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The Role of Attention:

Strategies to maintain and enhance student focus



THE ROLE OF ATTENTION

By InnerDrive

Learning starts where attention is given. Without it, students may hear but not process, see but not understand. In busy, fast-paced classrooms, maintaining student attention is both a challenge and a necessity. While attention naturally fluctuates, teachers can shape their environment and behaviours to boost focus and minimise distractions.

This article explores three separate areas from the research on student attention; attention contagion, seating plans and classroom displays. Each section draws on key studies to help you make informed decisions about how to structure your lessons and classroom environments.

1. ATTENTION CONTAGION: THE SCIENCE OF SHARED FOCUS

Attention doesn't just arise from within; it is shaped by those around us. The concept of attention contagion refers to how one student's level of focus can influence their peers. When learners are surrounded by others who are on-task and engaged, they are more likely to mirror that behaviour.

A key study by Forrin et al. (2021) tested this phenomenon in a simulated classroom setting. Participants watched a video while sitting next to someone who either displayed attentive or distracted behaviours. Those seated next to an attentive peer spent more time focused on the video and demonstrated better retention of the material. In contrast, those near distracted peers showed decreased attention and lower test scores.

The implication for classrooms is powerful: attention can ripple across a group. By modelling focus and encouraging engagement among key students, teachers can create a social environment that enhances attention for everyone. A single attentive student can, quite literally, help lift the focus of those around them.



2. SEATING PLANS

Seating arrangements are one such strategy that can help facilitate student attention. What you want students to pay attention to will impact how you lay out the room (Wannarka and Ruhl, 2008). For example, evidence suggests that having desks in rows will lead to a much quieter environment (Gremmen et al., 2016). As students are not directly facing each other, it may mean that they are less distracted and therefore more focused on doing their work. In another, much older study focused on students with special educational needs, researchers found that sitting in rows led to an increase in 'on-task' behaviours, from 35% to 70% (Wheldall and Lam, 1986).

That being said, evidence suggests that having students in small groups resulted in students being more likely to brainstorm and work better with their peers (Rosenfield et al., 1985). One popular 'halfway house' between rows and groups is a semi-circle/horseshoe arrangement. Marx, Furher and Hartig (2000) found that when primary-aged students were sat in this configuration, it resulted in them asking significantly more questions when compared to rows.


Once you have decided whether to arrange your classroom in rows, groups or semi-circles, how do you decide where everyone sits? Research has shown that when students choose their own seats, they are three times more disruptive in comparison to when the teacher picks the seating plan (Bicard et al., 2012). One reason for this could be because students tend to sit next to their friends, encouraging them to talk more and not stay on task.

In summary, focus is not just personal—it's social. Understanding this dynamic allows teachers to set up their classrooms in ways that foster shared attention.

3. CLASSROOM DISPLAYS

Classroom environments are designed to be vibrant, informative and stimulating—but too much stimulation can become a distraction. Wall displays that are overly busy, colourful or unrelated to the task at hand may hinder attention, particularly in younger students.

In a controlled experiment, Fisher, Godwin, and Seltman (2014) investigated how classroom decoration affects learning.



Kindergarten children completed lessons in either a highly decorated classroom or a more minimalist one. The results were significant: in decorated rooms, children spent more time off-task and performed worse on learning assessments.

A follow-up study by Godwin et al. (2016) looked at classroom activity in primary school settings. They found that children were more likely to be distracted during lessons when surrounded by highly visual environments. Students in classrooms with excessive decoration engaged in more off-task behaviours, suggesting that their attention was being drawn away from instruction. It is worth noting that more long-term studies may find that students start to get used to these excessively decorated classrooms, so the impact may reduce over time.

These overall findings are consistent with Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988), which highlights how too much irrelevant input can overload working memory. When students are distracted by wall displays, they have fewer cognitive resources available for learning. A balance between creating a warm, inviting classroom that celebrates students' work along with helpful reminders, whilst limiting distractions, needs to be struck.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Attention isn't just an internal process—it is deeply influenced by external factors such as peer dynamics, the room layout and what is in students' eyeline. Recognising how these variables interact can help educators understand why some students sometimes struggle to pay attention for extended periods of time. When attention is intentionally supported, students are better equipped to take in information, process it meaningfully and ultimately succeed academically and socially.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Blogs

Attention Contagion: Can attention spread among students?

<https://www.innerdrive.co.uk/blog/attention-contagion/>

6 Ways to grab student attention

<https://www.innerdrive.co.uk/blog/keep-my-students-attention/>

Why are students so easily distracted?

<https://www.innerdrive.co.uk/blog/students-easily-distracted/>

Can Metacognition reduce mind wandering?

<https://www.innerdrive.co.uk/blog/metacognition-mind-wandering/>

Book

Do I Have Your Attention (2025) by Blake Harvard

<https://amazon.co.uk/Attention-Understanding-Constraints-Maximizing-Learning/dp/1032750278>

Podcast

Do I Have Your Attention with Blake Harvard. *Becoming Educated*

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/3KZ8JUJerj43dEfv7bvzit>



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