

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