Designing Attention & Learning in the Modern Classroom: Emerging Social Rituals and Their Influence on Classroom Learning

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Attention

Many new technologies, while distracting, were designed to focus our attention.

We are always to a certain extent in a state of distraction. --Emile Durkheim
William James wrote in the late 19th century that “when we wish to rivet attention on an object, we must constantly seek to find something novel about it, and this is especially true when other powerful impressions of the senses are tugging at it and trying to distract it.”
What’s that?

World of stimuli and world of gadgets to harness the stimuli
In an industrial society, the scarce resources are goods and services. In an information society, the scarce commodity is not information—we are choking on that—but the human attention required to make sense of it. Human attention-structures work differently from goods and services and will require a new kind of economics and a new kind of economist. The economists have not realized this yet, but then neither have the rest of us.
The Classroom
Distractions

But the classroom was never void of distractions, we have just built them to appear as if that were the case.
Attention, Please!
Responsibility

• The audience is responsible for their outward appearance of attention.

• Audience attention is directed forward
What does learning look like?
Technology in the Classroom

Technology is challenging accepted notions of teaching and learning.

How do we know if these students are learning?
Expectations & Practice

There are two questions we need to ask:

• How are new technologies affecting **expectations** of teaching and learning?

• How should new technologies be changing the **practice** of teaching and learning?
Shaping Expectations

Technologies frame how we approach the world.
At Your Fingertips
SNS as Attention Machine
Puppets of distraction
Practices

Should teaching practices accommodate the expectations of students?
The Situation

- Erving Goffman writes that the order and organization of the lecture is built around a specific, situated management of the tension between maintaining an audience’s attention and exploiting their proneness to distraction.

- Lecture is divided up between the business at hand (the content of the lecture) and the custard of interaction in which the business is embedded.
Custard

- The traditional lecture aims to redirect participants away from the custard and towards the subject matter.

- Despite the fact that participants inevitably focus on the surrounding environment, Goffman suggests that the social and physical site of the lecture is structured in such a way that forces them to act “as if” they were engaged directly with the subject matter.
In reality, according to Goffman, the participant “skips along dipping in and out of following the lecturer’s argument, waiting for the special effects which actually capture them, and topple them momentarily into what is being said.”
Special Effects

- Educational content should be understood as intermittent and surrounded by a rich context of special effects.

- These are the practices that should accommodate expectations and the context of learning.
Active Learning Classrooms

The successful implementation of communication channels should always be embedded in the physical organization of space.
But what about software?

Live Tweeting in the Classroom

- Give students opportunity to participate
- Extends responsibility for content to students
- Temporally extends the conversation beyond the classroom
- However, restricted by size - under 20 students is difficult
- Requires constant maintenance
Social software

- Expand opportunities to learn
- Expand the time of learning
- Expand the space of learning
- Expand risk to teaching
Some Questions

- Is all distraction bad for learning? Can distraction create serendipity and “aha” moments?
- Can archivability raise the stakes of learning?
- Can collective efforts motivate learners?
- Can the desire for small amounts of attention motivate participation?
Case Study: Tin Can

Shaping Discussion

- Beyond backchannels
- Theory of stages: main and side (simultaneous performances)
- Reduction of barriers
- Accommodates different learners
Conclusions

- Classroom technology needs to be designed
- Distractions need to be choreographed
- Stages are not tied to particular technologies, nor are they predictive of specific behaviors. They are a way of conceiving of modes of communication within situations that are flexible and that emerge from participant performance.
Thank you

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