Attention, Please!
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Attention has become our most valuable commodity

iGen/Millennial students (b. 1995 and later) are:
- chronically overstimulated
- part of a culture of divided attention
- continually tested
- conditioned to value the end product more than the process
- struggling with impulse control
- overextended

Attentional training
Spotlight model: attention has a focus, margin, and fringe
Zoom-lens model: attention can also be adjusted in size

Spotlight imagery
Attentional beam can be near (narrow, concentrated) or far (wider, diffused)
We are always paying attention; the beam is always shining on something
Our focus can be broad or narrow, internal or external:
  o broad internal
  o broad external
  o narrow internal
  o narrow external

Deliberately shifting focus during a performance
To manage anxiety: narrow external focus
To avoid an impending memory slip: broad internal or broad external focus
To focus after a distraction: narrow internal

Focus cues for attentional training
- It is impossible to maintain a single point of focus for an extended period of time
  …focus cues can help plan for more intense moments of focus
- When unguided, the human mind will most frequently drift towards the negative
  …focus cues can help emphasize desired outcomes
- Types of focus planning:
  o Focus graph for a piece of music (peaks and valleys of focus intensity)
  o Creative words, phrases, images for different points in the music
  o Abstract visual map of the piece
  o Performance day focus cues
Research-supported teaching strategies

- Remember that attention is 80-90% visual for most students
- Engage a student’s attention rather than demand it
- Give students more control, accountability, choices
- Facilitate student-generated projects when possible
- Encourage group work, peer performances, or peer assessments
- Facilitate “down time” (take breaks, breathe, stretch)
- Do not assume boredom when attention drifts; student may be processing
- Use humor or novelty to engage attention and memory
- Introduce moderate amounts of stress (or challenge), including games, friendly competition, low-stakes performances
- Engage in mindfulness practices

Mindfulness:

- The deliberate focus of awareness,
- without evaluation,
- on thoughts and events of the present moment.

Psychological benefits of mindfulness:
- Attentional control
- Ability to refocus quickly after a distraction
- Reduced mental chatter
- Improved concentration
- Increase in relaxing alpha brainwaves
- Decreased stress and anxiety
- Objective self-assessment
- Greater ability to accept criticism
- Increased empathy and compassion
- Feelings of social connectedness
- Improved sense of wellbeing

Strategies for cultivating mindfulness in the music studio

1. Create psychological “space” within the learning environment
- Begin each lesson or practice with one minute of mindful breathing
- Pause mid-lesson to experience silence, regroup, or focus awareness
- For teachers: pause mid-lesson to stop teaching and practice listening, asking, or reflecting
- Practice finding comfort in silence
2. Make body awareness a regular practice
   • Begin each lesson or practice session with quiet awareness of the physical self
   • Pause mid-lesson or mid-practice to check in with the body, its alignment and balance, releasing unnecessary tension
   • Address physical needs (hunger, thirst, bathroom) before practicing or performing
   • For teachers: pause mid-lesson to become aware of the physical self, including tension or misalignment

3. Help students develop awareness of thought
   • Practice observing thoughts with detached curiosity
   • Recognize that thoughts are not facts
   • Replace maladaptive thoughts with positive, healthy thoughts
   • Recognize the thoughts behind each emotion
   • Practice impulse control with smartphones and social media
   • Redirect thoughts to practice redirecting attention

4. Cultivate a safe space for students
   • Create an environment where experimentation is encouraged
   • Allow students to take risks
   • Allow students to think (or play) outside the box
   • Acknowledge mistakes without excessive judgment
   • Develop an atmosphere of joy and creativity

5. Help students develop mindful practice habits
   • Practice slowly (when practical) with awareness of each moment
   • Practice “deep listening”
   • Articulate goals for each repetition in practice
   • Approach each repetition with thoughtful awareness
   • Practice mindful self-assessment of each repetition

Mindfulness and the music teacher
- Manage burnout, mental fatigue, physical tension or pain
- Develop healthy attentional training skills
- Cultivate quiet awareness during conflicts with students or colleagues
- Remain present with students who are performing, misbehaving, or sharing personal struggles
- Separate the sense of self or self-worth from quality of work (teaching, performing, research, service, administration)
- Handle criticism or professional rejection
- Let go: choosing battles with detached compassion

“*To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work.*” ~ Mary Oliver