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## BOOK REVIEWS

### James M. Lang, *Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It*, Basic Books, 2020.

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Distraction surrounds us at all times. We see its pull on our students as the assignment or activity that they should be focused on does not seem as important as their phone, computer, or talking with a classmate. We see it in our own lives as distraction pulls at us as we design a learning activity, grade papers, or even write a book review. In our current society, it seems easy to place the blame on the proliferation of digital devices with their promise of instant gratification. Although devices are certainly a source, continual distraction is not a new problem. The concern that the latest technology is diminishing our attention joins the company of similar concerns when other technologies were introduced - radio, television and video games - even coffeehouses were blamed as a source of distraction when they were first introduced in Europe. Students have always been challenged by the need to maintain focus while distraction draws their attention away, promising something new and shiny. Clearly with all the possible sources of distraction, a learning experience might easily be derailed as students fail to hold their attention to the task at hand.

Why is it a problem to keep students' attention? In this outstanding book, James Lang approaches this problem head-on, delving into a wide range of research investigating different aspects of distraction and attention from both current and classical research. He discusses how distraction comes from both internal and external sources, laying the groundwork for his answer to the key question: what can you do to help your students overcome distraction? Lang interviewed numerous educators about their approaches to combat student distraction in the classroom and ties these vignettes to the concepts presented in each chapter. The introduction to

the book moves the discussion from the idea that we are fighting distraction to a focus on capturing our students' attention. He provides three main principles that form the basis of the book: that attention is an achievement, that attention remains achievable, and if we want to achieve attention in the classroom we must cultivate it deliberately. His exploration of these principles forms the remainder of the book. To do this the book is divided into two parts that investigate the nature of distraction and then provides modern solutions.

In the first part, Lang explores the history of distraction (spoiler: distraction didn't arrive with the iPhone, or even with the advent of the coffeehouse), examines distraction as it occurs in the classroom, and then discusses the debate surrounding banning tech in the classroom. In the chapter that discusses tech in the classroom, Lang provides a summary of the arguments for and against allowing students to use electronic devices in class. Several different example course policies covering each extreme, and a context-specific compromise is discussed (a full-length example can be found in the book's Appendix). Included in the debate are both student and faculty views on tech in the classroom and how these views have evolved over time. This is concluded with a discussion on how to present and sustain the classroom policy that one decides to use.

In the longer, second part of the book, Lang explores various practices of attention. In this section he moves away from defining the problem of distraction to offering possible solutions to gain and then support students' attention. Each chapter addresses a way in which the actions of the professor can have a profound effect on

## Distracted *continued*

the attention of their students. Ideas and suggestions to gain and maintain attention are provided, ranging from the level of course design to day-to-day classroom management. Lessons are grounded in examples from Lang's wide-ranging research on the topic, including the experiences of professors as well as lessons drawn from both education and psychology research. At the end of each of these chapters he provides a Quick Take, a bulleted list of main points (see practices below), followed by a conclusion section in which the lessons of the chapter are put into a larger context.

With six chapters devoted to Practices of Attention, readers are sure to find more than one approach that fits their style, and will be useful in the classroom. There are too many lessons to list here, instead we highlight three of the practices:

- Build a learning community. Here Lang focuses on the social component of attention. He stresses the positive effect of simply getting to know your students and their names. You are more likely to gain and retain their attention if they know you care enough to learn their names. Building this community can also involve making use of the physical space in your classroom. For example, something as simple as rearranging the classroom seats or the professor moving throughout the classroom to break the invisible barrier between professor and students can have significant effects on students' attention.
- Curiosity to capture and retain attention. Lang explores the power of using questions, problems, and stories to promote student attention. He suggests initially capturing attention through curiosity and retaining it through introducing transitions in the lecture to break-up content.

- Signature attention activities. How do we hold student attention? One suggestion of Lang's is to create a toolbox of signature attention activities. Learn to "read the room" and the ebb and flow of your classroom, and use a signature activity to reel students back in when their attention starts to wane. Lang distinguishes three broad categories: focusing, creating, or connecting. The activities you choose to add to your toolkit should be ones that suit your teaching style, though he cautions the overuse of any one activity, as it will just become familiar and lose its purpose as an attention gaining activity. Using too many can also have the unintended effect of distracting from the material being taught.

Lang finished writing this book just as the world was entering a pandemic lockdown, and educators everywhere were trying to determine how to transition face-to-face learning to a remote learning model. While the topic of the book seemed particularly pertinent to the difficulties presented by online learning, the lessons provided transcend any one model or mode of teaching.

This is a book to pick up and reread before each semester while planning syllabi. The ideas and practices discussed help structure the ways in which one can design courses to best hold student attention. At the same time, it is a book to pick up during the semester, to remind ourselves of the things that we can do to intentionally cultivate the attention of students. In our classrooms we have found some of the simple techniques he discusses such as starting classes with a "question of the day" or making the effort to make real-world connections to the course material have a large impact on capturing student attention. With the limited time a professor can devote to professional development, this is a book that you will want to read, and then keep close at hand to go back to again and again.