

Thriving *in* Academe

REFLECTIONS ON HELPING STUDENTS LEARN

Thriving in Academe is a joint project of NEA and the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org). For more information, contact the editor, Douglas Robertson (drobert@fiu.edu) at Florida International University or Mary Ellen Flannery (mflannery@nea.org) at NEA.

■ Your Attention, Please!

Have you ever faced unfocused, disengaged students? What can you do to re-set academically adrift students on a course for improved learning?

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Creating Student Focus in a World of Distractions

To a caring teacher, it's frustrating when students don't fully listen or make only modest efforts to learn course content. If you can't get their attention, or even half of it, how can you expect students to experience authentic, hard-earned learning?

Today's distractions are like honey to bees—powerful, irresistible, and seemingly natural. My teenage daughter has found five ways to “Facebook” (that I know of.) Like a junkie after her next fix of virtual socializing, she scours the house for whatever device she can find. It's just not that healthy, whether socially, emotionally, or physically.

Distractions have multiplied exponentially over the last twenty years: the internet, cell phones to smart phones, more compelling video games, easier access to private music, and the omnipresence of social media. Such technologies are both astonishing and accessible 24/7, making the road to effective teaching and learning both exciting and daunting.

My premise is that while such distractions are prevalent and carry students away from learning, teachers can easily acquire and implement a short list of tools that help to regain students' attention and refocus student learning. As a result, you can recapture that wonderful feeling when you see your students achieve significant new learning, and be able to share with them that occasional “aha!” experience.



Meet Jim Therrell



Jim Therrell is the director of the Faculty Center for Innovative Teaching at Central Michigan University. Having taught since 1979, Jim understands the challenges of teaching and the need to forgive oneself and move on with new teaching practices. He's presented on Focused Learning, as well as over 400 other presentations nationally and internationally. In 2010, he won the POD Innovation Award with the "One-Hour Conference," and currently sits on the POD Board of Directors as membership chair. When Jim isn't parenting five daughters and enjoying seven grandkids, you can find him in a racquetball court, on the golf course or sledding hill, or curled up in his favorite chair with the latest book on teaching and faculty development.

Focused Learning

We know from brain research that learning is simply meaningful, hard work, and that teachers can put forth maximum effort without gaining significant results. Here's the evidence (Meyers & Jones, 1993) that haunts me and propels me to improve my teaching: Psychology students were tested four months after course completion and compared to students who had never taken the class. They knew just 8 percent more!

If students are to have a chance at long-term learning, teachers must employ powerful ways to provide *focus*, to transform

TEACHERS MUST EMPLOY POWERFUL WAYS TO PROVIDE FOCUS, TO TRANSFORM STUDENT EFFORTS INTO LASER-LIKE PATHWAYS OF LEARNING.

student efforts into laser-like pathways of learning. From the immediate to the long-term, here are my "Top 5 Ways to Focus Student Learning":

Focuser #1: Get their attention—and don't proceed without it.

What does it matter if what you're presenting is wonderful and state-of-the-art if students aren't paying much attention? If students are looking at you with that glazed look in their eyes—like they've been watching TV the past three hours—then stop and get their attention. There are dozens of ways to gain attention. Here are a couple ways to get you started:

TALES FROM REAL LIFE > FROM TEACHING TO LEARNING

After more than 30 years of teaching and research, I know the challenges of creating a focused, productive learning environment. The following statement may sound counter-intuitive, but I've learned that one way is by *not* focusing on your teaching.

I've wandered by many a classroom, noting either the utter boredom and/or the multiple devices with thumbs or fingers flying for purposes other than that of the instructor. Wanting to illustrate the difference between teaching and learning, I've often told the story of the whistling teacher:

One day, while wandering the hallways of a classroom (which I actually do as part of my workday), I heard this beautiful whistling from a teacher inside his classroom, and I paused to listen for few minutes. Soon the class finished and students ambled to their next class. Out of curiosity

I asked this teacher how it went and he replied, "Great!" I commented on how beautiful his whistling was, then asked: "How are your students doing with whistling?" He responded with a quizzical look, then exclaimed, "Well, they don't really whistle, but I taught them quite well!"

While some teachers teach well, students don't necessarily learn. Making the leap to a focus on learning wasn't easy. I truly enjoyed the "sage on the stage" role, but eventually realized (I'm stubborn!) that my focus should be on the end result—student learning.

- Adjust your voice: go from loud to quiet or vice versa, or just stop talking;
- Choose a student at random to respond to a question;
- Change set: go from the middle of a PowerPoint to a small group discussion;
- If you're trying to refocus from a small group activity, ask three students to start clapping.

A great resource online for gaining your student's attention is "How to Get Attention," at www.shkaminski.com/Classes/Handouts/Attention.htm.

Focuser #2: "What's the big idea?"

I don't want this to sound harsh, but as Einstein stated: "If you can't explain it simply, you don't know it well enough." Think of your course and restate the central idea or main objective in one sentence, concretely and/or metaphorically. I did this for a course I taught four years ago (and since then), called "Multicultural Education," and came up with: "Walk with a smile in the shoes of the 'other.'" Students from that class still remember much of the course content via this one focusing sentence. We know that

the brain craves a way to organize and relate information. This one sentence became the foundation and focal point for how students attached and recalled information from this class years later.

Another focuser in this vein is how you structure the learning objectives in your course. I had one course with fourteen objectives and I wondered how the heck students would focus on this many, espe-

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cially in conjunction with three or four other courses. I decided to have small groups of students discuss the first seven objectives and agree upon their top two most meaningful choices. By tallying their choices, I highlighted the top four objectives and told the students that these would be the learning focal points for the semester. The other objectives would be connected

to these top four. The students were empowered in their own learning, and they understood what was going to be emphasized and why, thus engaging in a meaningful, focused way with the syllabus.

Focuser #3: Think and act visually.

Take advantage of the largest, most active part of the brain: the visual cortex. Start with the syllabus, the foundation for learning in your course. Make your syllabus more meaningful and engaging through graphic design. Once you have a graphic template for one course, you have it for life, making small tweaks as desired. Wonderful examples of a visual syllabus are located at: <http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/creative-approaches-to-the-syllabus/35621>.

One of the best visual focusers is a concept map because it offers a relational way in which students may see big ideas mapped out and connected. Prezi, an online presentation tool, also has the same capacity to engage the brain in relational ways. For a more in-depth look at visual learning, see the April 2010 issue of NEA's *Thriving in Academe*, "Seeing is Believing," at

■ BEST PRACTICES > TAKE "AHOP," BEFORE YOU LEAP INTO CONTENT

Do you afford your students an opportunity to see or understand the big idea? Why what they're about to learn is meaningful, and what the possible outcomes might be? The brain needs such a context within which to construct, attach, and relate significant concepts or details. I've distilled this approach into a nifty acronym, AHOP.

Attention: As you think about how to start each class, consider how to get their attention.

Hook: How will you set the

hook that holds their attention and inspires their thinking? Often, this amounts to explaining the "why" of the upcoming content. Ask, "Why is it vital to learn about the so-called causes of the Civil War?" and then add, "Why can't we skip this content? Why is this meaningful?" Pause for an uncomfortable five or 10 seconds, and repeat until you get a response or two. Other ways to set the hook include:

- a controversial or challenging question on the board before students arrive;
- a compelling or provocative image or graphic on

- the screen;
- doing a simple, quick role-play.

Objective: Make sure you make crystal clear the 2-4 main learning objective(s) for the class period. List these in the upper right corner of the whiteboard. Students who lapse with their attention can look at this list and refocus quickly on target. This "advanced organizer" can also be a great framework for the brain and how it connects details to these learning objectives.

Predictions: Finally, ask



your students to make a prediction or two about the upcoming content, results, or outcomes. Praise students for trying. Making predictions, then testing them, gives the brain something to resolve. The brain dislikes any cognitive dissonance (so create it!), and it wants to figure out the "right" answer. Course content then becomes a way to solve the problem, a dilemma, or a mystery.

Focuser #4: Explain why! (And do it concretely).

Faculty are trained to know their disciplinary content backwards and forwards, and they know it in a mostly abstract, complex way. But even as we know *what* to teach, we seldom address the *why*. Students, on the other hand, are motivated by what's meaningful. It's as if there's a constant refrain in their heads: "Why is this content important to me—why should I learn this—how is this meaningful to me?"

Figure out how to explain the why. Simplify and make content concrete or metaphorical—it's what the brain loves to digest. It's the way you get on the same page with your students and create the road to meaningful learning for them.

Focuser #5: Deliver clear expectations, including accountability.

The perennial challenge for faculty is to communicate expectations clearly via the syllabus and rubrics, and through verbal explanations, whether on the first day or during office hours. If they don't know how much and how well they have to perform in your class, many students will just throw up their hands and say to their friends: "This looked like an interesting course to take, but the instructor has all these rules and assignments, and I just don't get what's expected. I asked, but I still don't get it." For obvious reasons, you don't want this type of communication on Facebook.

Your students are not just learners. In college they are supposed to be scholars, so treat them that way. In fact, expect and create an active community of scholars by assigning a short, collaborative literature review the first day. Suppose the issue is "childhood safety." Brainstorm with students the major areas of concern for this topic. Create teams to review and write about the readings per each area within this topic. Now you've set the expectation of scholarship and collaboration, and then explain how this lit review leads to the next step or the next assignment.

Have your students stand up that first day of class and ask anyone to sit if he/she is (1) not smart, (2) not an adult, (3) not

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

GETTING THE FOCUS JUST RIGHT

MAKE FOCAL POINTS MEANINGFUL AND MEMORABLE.

Find out and truly understand who your students are: their stories, experiences, prior knowledge, frustrations, interests, and skills. If you're trying to convey a concept to students like "redistribution of wealth," bring in some chips for poker, play Pink Floyd's "Money," then debrief the experience. Was money redistributed fairly? By chance? By virtue of skill? Now you're poised to develop learning from better understanding to evaluation and focus the main issues behind this concept in memorable ways.

IT'S IMPORTANT TO KEEP FOCUS FRESH.

Yes, develop a set of practices around focusers

and focal points for students, but don't over-use or over-rely on the same set of practices. Human beings, students in particular, appreciate and respond to fresh practices, so continue to expand your engagement tools. Even the best practice will founder if used too much. Small groups can be a great way to increase student engagement and focus, but don't employ them every class period.

THE RIGHT FOCUS AT THE RIGHT TIME.

This aligns with the maxim of Aristotle to conduct practices "in the right manner at the right moment and for the right length of time." If you don't over-use a single technique, students will end up listening more and with more focus, and being more engaged in their learning. Focusers make Aristotle's maxim more possible in everyday teaching.



FOCUSED LEARNING DOESN'T ALWAYS WORK.

I've learned over the decades that teaching is complex. Even the best solution doesn't always work. We try our best to eliminate uncertain or lackluster results, but reduction is a more reasonable expectation. Instructors have to remember that students, the most salient variable in any learning equation, are the ones who ultimately decide how robust or engaging their learning becomes. Thus, as you try your hardest to implement the practices above, allow yourself room for error and subpar experiences. Give yourself a break, then come back the next day with refinements and other new ideas to try.

responsible, and (4) not accountable. While dramatic, it makes your initial expectations clear. Because it's dramatic, this exercise makes a firm impression. Students are now saying to themselves: "Hmmm, this class may take some effort. I better get it in gear." If you don't somehow focus upon and firmly set high expectations, you're in for a loong semester.

Setting the expectation of participation is also critical for a semester of engagement, as opposed to weekly doldrums. For example, I always set a 90 percent bar for attendance. Or, during class when I ask a 50/50 proposition (like true/false) I make sure every hand goes up. If one student doesn't raise a hand, I gently ask why, or ask for another vote. The semesters I haven't followed through with such expectations of participation were times of great lament for me.

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