

Student Engagement in an Attention Economy

Or, How I Tempted my Students to read *Middlemarch*

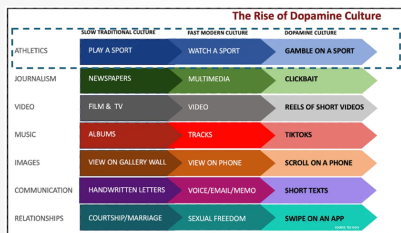
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The Problem

~Students, raised in a dopamine-driven culture, often have difficulty sustaining deep focus on complicated texts.

~Much of their experience in the attention economy is automatic; they do not realize their attention is a valuable commodity, and one they can take agency over.

~When professors choose to assign shorter, less difficult texts that are easily accessible to students, they rob their students of the opportunity to experience the *pleasure* of lingering over, absorbing, and responding to challenging texts.



Modeling Attention

Model the mindful use of our own attention when interacting with students:

~Extend regular invitations and incentives to attend office hours, and curate a physical space there that makes attention/focus a priority.

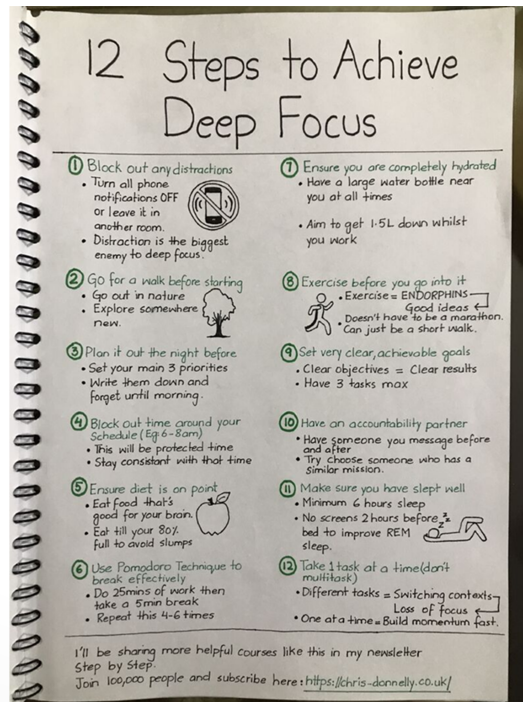
~Employ a Socratic method of classroom discussion, focusing on student responses to texts and answering those responses with additional questions meant to encourage students to support and defend assertions with textual observations and analysis.

The Possible Solution

~Challenge students to strengthen their attention muscle throughout the semester.

~Introduce the idea that attention is a commodity, valuable because it is a limited resource, and one they can take agency over.

~Change classroom policies and practices to reflect the aim of creating a dopamine reset for 16 weeks.



Some Particulars

~No electronics permitted in class. Our tools for exploring a challenging text are a notebook, pen, physical book, and human-to-human discussions, unmitigated by technological devices.

~ Make use of frequent small assignments to increase student accountability.

~ Give students responsibility each week to lead a discussion with their peers on one aspect of the text.

Results

The quality of my classroom "vibe" has drastically improved, including student level of engagement (as observed by who is tracking, taking notes, keenly thinking, asking questions, and doing well on quizzes).

~Glowing student evaluations. Every person knows intuitively that careful attention is the key to adding value to someone's life, and often students, who have been trained to look to authorities for self-value, can perceive if they are indeed a priority or not based on the quality of attention given to them.

A Final Note

Giving students close attention does not necessarily require more time. Like attention, time is a limited commodity in any given life. Attention is how we use the time given to us. We do not need to add any additional office hours to our schedule or hours to our classroom time to engage our attention or that of our students, we can add value to our students' educations by using the time we already have with them to focus carefully on them and thereby add value to their academic lives.

Acknowledgments

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