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Distracted: Why students cannot focus by James M. Lang

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Distracted: Why Students Cannot Focus

by James M. Lang, New York, NY: Basic Books, 2020, 304 p., £25 hdbk. ISBN: 978-1-5469980-9

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BOOK REVIEW

Distracted: Why Students Cannot Focus, by James M. Lang, New York, NY: Basic Books, 2020, 304 p., £25 hdbk. ISBN: 978-1-5469980-9

Humans are easily distracted creatures. Our attention seems to constantly waver, shifting every second to different objects, sounds or stimuli. As we transition into adolescence, we start to hear the all-too familiar phrase that technology – smartphones, laptops, televisions and gaming devices – is an obstacle preventing us from reaching full productivity and sapping our attention. In *Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It*, James Lang describes the oftentimes complicated and false conceptions about distraction and the part that technology plays in it. Currently, society places extremely high demands on students and expects them to be focused and attentive to lessons. Any wavering of attention is seen to be either the student's fault for letting their mind wander, or technology's fault for stealing their focus. From this perspective, teachers might feel that they have little control over their students' attention, and that it is solely up to students' willingness to pay attention. On the other end, students might feel that they are to blame for their poor grades that stem from their inability to channel their attention into lessons.

Lang offers an alternative way of thinking about distraction and technology. He posits that humans are inherently easily distracted creatures, and that these tendencies to observe our surroundings instead of focusing on the task at hand are due to evolutionary survival instincts from our predecessors. Technology is framed not as a source of all distraction, but instead as a tool to help students find meaning in their work through modern methods.

This book is a useful guide for teachers, professors, childcare workers and tutors who wish to understand distraction, as well as to pick up skills that can be used to engage students more effectively. It also teaches readers how to seamlessly integrate these tools into their teaching modules or classes. Structured beautifully in an easily digestible manner, Lang provides a comfortable way of learning about distraction and ways to enhance attention.

The text begins by introducing readers to the brief history of distraction and how society believes that we used to have “complete control over our minds”, and “the ability to ward off distractions at will”. Lang correctly points out society's misconception that it is technology which has degraded our mental capabilities, and insightfully addresses this by supporting his argument with numerous empirical studies that found no difference between our mental capacities in the past as compared to the present. In fact, distraction, according to Lang, was a necessary feature for our ancestors to survive. Our brain evolved to consist of different capacities for attention in order to facilitate hunting and tracking while being aware of predators or dangers. Lang then emphasizes the three principles of attention: attention is an achievement, attention is achievable and we must deliberately cultivate attention in the classroom.

The notion that attention is an achievement offers a fresh perspective; attention is not a button that can be switched on and off at will. It is important that educators, with their important role of nurturing the next generation of talents, recognize this notion in order to create a healthy and conducive learning environment.

Chapter 2 highlights the different forms of distractions in a classroom. Distraction in classrooms refers to a wide plethora of activities and causes, ranging from worries about finances, lack of sleep, classroom bullying and technology. Lang believes that there is no way to eliminate all forms of distraction in the classroom, we have to learn to accept and live with it. Instead of futilely trying to fully eliminate distraction, Lang calls for a focus on the joys of attention. He points out that “optimal experiences” occur when a person's mind is “stretched to the limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile”. As students, at one point or another, we have all experienced euphoria from understanding a complex theory or solving a lengthy math problem. Lang offers a thoughtful perspective about how learning and joy are intertwined: learning does not have to be the weary process that has come to represent our current education system. The good introduction of distraction convinces readers of the book about the importance of accepting the fact that we are and will always be prone to distraction, and that attention is an achievement, not a given. Teachers must address attention directly and creatively, and see it as an important value to cultivate in the classroom.

Chapter 3 expands on the issue of technology and describes humans as information-seeking creatures. He explains that technology is better at soliciting our attention from us because it provides greater amounts of information. Information on celebrities' lives, funny tweets or videos of puppies might not be essential, but they still fulfil our need for a constant flow of information. Lang argues that technology should not be banned but proposes instead that classrooms should have a technology policy about how and when to use technology, in order to maximize learning. Some activities such as group discussions might be better without devices, while creating a presentation might be better with a laptop. Additionally, Lang suggests flexibility – something that many classrooms of today lack. Many teachers and classrooms have rigid rules that constrain students, and attempt to educate all students as if they are exactly the same as their peers.

In the second part of the book, Lang highlights different types of attention and the methods that teachers can employ to tap on them, such as renewing students' attention with moments of active engagement in Chapter 6, implementing signature attention activities in Chapter 7, making use of assessment in Chapter 8 and, practicing mindfulness in

Chapter 9. However, what stood out most were his thoughts in Chapters 4 and 5.

Chapter 4 highlights a novel perspective about the importance of building of communities of attention. By forming a relationship with students through positive interactions – such as by remembering their names – it induces greater attention and interest toward the lesson. Lang, therefore, emphasizes an interesting dynamic whereby attention given to students results in attention from students. Few educators, especially in large lecture settings, take the time to get to know their students on a personal level; they deem it impossible to interact with a large audience. Lang, however, rebuffs this and states that effort determines if it is possible or not, and shares several examples of it being done. This novel perspective may be an awakening for lecturers or educators and can provide a wonderful method for them to enhance students' learning experiences.

Chapter 5 emphasizes “curious attention”, which describes humans as a species of curiosity, and how teachers can use students' curiosity to enhance their attention. Lang offers a fresh perspective into the different types of curiosity present in different students. Individual curiosity is present when a student already knows what they like: teachers have an easy time teaching student's material they are interested in. Situational curiosity on the other hand, highlights the curiosity present in students when they interact with a task and realize that it is interesting to them. Lang brilliantly illustrates that teachers need to identify students that lack individual curiosity, and suggests methods for educators to induce situational curiosity in the current task in order to enhance attention. The idea of cultivating curiosity using

situational factors fits well with the importance of intrinsic motivation based on a self-determination perspective.

Overall, the book is a great mixture of theory and practice. Clear explanations of theories, personal tried-and-tested examples, as well as reflections ensure that the book provides the readers with real-life practical advice. The book employs metaphors to help readers understand the different tools with which to engage students, and why these tools work. Additionally, it effectively uses summaries, appendix, and key takeaways for a better learning experience. Overall, *Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It* is a book which beams with compassion and empathy with the struggles of students, while at the same time providing tools to aid teachers and students in their joint journey in learning.

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