
Keep Students Focused on Class Content

It's that time in the semester when students are juggling assignments for several classes and mid-terms are looming, potentially increasing anxiety and workload. During class, instructors may find that students are on their devices (perhaps completing other assignments) or just distracted in general. Arousing and holding students' interest in a topic results in increased cognitive processing and learning (Rosegard & Wilson 2013, p.4). Here are some tips to capture and maintain the attention of your students.

Ask a challenging question at the start of class

Novel or challenging stimuli generate interest in a topic or a class. For example, Liu, Graham and Zorawski (2008) found that students who viewed a stimulating video were able to recall a set of pictures significantly better than students who viewed a video with neutral stimuli. Consider using the first five minutes of class to pose a complex or challenging question/scenario related to the class to your students. You could base the question or scenario on the reading for the class that day, helping students grapple with a topic with which they might have some familiarity. Elevating a student's interest in a topic before a class increases the chances that they will pay attention to the class itself.

Tell stories from your professional experiences

Our brains are programmed to understand and remember stories better than most other types of information. Draw on your professional experiences to tell stories related to the class content. This simple yet powerful technique has the potential to achieve several results; it can help students relate better to you, as a professional and as an individual, which will likely increase their motivation to learn. In addition, since stories are a particularly interesting way of processing information, they can help students learn and recall class content especially effectively.

Ask students to share stories from their experiences

Encourage students to share stories related to the topic you are trying to teach. This strategy draws students into the class dynamic because it indicates to them that you value their experiences. This practice will also lead students to become more familiar with one another, which can create a strong sense of class community. Students who feel connected to their classmates are more likely to report feelings of belonging, and tend to be more attentive and likely to participate in class.

End every class with a five-minute activity

One way to ensure that students retain what they have learned is to allocate five minutes at the end of each class for students to write, in their own words, the 'biggest take homes' from the class session. This requires them to pay attention in class, retain the information and strengthens their ability to recall it. Please find an example for a closing activity on the following page.

References:

- Liu, D. L. J., Graham, S., & Zorawski, M. (2008). Enhanced selective memory consolidation following post-learning pleasant and aversive arousal. *Neurobiology of Learning and Memory*, 89(1), 36–46.
- Rosegard, E & Wilson, J. (2013). Capturing Students' Attention: An Empirical Study. *Journal of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 13 (5). pp. 1-20

Closing Activity Example

1. In your view, what was the most important concept covered in class today?

2. Please explain the concept using as few words as possible.

3. How does this concept connect to previous material covered in this course?

4. How might this concept be applicable to you in a current or future professional setting?