakes quizzing.

- Encourage active participation through Socratic dialogue.

- Integrate silence and slow reading exercises.

- Establish collaborative device use policies.

Activity: Attention Challenge in My Discipline
Identify one key challenge to student attention in your classroom:

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Reflect on one potential strength or opportunity your discipline offers for cultivating attention:

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Designing My Attention Reset Moment

Sketch a 2-minute in-class practice you can use to restore focus:

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Commitment to Action

One practice I will try:

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Key Findings on Attention and Digital Culture

Insights from Maryanne Wolf, Nicholas Carr, and Sherry Turkle

Maryanne Wolf
- - Deep reading is a skill that develops through slow, immersive engagement with texts.
- - Digital reading habits are training our brains to skim, scan, and skip—undermining comprehension and critical analysis.
- - Students are increasingly losing the cognitive patience required for deep attention and reflection.
- - Educators must explicitly teach 'biliterate' reading strategies to help students toggle between digital and deep reading modes.

Nicholas Carr
- - The internet encourages a fragmented, distracted mode of thinking that weakens memory consolidation.
- - Frequent screen-switching trains the brain to be less attentive and more reactive.
- - Students immersed in multitasking environments develop a 'shallower' form of knowledge acquisition.
- - Sustained attention and deep focus are essential for the formation of long-term understanding and intellectual maturity.

Sherry Turkle
- - Digital devices are reducing face-to-face conversations and empathetic listening in classrooms.
- - Students report anxiety when separated from their phones, even during learning.
- - Technology fosters a culture of 'presentation over presence'—students curate their identities but disengage from authentic dialogue.
- - Human connection and reflective solitude must be protected and re-integrated into education.

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Annotated Bibliography on Attention, Learning, and the Digital Age

Cain, S. (2012). *Quiet: The power of introverts in a world that can't stop talking*. Crown Publishing.

Cain argues for the value of silence and introspection.

Use: Include silent reading, reflective writing, and low-stimulation participation formats.

Carr, N. (2010). *The shallows: What the Internet is doing to our brains*. W. W. Norton.

Carr argues that the Internet fosters skimming and cognitive fragmentation. He calls for educational practices that rebuild linear thinking and deep focus.

Use: Develop exercises that reward uninterrupted attention, such as Socratic seminars.

Cavanagh, S. R. (2016). *The spark of learning: Energizing the college classroom with the science of emotion*. West Virginia University Press.

Cavanagh links emotional resonance with sustained attention. She advises teachers to incorporate storytelling and emotional relevance into their methods.

Use: Begin lessons with emotionally rich narratives or provocative prompts.

Davidson, C. N. (2017). *The new education: How to revolutionize the university to prepare students for a world in flux*. Basic Books.

Davidson champions participatory and interdisciplinary learning as antidotes to disengagement.

Use: Employ collaborative inquiry and purpose-driven learning to sustain student attention.

Lang, J. M. (2020). *Distracted: Why students can't focus and what you can do about it*. Basic Books.

Lang synthesizes cognitive research and classroom strategies for attention.

Use: Implement attention-grabbing openers, structured transitions, and varied instructional modes.

Stone, L. (2005). *Continuous partial attention*.

Stone coined the term "continuous partial attention" to describe cognitive overload from multitasking.

Use: Encourage mindfulness breaks and deep work sessions in the classroom.

Turkle, S. (2015). *Reclaiming conversation: The power of talk in a digital age*. Penguin.

Turkle explores how digital devices undermine face-to-face communication and empathy. She suggests creating "sacred spaces" in classrooms for undistracted presence.

Use: Establish device-free zones and prioritize dialogic learning formats.

Warner, J. (2018). *Why they can't write: Killing the five-paragraph essay and other necessities.* Johns Hopkins University Press.

Warner critiques rigid writing instruction and advocates for expressive, authentic writing.

Use: Replace drills with meaningful assignments tied to students' lives and values.

Wolf, M. (2018). *Reader, come home: The reading brain in a digital world.* Harper.

Wolf examines how digital technologies alter the reading brain, threatening deep reading and sustained attention. She advocates slow reading and metacognitive practices to cultivate cognitive patience in students.

Use: Introduce screen-free reading sessions and reflective reading journals.

Zajonc, A. (2008). *Meditation as contemplative inquiry: When knowing becomes love.* Lindisfarne Books.

Zajonc promotes contemplative pedagogy to counteract distraction.

Use: Begin classes with mindfulness practices and integrate reflective journaling.