

The Role of Contemplative Pedagogies in an Age of Fragmented Attention

1. What is your experience of fragmented attention/Digital Distraction in yourself and/or your students?

1. Student Distractions:

- Some students are engaged, while others are on devices during class. The exact purpose of their device use remains unclear.
- Checking phones, especially messaging apps, is a significant distraction even with notifications turned off.
- Concerns arise about whether students are using devices for the assigned task or if they are elsewhere mentally.

2. Personal Experiences:

- Despite best efforts to concentrate (such as hiding away and turning everything off), computers bombard us with notifications and other distractions.
- Personally, there's frustration when starting a task online and getting sidetracked by seemingly interesting content, leading to forgetting the original task.
- Internet browsing tends to be the worst distraction, often leading down rabbit holes.
- WhatsApp groups and mobile notifications (emails and other apps) contribute to distraction.
- Emails, especially for teaching staff, can pull attention away from the classroom.
- Remote teaching with recorded tutorials reduces real-time interaction.

3. Physical and Mental Effects:

- Fractured attention results in tiredness, headaches, and grumpiness.

- Overwhelm occurs due to information coming from various sources.

4. Clinical Work Interruptions:

- Clinical work experiences frequent interruptions from staff seeking advice or sending messages on screens.
- Students observe these interruptions, prompting discussions about potential errors.

Overall, fragmented attention affects both students and educators, impacting focus, productivity, and well-being.

2. What are the challenges of fragmented attention/Digital Distraction for Teaching and Learning?

1. Diminished Sustained Attention:

- Excessive distraction hinders learning processes by reducing the capacity to sustain attention.
- Sustained attention is fundamental for closely examining information.

2. Balancing Social Media Benefits and Distractions:

- Teachers face the challenge of leveraging the benefits of social media without succumbing to its distractions.

3. Deep Learning and Sustained Attention:

- Deep learning relies entirely on sustained attention.
- Sustained attention is essential for contemplative practice and all forms of learning.

4. Cognitive Overload and Teacher Awareness:

- Teachers must not only be aware of the content they teach but also support learners in minimizing distractions.
- Cognitive overload due to distractions affects both educators and students.

5. Lack of Practice in Focused Thinking:

- A significant challenge is the lack of practice in thinking through tasks with sustained attention.
- Compensatory skills may exist, but they come at a cost.

Overall, addressing these challenges requires strategies to enhance sustained attention and minimize digital distractions in educational settings.

3. What are some potential solutions incorporating contemplative approaches?

1. Guided Visualizations:

- Use guided visualizations related to subject matter and personal performance.
- These visualizations can enhance attention and engagement.

2. Classroom Practices:

- Encourage students to mute devices and turn cameras on during online sessions.
- Foster a sense of community to motivate students to engage actively.

3. Incorporate Practices into Content:

- Integrate contemplative practices directly into lecture content.
- This helps students experience mindfulness and sustained attention.

4. Wise Use of Digital Media:

- Use digital media wisely, including designated times for not using it.
- Incorporate embodied practices in the classroom to build knowledge, e.g. movement and light exercises.

5. Transfer Attention Skills:

- Apply the skill of gently and firmly returning attention to things beyond just focusing on the breath, e.g. through reading exercises such as *lectio divina*.

6. Mindful Social Media Use:

- Encourage students to use social media mindfully for learning, avoiding excessive distraction.

7. Structured Thinking Time:

- Build thinking time into tasks using the "explain, check, go" methodology.
- Provide multiple points for students to refocus during tasks.

8. Manage Email Distractions:

- Implement "Calm Inboxes" by checking emails only at specific times.
- Reduce the impact of constant email notifications.

9. Discuss Expectations and Research:

- Spend time discussing attention expectations at the start of modules.
- Share relevant research on attention and digital distractions.

10. Model Focused Attention:

- Model focused attention for students.
- Build "digital spines" to fully engage in sessions. A digital spine is the sequencing of activities and documenting of knowledge and decision-making over time that supports and guides the work.

11. Varied Activities:

- Design tasks that introduce screens and devices as a welcome change.

- Include activities that don't depend solely on screens.
- Online settings allow for flexibility, such as giving permission to look out of the window or turn off cameras.

12. **Gentle Discouragement of Device Use:**

- While avoiding draconian measures, gently discourage device use during teaching.
- Set up a conducive learning environment.

13. **Embodied Attention Moments:**

- Invite students to short moments of embodied attention at the start of class.
- Explain the voluntary nature of this exercise.

These strategies can promote mindfulness, reduce distractions, and enhance the learning experience.

4. How are student lecture attendance and distraction related?

1. **Availability and Effort:**

- When lecture content is accessible online at any time, students may question the effort required to attend in person.
- The convenience of online availability can reduce motivation for physical attendance.

2. **Challenges of Accessibility:**

- While solving accessibility issues, we've introduced new challenges.
- Students may choose alternative activities over attending lectures.

3. **Pre-Lecture Access to Slides:**

- Providing lecture slides in advance allows students to view them on their laptops during the lecture.
- However, this approach may not always enhance engagement.

4. Tech Use in Lectures:

- Use technology to meaningfully engage students during lectures, e.g. polls, wordclouds, padlets etc.
- Ensure such, interactions are not trivial and ineffective.

5. Concentration and Attendance:

- If students struggle to concentrate during lectures, they may skip attending altogether.
- Lack of focus impacts attendance.

6. 24/7 Content Access:

- The idea of continuous content access can lead to missed lectures.
- Real-world reasons contribute to non-attendance, i.e. students may have important other obligations such as factoring in commuting time or caring responsibilities

7. Speed and Convenience:

- Prioritizing speed and convenience affects higher education.
- Students may prefer watching recorded lectures at double speed over attending in person.

8. Changing Connection Norms:

- Personal connection norms are shifting.
- Students may not fully recognize the value of in-class, embodied presence and connection.

In summary, digital distractions, accessibility, and changing norms influence student attendance decisions.

5. How have you supported your students in active listening?

1. Device Management:

- Some educators enforce rules about putting away and silencing devices to minimize distractions during lectures.

2. Contemplative Reading Circles:

- Effective strategies include using contemplative reading circles and sharing insights after discussions with student groups.

3. Explicit Teaching of Active Listening:

- Actively teaching active listening as a skill helps students engage more effectively.

4. In-Class Practicals and Training:

- In-class practicals and discussions about active listening outcomes contribute to skill development.
- Student medics receive formal training in history-taking skills.

5. Integration into Lecture Content:

- Active listening is introduced as a study skill within lecture content.

6. Non-Judgmental Observation:

- Encouraging students to observe without judgment and describe their observations while being aware of their feelings enhances active listening.

Overall, these approaches foster better listening skills and enhance the learning experience.

6. How do you encourage/create social presence?

1. Structured Routines:

- Introduce routines like chat time in a circle.

- Encourage students to use each other's first names during interactions.

2. Effective Formats:

- Pair work and small group discussions can foster social presence.
- Themes and case studies related to students' experiences enhance engagement.

3. Active Learning Techniques:

- Utilize active learning methods to promote interaction and participation.
- Show students how to use social media effectively for educational purposes.

4. Personal Connection:

- Actively get to know each student individually.
- Remember details about them and engage in personal conversations.

5. Collaboration and Discussion Tasks:

- Collaboration tasks and discussions are essential for building social connections.
- However, it can still be challenging to encourage social presence.

6. Interactive Learning Environment:

- Classroom space matters; create an environment conducive to interaction.
- Ensure lectures go beyond passive listening and actively engage students.

Overall, a combination of these approaches can enhance social presence and create a more connected learning experience.

7. How can social presence be embodied authentically in practice to counteract the separated mind vs body worldview and to help us 'reclaim ourselves'?

1. Courage and Community Support:

- Reclaiming ourselves requires courage and determination, especially in a culture that often separates mind and body.
- Communities that foster connection and understanding play a crucial role.

2. Self-Acceptance and Embracing Distractions:

- Accepting ourselves, including our distractions, is essential.
- Recognize that efficiency isn't always the goal.

3. Physical Presence:

- Being physically present with students matters.
- Shared physical spaces create connections.

4. Contemplative Practices:

- Incorporate practices that bring students back to their bodies and the present moment.
- Examples include grounding exercises like the "54321" technique.

5. Interactive Language Teaching:

- Start language modules with small groups in a circle.
- Encourage student interaction and engagement.

6. Awareness Practices at Session Start:

- Begin sessions with focused attention and awareness.
- Set the tone for learning throughout the course.
- Being clear about the current task and allow time for reflections on it and to answer questions.

7. Encourage Body Awareness and Sensory Invitations:

- Develop body awareness through movement practices.
- Invite students to be aware of feelings and senses.
- Highlight moments like laughter and their value.

8. Collective Identity Beyond Individualism:

- Reclaiming ourselves involves moving away from individualism.
- Establish connections as part of something bigger.

Overall, these practices foster authentic social presence and holistic well-being.