

Managing Attention and Distractions

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Instructor's note

Based on the [Metacognition: The Neuroscience of Learning](#) chapter from LaGuardia OER textbook, this activity focuses on managing attention and recognizing the importance of eliminating multitasking as a study strategy. Students are presented with research that analyzes the impact of distractions on cognitive performance and learning outcomes and perform an exercise to experience this first hand.

Approximate activity time: 45 min

Objectives

Students should be able to:

- Describe the concept of attention as a spotlight;
- Identify how distractions impact task performance based on experience; and
- Describe and employ strategies to manage attention and avoid distractions.

Preparation

Materials needed:

- Whiteboard
- Computer or tablet for video playback
- Timer
- For reading passages: [How to Write a Good Descriptive Paragraph](#)
- Video: [What Multitasking Does to Your Brain](#)
- Article: [The Mere Presence of Your Smartphone Reduces Brain Power, Study Shows](#)

Warm Up - up to 10 minutes

1. Ask students to think about all the distractions they encounter while sitting down to complete their homework. Students can jot down a list of distractions, and/or share in pairs.
2. Briefly introduce the importance of attention and its impact on learning.

Reading Passage 1 With Distractions - 2 minutes

1. Provide a descriptive paragraph for students to read, prompting them to remember details from the passage.
 - a. You can use any passage you choose, including ones from the following: [How to Write a Good Descriptive Paragraph](#)
2. Set a timer for 2 minutes.
3. As they read, periodically distract students by bringing their attention to something on the board and asking them to respond (e.g., funny memes, asking simple unrelated questions).
 - a. Make the distractions fun and engaging.
4. Require them to write down one word responses to each distraction to ensure they're actually shifting their attention to them.

Memory Recall - 3 minutes

1. Give students 2 or 3 minutes to recall and record as many details of what they read without referring back to the passage.
2. Set a timer.

Discussion on Managing Attention and Distractions - 5 minutes

1. After the time is up, ask students how easy or challenging they found recalling the passage details.
2. Ask if they think the distractions affected their performance and accuracy.
3. Introduce the concept of managing attention and the switch-cost effect as explained in [Metacognition: The Neuroscience of Learning](#).

Video on Multitasking Myth - 5 minutes

1. Play this short [video explaining why multitasking is a myth and how it impacts learning](#). (3:16)
2. Discuss key points from the video and relate them to the pre-task exercise.

Reading Passage Without Distractions - 2 minutes

1. Provide another descriptive paragraph of similar length to the first for students to read, again prompting them to remember details from the passage.
 - a. You can use any passage you choose, including ones from the following: [How to Write a Good Descriptive Paragraph](#)
2. Set a timer for 2 minutes.

Memory Recall 2 - 3 minutes

1. Give students 2 or 3 minutes to recall and record as many details of what they read without referring back to the passage.
2. Set a timer.

Comparison and Reflection - 5 minutes

1. After the time is up, ask students how easy or challenging they found recalling the passage details.
2. Discuss the differences in recall between the distracted and focused conditions.
3. Ask students to reflect on how the lack of interruptions made a difference in their ability to retain information.

Article Discussion and Final Points - 10 minutes

1. Provide students with a handout of the article: "[The Mere Presence of Your Smartphone Reduces Brain Power, Study Shows.](#)"
2. If time allows, have students read the article in class.
3. Discuss the key findings of the article and its implications for learning and attention.
4. Make a final point about the significance of managing distractions, particularly the presence of phones. Encourage students to try putting their phones away when completing work to improve their cognitive performance and learning outcomes.
5. If possible, set a challenge for students to do this for a week and return to assess the outcome of the exercise with the group.

References, Licenses, and Attributions

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