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Distracted Minds: Your Classroom Can Be a Retreat in Dark Times

Support and sustain your students' attention, and you contribute not only to their learning but to their well-being, too.

By James M. Lang

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IMAGE BY DARKMOONART_DE FROM PIXABAY

Years ago, the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi — using a technique he called the "Experience Sampling Method" — handed out pagers and asked people, at random periods throughout the day, to pause and describe what they were doing and their current mood. An early researcher in the field of positive psychology, he wanted to understand which kinds of activities made people feel happy.

Most of us expect that we will be happiest when we have nothing to do — lying in a backyard hammock, sunning ourselves at the beach, or just vegging out on the couch. But the results of Csikszentmihalyi's experiment showed something quite different: "Optimal experiences" for humans, he wrote, "usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile."

In his 1990 book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, he labeled those moments of deep and full attention as "flow states." When we are in flow states, he wrote, we "are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter." We block out time and distractions voluntarily, so absorbed are we in the task. The more time we spend in these flow states, he argued, with our attention fully captured and directed, the more likely we are to lead a thriving and happy life.

Since September, I have been writing a series of columns on attention and distraction in the college classroom, and presenting practical strategies for cultivating students' attention in our courses. Here, I want to step back from the details and make a broader point: During this difficult time in higher education and in our country, our efforts to hold students' attention and focus it on an intellectually absorbing topic can play a vital and healing role in their lives.

The kinds of flow states that Csikszentmihalyi documented have been increasingly difficult to achieve during the pandemic. Not only have we been continually distracted by political upheavals and global health anxieties, but we have also been worn down by the ways in which so much of our communication with one another has been mediated through screens. The temptation to distract yourself with other tasks during a Zoom meeting — or for students, during a Zoom class — tugs continually.

Many of us are also working from home, where interruptions and distractions are plentiful. My five children, even the two who have graduated from college, are all living at home at the moment. That's a lot of bodies in constant motion around the house. But they're not even the biggest distraction. Every day, all day long, I hear my wife teaching remote kindergarten in the other room. I love my wife very much, but if I have to listen to her sing the "Days of the Week" song one more time, I might have to move my office into the backyard shed.

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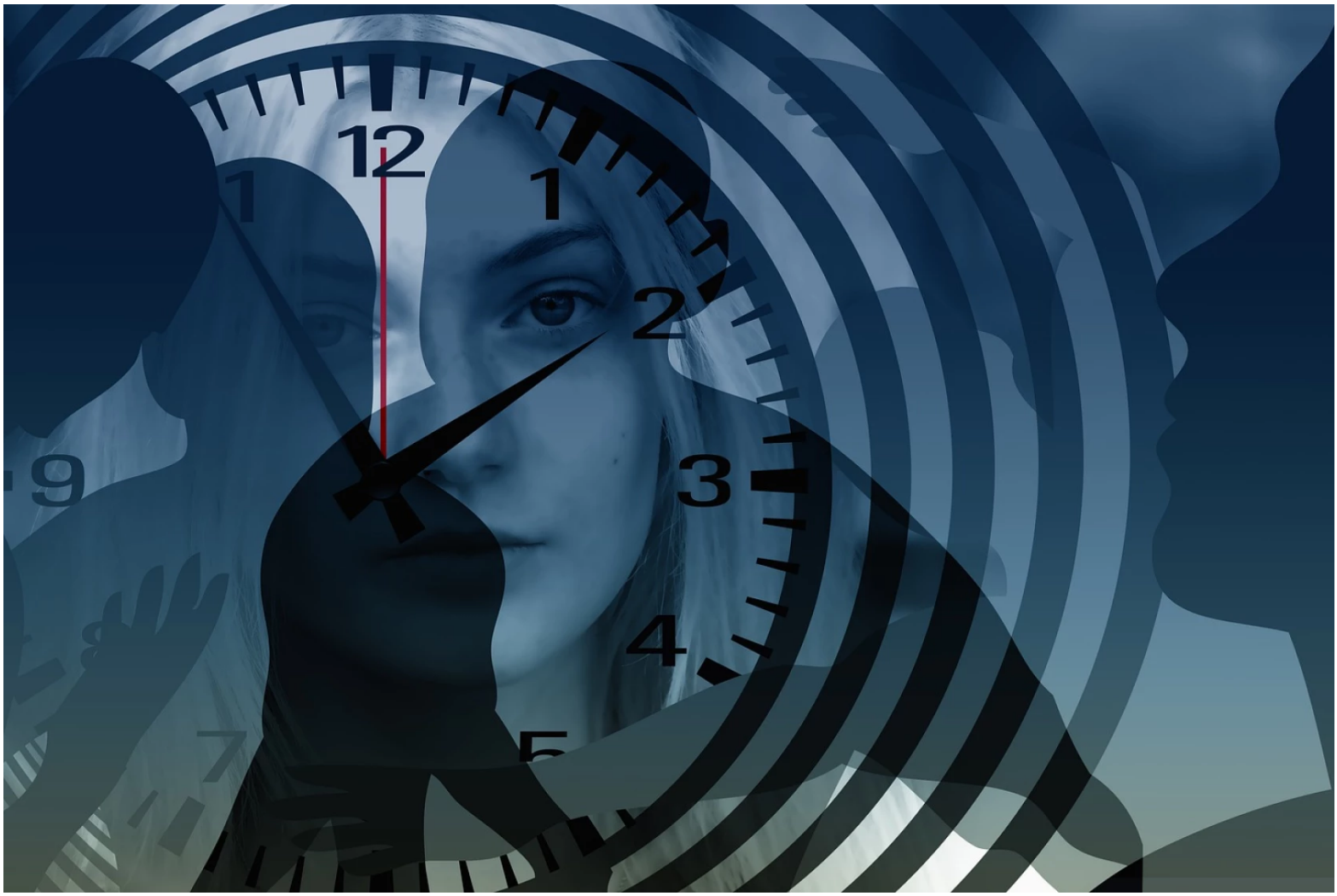

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Distracted Minds: Why You Should Teach Like a Poet

Of course our students also have been trying to manage their fears about the state of the world and the complications of pandemic life in home environments that might not be conducive to quiet study and concentration. They are experiencing the literal meaning of the word distraction, with its Latin roots: *dis* (apart) *trahere* (to drag). We are all being dragged apart, pulled in many different directions.

Amid so much anxiety and tension, faculty members have an incredible gift to offer students: the opportunity to come together and learn something meaningful.

If Csikszentmihalyi is right, the more we can design and structure our class meetings — whether face to face or online — as opportunities for students to engage in attention-absorbing acts of learning, the more we are offering them experiences that will enhance their well-being. This seems like an especially valuable exercise in the present moment, but it's one that we actually have the opportunity to provide every semester, pandemic or no.

So how do you create a course environment that values attention and counters the many distractions of this traumatic year? To that end, any instructor in any type of course can deploy three core principles:

- **Community.** Attention is reciprocal. The more attention I pay to you, the more attention you are likely to pay to me. Our first priority in the classroom should, thus, be to establish a sense of community, one in which students feel recognized as individuals (for specific tips, see "3 Ways to Get Their Attention in Class"). You expect students to give you their attention, and to give it to one another, but they should feel your attention, too.
- **Structure.** To pay attention to anything for long periods of time is difficult, but change, variety, and transparency help. Think about designing a modular classroom experience in which you as the instructor deliberately shift between different modes of engagement: active and passive; individual and group; speaking, writing, and thinking (find suggestions here on the "role of tempo in good teaching"). Make sure the structure is visible to students, in the same way that great speakers guide listeners through a talk.
- **Renewal.** Routines and familiarity dull our attention. Students spend their days trudging from one classroom or Zoom call to the next, and in your course might be rehashing material they encountered in other courses. When class attention seems to flag, you need to deploy what I call "signature attention activities" (find examples here) to break the monotony, wake students from their educational sleepwalking, and enable them to see the course material with fresh and wondering eyes.

The principles and specific strategies I present in my recent book, *Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It*, can help you give students the "attention supports" they need — that, in fact, all of us need, students and teachers alike, to stay focused and attentive as we do difficult cognitive work.

Perhaps more important than the specific techniques is the message you send to students about the value of attention in your classroom. That message is simple: *"I know your lives are complicated, and distractions are ever at hand, but here is a space in which we can do our best to put them aside and focus on learning. Every moment of this experience might not be a joyful one, but the more you are able to give your attention to your peers and the course content, the more pleasure and satisfaction you will gain from the time we spend together. I pledge my attention to you, and I hope you will pledge it back to me and to your peers."*

You can convey that message in a variety of ways. Write it on your syllabus, and talk about it on the first day of the semester. In the weeks that follow, remind students about it in those few minutes of informal conversation before class.

A couple of years ago, my colleague Esteban Loustaunau wrote an essay about the classroom "as a retreat space" — a place where we can put aside the cares of the world and focus on one another and our learning. That conception matches well with the argument I am making here.

Every course is an opportunity for students and teachers alike to escape for a little while from the chaos in the world and in our brains, and turn our attention to something important, intriguing, or beautiful. If you support and sustain your students' attention in your classroom, you contribute not only to their learning but, as Csikszentmihalyi and other researchers have found, to their well-being.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

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James M. Lang is a professor of English and director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College, in Worcester, Mass. His new book is *Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It,* published by Basic Books in October. He also is the author of *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons From the Science of Learning*. His Twitter handle is @LangOnCourse.