

Mark Your Calendars for ITLAL Winter Events

January 8 & 10, 2020 **Instructional Leadership Academy: Course Design for Deeper and More Lasting Student Learning** 9:30 am—3:30 pm Location TBA

This Academy is designed to offer you an all-too-rare luxury: time to step back and (re-) conceptualize a course that will lead to better learning outcomes for your students without "dumbing it down." We'll help you create more challenging encounters with the thinking of your discipline—and more fun for you and your students! The Academy includes a two-day interactive workshop and a full semester of support as you implement your new design.

February 1, 2020 **Grade Faster AND Better with Rubrics!** *Spring Brunch & Workshop* 10:00 am—12:00 noon Location TBA

Do you find that you spend far too much time grading and students spend far too little time reading the feedback they receive? Carefully constructed rubrics can break this pattern by helping you to clarify your expectations up front, streamline the process of grading, and provide specific feedback that students can use. In this workshop, you will learn how to create and use rubrics to save time and communicate more effectively with your students.

To learn more about our events and services, please contact us.

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How can I get them to pay attention? *Strategies for helping students avoid distraction and focus on learning*

Picture an instructor at the front of a lecture hall at the start of a new week. Frustrated by the fact that her students frequently seem to “check out” and play on their devices during her lectures, she has decided to make some changes. To better capture their attention, she has added examples that she knows will be relevant to her students’ lives and experiences, she uses humor, she demonstrates her passion for the discipline, and she changes things up every 15 minutes or so. She is confident that her new approach will really help students pay attention to the important content she is covering and positively affect their learning. She notices during class that her students do appear more attentive, and she is curious to see how they perform on the weekly quiz. Given these changes, what do you think that quiz will reveal?

The quiz will probably show that these carefully laid plans are actually misdirected efforts. Why? Because these approaches, ones we’ve likely all tried, tend to conflate attention with alertness. When students hear us refer to a popular TV show, laugh at our jokes, note the emotion in our voices, or perk up because we ask them to answer a question, what we are really doing is alerting them to their surroundings. Unfortunately, these tactics don’t direct student attention toward what really matters for learning: meaningful disciplinary work and their own thinking about that work. In fact, research suggests that students’ attention quickly cycles during these kinds of lectures: during a 12-minute segment, about half of all students report lapses in attention at the 2-minute, 5-minute, and 10-minute marks (Bunce, 2010). This cycling means that students simply engage briefly with what they are hearing or doing and then let go of those mental threads as they tune out, glance at their phones, or flip between tabs on their laptop to shop or check social media. When they reconnect with what’s happening in class, they need to pick up those lost threads again and thus restart where they left off. The result is superficial processing of what’s happening in class.

So if many of our typical efforts to “capture” student attention result only in short-lived increases of sensory alertness and don’t really ensure that students will resist distractions like their electronic devices, what can we do to help students pay attention more productively in class?

A new way of thinking about attention

While we find ourselves tempted to keep seeking ways to direct students’ attention to *us*, the truth is that helping our students avoid distractions requires us to refocus their attention toward *their* developing understanding of what they’re learning. Students need to do the work of learning in class by making connections across the ideas in a lecture, using what they’re learning to solve problems, trying out new ideas, and considering the implications of what they’re learning now for what they will do next. This doesn’t mean just “keeping them busy,” but instead means having them do meaningful work that keeps them looking forward to how their thinking will change during class. While this may sound like it requires a radical overhaul of our approach to teaching, it doesn’t have to: instead, we can integrate small bits of student work into different points of a class period to ensure that they are attending to their learning.

Low-labor strategies for getting and keeping students’ attention

Have students do work at the beginning of class (before you do any work) to focus their attention.

When students do meaningful work at the beginning of class, it activates their current understanding so that they can prepare to trace the development of (i.e., attend to) their thinking as they learn more. This also helps orient them to the lecture that is coming because it gives them a reason to listen to what that lecture will reveal and prepares them to make connections across ideas.

Example: The *Muddiest Point* is a technique designed to help students recognize and articulate points of confusion. Using this strategy at the very beginning of class helps you assess students’ current understanding and prepares them to listen for answers to their questions. This technique has two steps:

1. Before class begins, give students 2-3 minutes to write in response to one of the following prompts:

- What are the three muddiest (i.e., most confusing) points from the reading or homework you did for today’s class?
- What are three questions from the reading or homework that you would like to have answered in today’s class?

2. Ask students to share their ideas with a partner or small group, and then ask groups to share some of their questions or confusions and write those on the board. Students can revisit their muddiest points during or at the end of class to see if their points of confusion have been clarified.

Have students do work during class to maintain their attention.

When students do meaningful work during class, either as part of a larger activity or as a pause during lecture, it requires them to pay attention to how their thinking is changing. Such work keeps students focused on the connections between their thinking and what's happening in class.

Example: *Directed paraphrasing* is a technique designed to help students begin articulating new ideas for themselves by imagining how they would communicate them to others. This helps students attend to gaps in their thinking and lets you assess their progress. This technique has two steps:

1. During class, after you've explained a challenging concept, ask students to imagine that their aunt is going to call them after class and will be very interested in what they learned today. (She isn't going to let them get off the phone until they are able to clearly explain the concept in language that she can understand!) Have them write a 1-sentence paraphrase of the challenging concept they have just been learning without disciplinary jargon.

2. After students have written their paraphrases, ask them to share them in pairs or small groups. Ask the groups to share out the best paraphrases they heard and compare them. Students can revisit their paraphrases at the end of class to see if their thinking still holds up. You might choose to collect their written work and quickly review it for an informal assessment of student learning.

Have students do work at the end of class to prepare them to carry over their attention into subsequent work. When students do the work of "summing up" or pulling together the big ideas from a class, they begin to place what they're learning into the broader context of the work they will do next when they read, do homework, or prepare part of an assignment. This strengthens their attention to what has happened in class and how it relates to what will happen in the course.

Example: A *Minute Paper* is a technique designed to help students identify and articulate what is important and begin to make connections across the big ideas that have been the focus of a class period. Using this strategy at the end of class helps students to think about the big picture of a class meeting and isolate the most important takeaways. This technique has two steps:

1. At the end of class, have students write down their response to these questions:

- What is the most important thing I learned in today's class?
- How will I use what I've learned to help me on the upcoming class assignment/test/project?

2. If time permits, have students share their minute papers in small groups and compare their big takeaways. Alternately, you can col-

lect these minute papers and review them for an informal assessment of student learning.

Have students do work at multiple points of a class meeting to sustain attention throughout the class meeting. Having students do meaningful work at any point of a class meeting increases attention, but the positive effects can be increased by integrating multiple moments of student work during a given class with little effort on our part.

Example: *Prediction* activities are designed to prepare students to actively listen to lecture and integrate new information as they are learning it. This strategy can be carried out in 3 steps.

1. Before class begins, give students a 3-5 sentence description of a problem that experts in your field solve using the concepts that are the focus of this class meeting. Have them predict in writing a good approach to the problem. Have them share ideas with a partner or small group, and then ask groups to share some of their predictions with you so you can write them on the board.

2. During class, pause at least once (though you might pause two or three times) and give students a minute to re-read their initial predictions and make notes on the same paper about how their thinking is changing by having them answer questions like these:

- Given what you are learning in the lecture, would you still make the same prediction about the case, or would you revise it?
- Where was your initial thinking correct?
- Where was your initial thinking flawed?

Have students share their ideas with a partner or small group and then have groups share their thoughts and make some more notes on the board about how their thinking is changing.

3. At the end of class, have students reflect back on the problem and write a couple of sentences to articulate changes in their thinking about the problem and the solution. You might collect these papers so that you can see how they are beginning to integrate concepts from the lecture into their thinking and where they are still struggling.

Conclusion

If you would like to discuss these ideas or learn more about helping students avoid distractions and pay attention in class, visit our website and request a consultation: www.itlal.org.

References

- Angelo, T.A. and Cross, K.P. (1992). *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers*. 2nd ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bunce, D. M., Flens, E. A., & Neiles, K. Y. (2010). How long can students pay attention in class? A study of student attention decline using clickers. *Journal of Chemical Education*, 87(12), 1438-1443.
- Lang, J. (2016). *Small teaching: Everyday lessons from the science of learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.



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