

Five Ways To: Sustain Student Attention

Short-loop
Generative
Learning Tasks

Questioning with
accountability

Listening with
accountability

Prediction

Make it personal

Sustained attention takes a lot of effort

To learn new conceptual ideas and new skills, we need to focus our attention — our conscious thinking — on the material we're trying to learn. In most cases, sustained attention takes effort; it requires motivation — it's not something we should take for granted — from ourselves, let alone our students. Teachers need to find ways to orient students' attention to help them overcome the many things vying for their attention.

Questioning with accountability

This is one of the main goals of a good repertoire of questioning techniques: to create a culture where students default to expecting to answer all the questions, thinking for themselves. Attention is secured by students knowing that they could be asked a question about what is happening — more or less at any time. Make questioning accountable by using cold call and pair share.



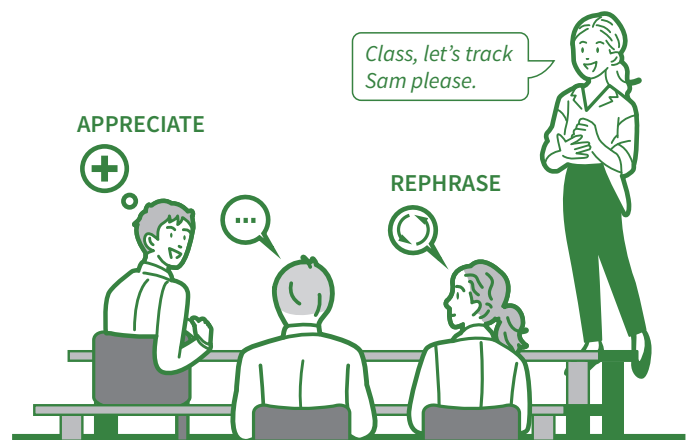
Listening with accountability

During class discussions and Q&A exchanges, students who do not feel involved can drift off. Similarly, during an extended explanation, demonstration or text reading, students can lose attention. Accountability for listening is reinforced by punctuating these inputs with checks.

The expectation is that students follow the discussion, not just focus on their own view of things. Creating cross-class accountability for listening is a means of sustaining attention to what is being discussed a useful check for understanding. Directing students to rephrase the words of their peers, show the speaker everyone was listening. Elaboration also re-exposes students to content.

Short-loop Generative Learning Tasks

A generative task requires students to select and organise information, engaging with new knowledge using their prior knowledge, thereby integrating it into a deeper schema. This could be to organise information into a sequence, summarise a story, explain a concept to someone using the key vocabulary or create a structured mind map — with four key categories. Students have to do these things solo for the task to be generative. The short loop is about the task being quick enough to do and then checking a) that it's been done by everyone and b) that it is as valid or accurate as the material requires, without diverging too much.



Make it personal

If you can tap into students' personal investment in a set of ideas, it helps them filter out distractions and sustain attention.

The aesthetic question: In MARGE, Shimamura suggests that the 'aesthetic question' is powerful for motivating learning; 'What do you think? How does it make you feel? Why is it good?'

Make it theirs: Give students some ownership — something tangible so they're invested in the discussion. This could be handling materials when discussing their properties or reading part of a text that has been allocated to a student.

Put them in the centre of things: sustain attention by placing real or hypothetical decisions in students' hands so that they feel invested.

Prediction

This harnesses the power of narrative structures where we naturally run ahead to imagine future story arcs and possible outcomes. These hooks are useful for securing attention in any exposition or story-telling scenario

Oooh, interesting! It's getting tense now isn't it. What do you think will happen to the rabbit next? ... Suzie? Robert? Let's turn the page...

