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ADVICE

Distracted Minds: Why You Should Teach Like a Poet

How to use “close reading” of a text, an object, or an idea to focus your students’ attention in class.

By *James M. Lang*

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GERD ALTMANN FROM PIXABAY

Every Sunday morning of my childhood, my father would pile the family into our station wagon and drive two miles from our home in suburban Cleveland to our local church. Part of this route involved passing a gas station that was, at some point in my early teens, torn down and temporarily replaced with a dirt lot. We had been driving by this new dirt lot for at least a month when, one sleepy Sunday morning, my father stared at it and exclaimed in surprise: “Hey, the gas station’s gone!” This was met with laughter and incredulity from the rest of us, who had seen the gas station disappear many weeks ago.

Routine is a great deadener of attention. When you drive the same route, the scenery begins to fade into the background, and you barely see it anymore. When you follow the same routines at home, folding the laundry or doing the dishes, your mind goes on automatic pilot.

Likewise, routines can deaden the attention of students in our courses. They come into the same classrooms every day — in person or online — and experience the same generic suite of teaching activities: listen to a lecture, take notes, ask some questions, talk in groups. Even if we are mixing up our teaching strategies, as we should, they will eventually become routine enough that students will check in to class physically, but their minds are somewhere out of the room.

In [this series](#) on distraction and attention in the college classroom, I wrote last month about the [role of tempo in teaching](#) and the lessons on attention that faculty members can adapt from playwrights and composers. This month I want to turn to the poets, from whom we can learn how to push away distraction and reawaken attention — in the classroom as in life. Through the creative turns of language they use to describe the world and our experiences, the familiar becomes unfamiliar

again, and we discover in the everyday world fresh food for insight and reflection.

Mary Oliver, who [died in 2019](#), was for me the premier poet of attention. The explicit charge of so much of her work was to invite us to free ourselves from our familiar routines and blinkered perceptions. In her poem “Mindful,” she describes herself as having been put on this earth to help renew our attention to the world:

*It was what I was born for —
to look, to listen
to lose myself
inside this soft world —
to instruct myself
over and over
in joy,
and acclamation*

Take a tour through Oliver’s collected works, gathered in the pages of [her 2017 book](#) *Devotions*, and you’ll see what she means. Poems testify to the astonishing sight of a dead black snake on the road, a freshly sliced melon, or stones on a beach. In “Sometimes,” she invites all of us to follow her process of renewing our attention to the world:

Instructions for living a life:

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

These lines strike me as a beautiful expression of what we want for students in the college classroom. We want them to pay attention to course content, to be astonished by what they find there, and to report back to us and the world what

they have discovered.

In this fourth installment of my series — drawn from my [new book](#), *Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It* — I want to provide a few examples of how we can put Oliver's injunction into practice in our teaching. I am drawing here from creative teachers who have developed models of how to break from the attention-dulling routines that can infect our classrooms. In the book, I call these models "Signature Attention Activities." Deliberately designed to renew student attention, these pedagogical tools should be deployed strategically throughout the semester — once a week or month, or even just during those low moments when both teacher and students need a shot in the attentional arm.

You wouldn't want to use one of these every day of the semester. After all, then it would become routine and lose its effect.

Close — and I mean really close — reading. Kathleen Fisher, an [associate professor](#) at my college, teaches an introductory theology course that features well-known religious texts. To awaken student attention to those familiar texts, she uses an in-class exercise that draws from the ancient tradition of Torah study, in which practitioners slowly read the sacred scriptures of Judaism aloud to one another, pausing and discussing and questioning at every turn.

Fisher allowed me to visit her class and observe her students engaging in these slow readings of course texts. Students sat facing one another in pairs, the opening paragraphs of the Book of Genesis on their desks. Students read passages aloud to one another, pored carefully over single words and sentences, asked each other questions, pointed out anomalies and inconsistencies, and wondered.

After 20 to 25 minutes of this work, Fisher called the group to attention and asked what they had learned from the experience, and especially what they had noticed

about the text that they hadn't perceived before. A student raised his hand immediately. "I've read this a million times," he said, "and it never occurred to me what it means for the earth to be formless." That student's comment encapsulated perfectly what a signature attention activity should accomplish: opening a striking new lens onto something a student has encountered many times before.

Fisher's close-reading activity could work with any material that you want students to read and consider carefully, from works of literature to the data from scientific articles. This strategy provides a structure for deep engagement with a text and gives students the pleasure and responsibility of discovering new insights and ideas that the group as a whole can then analyze together.

Engagement with objects. Academics usually associate the phrase "close reading" with a text, but we can also conduct close readings of an object, an idea, or an experience. Jessica Metzler, a [senior associate director](#) at Brown University's teaching center, gave a 2018 workshop on helping students develop new "ways of seeing" images or physical objects.

Having students analyze an image or a physical object in the classroom (or in their homes) can be an excellent way to break them from normal classroom routines. You don't need famous paintings or rare finds from archaeological digs. Find an everyday object that connects to your discipline, or a photograph or image that accompanies an article or book in your field.

Drawing from research in object-based teaching, Metzler described how to guide students through three steps as they encounter an object, an image, or even a sound that you bring into the classroom:

- **What?** For the first step, students spend time just observing the object and taking notes. In this strategy, as in Fisher's, extremely close analysis can help

reveal unexpected new angles, perspectives, and ideas.

- **So what?** Students write down questions based on their observations and share them with one another. For example, they could pass their questions around the room and add new ones, giving everyone time to develop ideas or questions for further research.
- **Now what?** The final stage shifts into more whole-class and teacher-centered discussion. What paths for research or future questions were raised? What questions were unanswered? What do the experts say? What does it mean, and what comes next?

Those three simple questions can help you cultivate interest in any object or image that you want to bring to the attention of students: Begin with attention, expand to collaboration, and conclude with theorizing and reflection.

Attention through assessments. This is my favorite technique, and comes from [an essay](#) (in an edited volume) by the late Joanna E. Ziegler, a professor of visual arts at the College of the Holy Cross, who described a striking assignment she gave to students in her art-history courses. For 13 consecutive weeks, she asked students to leave the campus and make a visit to the nearby Worcester Art Museum in order to spend time in front of the same work of art. Students wrote new papers on their chosen work every week, describing what insights they had developed with each new viewing.

This slow unfolding of their ideas led them, Ziegler explains, “from personalized, almost narcissistic responses to descriptions firmly grounded in the picture.” As they learned to train their attention on a work of art, their attention brought them insights. They saw more clearly, developed new ideas, and wrote creatively about what they observed.

In all three models, the instructors believed that sustained attention was an

important value to cultivate. Instead of simply lamenting its disappearance, criticizing students for being easily distracted, or scapegoating digital devices, they designed activities to focus student attention.

As academics, we all face a similar choice in our approach to attention and distraction in the classroom. We could throw up our hands and ignore it, we could complain about “kids these days,” or we could ban technologies from the room in the vain hope that sustained attention would suddenly blossom in response.

A better solution: Follow one of these models and develop the kind of creative teaching strategies that will help students focus their attention and learn.

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

TEACHING & LEARNING

STUDENT SUCCESS

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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](#).

RECOMMENDED READING





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Distracted Minds: 3 Ways to Get Their Attention in Class

By James M. Lang

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