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What Was I Saying? Concentration and Attention

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Introduction

Picture the scene. Monday morning ... your colleagues are gathering in the staffroom ready for the morning briefing, the smell of coffee and the condensation of steam on the windows cloud the accumulation of students in the playground excitedly chatting about the weekend. Your

teaching plans for the week have been delivered to your line manager's desk and you have your first lesson planned and resources ready. A few notices from the headteacher, then the morning bell sounds, bringing order and uniformity to the chaos of the playground. Your students enter the room, settling quietly in anticipation of the day's events. You reach for the register as you have done so many times before ... *and find it is not there*. You remember seeing it for collection in the staffroom, yet it is not in your hands. When it really matters, your attention is focused elsewhere. You somehow fail to connect your body and mind to produce the start to the week that you and the students are expecting. They sense your frustration and start to fidget and chat as you send someone to collect it and struggle to find something to discuss for this impromptu start.

Or, perhaps during a lesson a student feels sick and asks to leave the room. This throws your concentration as your lesson loses pace. It takes a while to regain focus, but by this time it is too late, the moment has passed, other students have lost concentration while you respond to the situation. If only you could switch focus again to bring the lesson back on track.

These two examples suggest that focusing attention would seem essential in successful teaching performance. Lapses in concentration or focusing attention in the wrong area of your classroom may be detrimental in the learning environment. Consequently, this chapter highlights different types of attention, the reasons for loss of focus and strategies to improve concentration.

Chapter objectives

- Understand the elements that contribute to concentration and attentional focus.
- Consider the factors that affect attentional focus.
- Develop strategies to improve concentration and regain focus.

Clarifying terminology

Attention and concentration are not the same, although the two terms are used interchangeably. As a result, defining concentration is not as clear as it could be. In this section, we will highlight the differences between attention, attentional focus, and concentration, so that you are clear about the link between them.

The schematic diagram (Diagram 2.1) shows how attention can be subdivided. We will use the term 'attentional focus' when referring to concentration, although either term will suffice. However in our opinion, the term 'attentional focus' provides a form of key phrase, (similar to those discussed in Chapter 10 on self-talk) as it tells you to 'focus your attention'. The question in your mind should be, 'On what?' and you then actively search the

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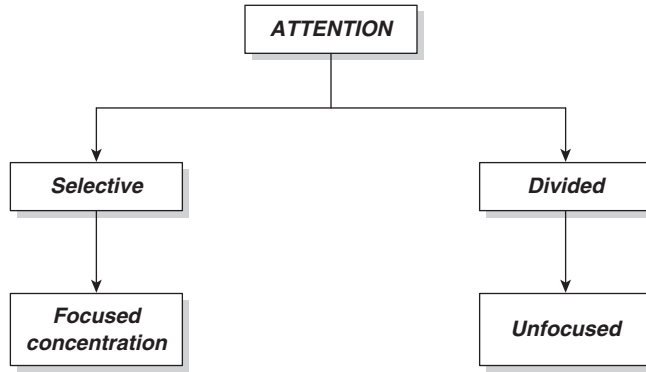


Diagram 2.1 A teacher’s attention may initially take one of two directions

environment for the relevant cues. To say ‘concentrate’ is perhaps too vague: it is akin to saying, ‘relax’ when you might not know how.

Diagram 2.1 demonstrates such ‘attentional focus’: to this extent, your attention may be ‘selective’ or ‘divided’. Selective refers to focusing your concentration on one area, for example, your marking. Divided refers to the continual refocusing of your attention between competing areas. This may be, for example, engaging with your planning while watching the television. We will return to this diagram later on in the chapter.

 Reflection

What is your ‘attentional focus’ at this moment in time? Is it on reading this chapter, or is it on some other environmental stimulus (for example, the television, music, a distraction outside)? Asking yourself where your attentional focus is can help bring the mind back to the present.



Activity 2.1

Within your teaching (and associated activities), list examples of where you are able to maintain selective attention and where your attention may be divided.

Is it always ‘wrong’ to have divided attention? Note down your response in your journal.

Attention

Attention was originally defined by the psychologist, William James, over a hundred years ago, as processing ‘one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought ... It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others’ (James, 1890: 403–4). This suggests that you selectively ‘attend’ to a single mental thought and it is this thought that goes forward in the mind. However, attention is far more than this. Despite age-old, humorous comments about the alleged ‘differences’ between male and female brains, the capacity of the human brain to process several pieces of information simultaneously is evident. It is also widely accepted that attention is selective, but in a more complicated way, that is, the individual is actively able to attend to relevant stimuli in the environment. Consider the times when you have overheard someone else mention your name in conversation and you have ‘tuned in’, as it were, to this conversation (affectionately known by psychologists as the ‘cocktail phenomenon’).

Of course in teaching, the importance of selective attention is no different. As you are ready for the start of a new lesson, you must filter out irrelevant information about what lessons you need to plan for tomorrow. You need to attend selectively to the students as they enter the classroom to ensure they are calm and settled, ready to learn. You must ensure that the class is ready for your first sentence in order to launch smoothly into the lesson. You must be aware of any distractions in the class that may need to be dealt with to ensure this continued flow of your teaching. If you consider the importance of selective attention during daily activities, you would have to be impressed by the way in which your brain processes information and focuses attention when working with perhaps 20–30 students at the same time. Most of your senses are providing information and your brain assembles and processes this information, before making a decision on what it believes is the best course of action (the reality of which is not always the correct course of action!)

Reflection

Consider the start of a new lesson within your classroom. How do you help focus your attention? How do you help to focus the students’ attention? Are there situations where you feel you may lack such selective attention? What could you do about such situations?

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Attentional focus

'Attentional focus' is the term used to describe the ability to attend to relevant information during your teaching (or indeed, any other situation requiring your attention). Environmental cues may be relevant or irrelevant to task performance. A concept called 'attentional narrowing' refers to the broadening or narrowing of this focus. In other words, attentional narrowing reduces available cues within the environment, so that cues are used, or utilized effectively. This is like the zoom function on a digital camera. One is the broad/narrow perspective, in which we take a wide or narrow view and process many, or few aspects of the environment. Within the classroom context, this is similar to working with the whole class, or a group or an individual. From time to time, your attentional focus will change to scan from the class to the individual and back. The second is the internal/external perspective, in which we view the environment either from within or outside of ourselves. We will discuss this in more detail shortly.

Concentration

Concentration is a prerequisite for success within teaching. It is about being totally immersed in the here and now, in the present. The past and future are not important. Your focus on the present seems effortless. Indeed concentration and mindfulness (as discussed briefly in Chapter 1) are very similar.

There are two strategies to help keep and maintain concentration:

- **Learn to increase attention to relevant information.** This involves training yourself to focus on something specific, for example, the attention students are committing to their work, whether they are on task, and so on. However, you may first prefer to practise this with something simple, for example, focusing on a lit candle, or your breathing, for increasing periods of time.
- **Learn to decrease attention to irrelevant stimuli.** This involves training yourself to 'shut out' anything that may hinder your concentration, for example, the noise from another classroom. Again, you may prefer to practise this through a simple exercise. If you drive a car with the radio on, turn it off and try to focus ONLY on the actions of driving, each gear change, use of your mirrors, potential dangers ahead, and so on without being caught up in the music or topical discussion.



Activity 2.2

- In relation to improving your concentration, consider each of the strategies above and how you could make these of personal relevance.
- Practise the strategies for two weeks keeping a record of how your concentration has altered.

After you have become practised in each strategy, try to use a combination of both. Filtering relevant information into conscious awareness is usually a good thing, since it is a positive attempt to increase awareness. Blocking irrelevant information from entering your mind is more risky: what may seem irrelevant at the time may in time develop into something significant. An example of this is a student not engaged with their work: they may be considering the best strategy to start their work, yet if too much time passes and they haven't started, this could indicate problems, or in turn they may start distracting others. To this extent, it may be preferable to let something irrelevant enter your mind so that you can actively evaluate and dismiss it. Think of it in terms of a Teflon™ coating on a frying pan. You can throw anything into the pan but nothing will stick, it simply washes off!

In reading the psychology literature, you will notice that concentration comprises four elements:

- Focusing selectively is necessary.
- Focus should be maintained over an undisclosed period of time.
- You should be aware of the unfolding situation.
- You should be able to alter attentional focus as required.

Lavallee et al. (2004) include an additional element for successful concentration which they call 'time sharing'. Time-sharing is simply another term for dividing your attention. In relation to teaching, you are able to divide your attention between the needs of the various students and the needs of the class in relation to your lesson plan. Another example may be in setting aside each day two hours for planning and one hour for marking as opposed to allowing this to cascade into your weekend. With this in mind, we can now develop the earlier diagram to incorporate this 'attentional shift' as demonstrated in Diagram 2.2.

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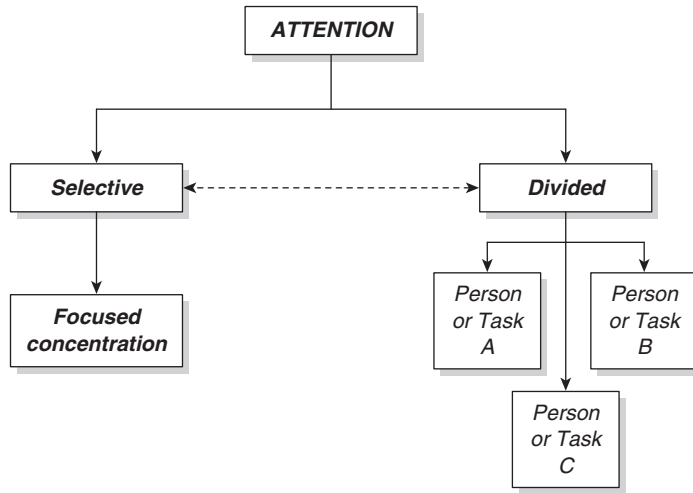


Diagram 2.2 Being aware of the 'attentional shift'



Activity 2.3

- The five elements of concentration comprise of:
 - Focusing selectively;
 - Maintaining focus;
 - Awareness of the situation;
 - Being able to alter attentional focus;
 - Sharing the time by dividing your attention to different tasks.
- For each of these elements, give yourself a score of 1 to 5 (where 1 equates to 'awful' and 5 'excellent').
- Now place these in rank order depending on the score. Put your lowest scores first.
- Keep in mind the element you want to improve.
- Periodically come back to this task over the coming weeks to reassess your development.

Components of attention

Many theories of attention exist and to outline all of them is a topic in its own right. It is also not productive for this book. It is, however, possible for us to summarize these theories into three main categories, all of which have some relevance to teaching. Attention can be viewed as a filter, a spotlight or a resource, as we will outline below.

Attention as a filter

You might think of attention as a filter or funnel, in which many pieces of information come into the brain, but only one of these pieces of information is processed. If you believe that ***you can only concentrate on one thing at a time***, this way of thinking is relevant for you. If you do think in this way, we would ask you to consider if this was actually the case within your teaching as we are sure you can process more than a single piece of information at any given time. (Remember that teachers are supposed to ‘have eyes in the back of their head’!)

Attention as a spotlight

A different way of thinking about attentional focus is as being like the beam of a spotlight, used to pick up relevant information in a similar way to a police helicopter searching for suspects at night. You are flexible in where you ‘direct the beam’. If ***you are able to direct your thoughts towards specific things within the classroom***, this suggests that you are already able to focus attention. This does not mean to say that you cannot improve on using this strategy. However, it does help to identify relevant stimuli on which to focus. It also provides an explanation for what happens when you lose ***concentration: focusing on the right area for too long or focusing on the wrong area***.

Attention as a resource

A different approach to thinking about attentional focus is like a ‘pool’ with a limited capacity. The analogy we use with our students is of a teacup. As the tea is poured from the teapot into the cup, there is a point at which the cup will not hold any more than its capacity. If you keep pouring, tea will simply overflow and will be wasted, unless you ‘empty your cup’. (Feel free to adapt this analogy to wine glass, beer glass, and so on!) In the same way, ***information entering your mind will ‘fill the space’ until you can no longer concentrate on new information***.

Some psychologists believe that there is not one ‘pool’ but many pools. So, in relation to teaching, you may have a ‘planning’ resource pool, a ‘whole-class teaching’ resource pool, an ‘individual support’ resource pool and so on. These are not necessarily the same size, so you may be able to focus more easily on one pool because it is ‘larger’ than another pool. Of course, you might direct the spotlight beam, discussed above, onto one of these pools thus combining these analogies. It would be worth considering with your mentor in identifying the types of resource pool needed for the classroom and work towards switching attentional focus between each of these at appropriate moments in time, without negatively affecting your performance.

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Activity 2.4

- Let's review the different components of attention:
 - Attention as a filter – you can only concentrate on one thing at a time.
 - Attention as a spotlight – you are able to direct your thoughts and direct the searchlight beam.
 - Attention as a resource – you are able to utilize the relevant 'pool' of resources you have at the right time.
- Consider the three different analogies above. For each of these, consider one example where you have put this into practice. For example:
 - Filter. This could relate to avoiding all distractions when marking.
 - Spotlight. This could relate to searching your mind for the relevant 'facts' you need to use when planning a lesson.
 - Resource pool. This could relate to using a specific approach to teaching an objective, phonics, scientific inquiry, and so on.
- By being aware of how you use the three components of attention, and by making these explicit, you will be able to use them to your advantage in the future.

Different types of attentional focus

As mentioned above, your attention seems to be drawn to both relevant and irrelevant cues in the environment. Even as you read this chapter, you are probably being distracted by the noise outside, the dog, children playing, a passing car, or the ticking of the clock ... or at least you are now that we have mentioned these distractions to you! Psychologists generally agree that physiological arousal levels in the body influence whether a person will filter relevant or irrelevant cues for processing in the brain. The schematic diagram (Diagram 2.3) illustrates this nicely. Attentional input can be seen as a funnel lying on its side. Initially, all sensory information enters the funnel. Some of it is relevant (represented by a five-sided star) and some irrelevant (represented by an eight-sided star). The horizontal axis represents level of arousal and the two vertical lines represent the area of processing where relevant information is filtered in while irrelevant information is filtered out. You should notice that this happens at a moderate level of arousal. This is the essence of Easterbrook's (1959) theory: a moderate level of arousal is best for successful attentional focus. Of course, it is not quite as straightforward as

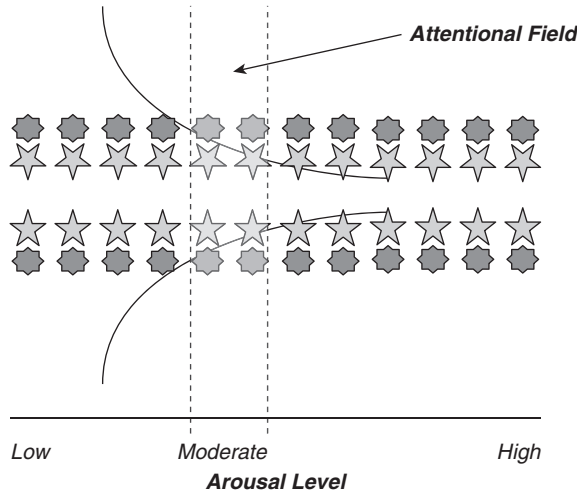


Diagram 2.3 Moderate levels of arousal should improve your attentional focus

this. You would need to establish what ‘moderate’ means for you and, this would undoubtedly differ from person to person.

An alternate perspective is that of Nideffer (1976) who maintains that attention can be viewed along the dimensions of direction and width. By ‘direction’, he means whether information is internal or external. For example, from time to time, you may adopt an *internal perspective to focus on information about how you feel*. If you are feeling tired or generally ‘under the weather’, you may decide to alter your teaching plans for the day to accommodate accordingly: where you may have planned to have taken a more demanding role in a physical education lesson, you may decide to change the focus to allow yourself to survive until the end of the day. In the main, however, as a teacher, you are more likely to focus on external cues, such as how the students are engaging with their work.

By ‘width’ Nideffer (1976) means whether to adopt a broad or narrow perspective. *A broad perspective enables you a teacher to process various cues simultaneously*, for example, what various groups of students are engaged with. This information may allow you to make a rapid decision on which group requires support as your attentional focus is on the present. In contrast, *a narrow perspective allows a teacher to ‘hone in’ in one or two specific things*, for example, the next stage within the lesson, or helping a student who has encountered a difficulty.

Ultimately you will fall into one of the four quadrants as indicated in Diagram 2.4. However, you will also move around these quadrants at different times, because your brain will be processing different information as time passes. Of course, the hard part is actually moving around these quadrants at the right time! This is where the next few pages will provide you with some guidance upon what to focus.

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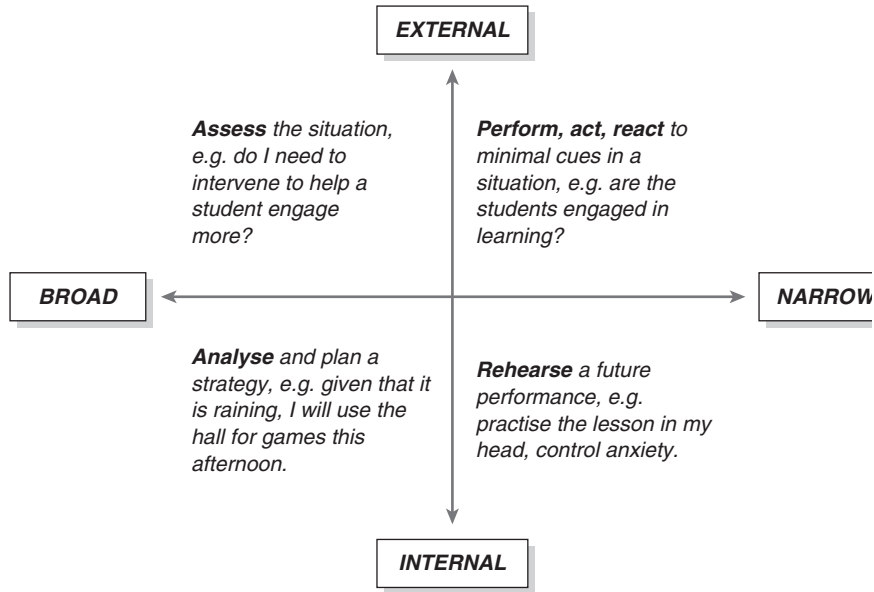


Diagram 2.4 Attentional focus may 'shift' depending on your needs at a specific moment in time



Activity 2.5

Consider the different quadrants of Diagram 2.4. Although examples have been placed in each of the quadrant, what other examples are relevant to your practice? The purpose of this activity is thus to take ownership of the model in order to identify when you may be operating in a specific quadrant.

Regardless of which quadrant you are in at any given moment, the message from this section of the chapter is very clear. Attentional focus may be adversely influenced by many potential distractions both in the environment and within yourself. It is to some of these distractions, or distractors that we shall now turn.

Attentional distractors

As we are sure you are aware from personal experience, there are many distractions during the school day that can take your mind away from the task in hand, or divert your attention to inappropriate aspects of the environment. At a general level, these can be divided nicely into internal

distractors and external distractors. One of the first things you should do, when addressing concentration problems, is to identify whether distractors are *internal or external*.

Internal distractors

Internal distractors are, as one may expect, internalized concerns and worries about your teaching. They are thoughts and cognitions that are of little, if any, benefit to performance, and include reflecting on past events, predicting future events, panicking under pressure, fatigue and motivation.

Reflecting on past events

Reflecting on the past is not necessarily a good thing in teaching. It is akin to superstition. 'I never enjoy teaching music.' 'I always seem to leave my planning until the last minute.' 'I can never seem to get my students to understand fractions.' Mentally this sets the mind up to do the same thing this time. It is a way of convincing yourself that the past will influence the present. Of course, having experience and knowledge are good qualities in teaching. However, they can work against you unless you use them wisely to inform your success within the classroom. In response to the quotations above, we usually *suggest that the teacher 'works in the here and now'*. Whereas we agree that reflection on past experiences is a good thing in helping to identify weaknesses and highlighting successful performances, it is not beneficial when a new term is about to begin.

Predicting future events

'Fortune-telling' or, predicting what will happen during the current school day is also a self-induced distraction that can have adverse effects on teachers. Such distractions are relatively easy to spot, since they usually consist of 'what if' statements. For example, 'What if I have planned too much/too little to cover in the lesson?' 'What if the students seem confused?' Or even, 'What if the students don't enjoy the lesson?' By avoiding such statements and *focusing instead on the present*, on strategy and on your own and your students' performance- or process-related goals, you will not succumb to these distractions.

Another type of future-based distraction is where a thought seems to suddenly drop in to your head, such as, 'How am I going to get to the students to cover all the areas before the exam?' Of course, this has nothing to do with the present lesson, but nevertheless it is an unwanted and unhelpful distraction. In Chapter 10 on self-talk, we mention using key words to regain focus. In preparing you for dealing with unwanted

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thoughts, we would perhaps advise you to use the word, 'STOP' as an immediate flag to show that the 'coverage' thought is a distractor. We would then help you to ***substitute the distractor thought with a more appropriate replacement thought***, such as, 'I will have ensured the students fully understand the concept of this lesson'. Of course, you must practise this technique before being able to use it successfully. In the first instance, you would need to identify when thoughts of this type emerge and then to deal with them accordingly.

Panicking, or 'choking' under pressure

We are sure that at some point in your teaching career you have succumbed to pressure; perhaps when you have been formally observed, perhaps when you have worked with a new class. Such factors may lead to panicking under pressure. Your performance suddenly drops through the floor. When it finally came to the crunch, you were unable to perform as you would have liked. Some people would argue that this is a bad thing and, yes, at one level we would have to agree. However, we would argue that if a teacher 'chokes', it is best to ***take the experience, learn from it and then return even stronger than before***. From this, we would encourage you to explore your thoughts, feelings and emotions, discuss factors leading up to choking and consider how coping mechanisms can be employed to deal with the situation. Essentially, we are suggesting that choking is OK! The key is dealing with it before it happens in the future, or handling it if you suddenly feel it emerging. Nevertheless, our role is to provide a contingency plan for you to use if the situation goes too far. Choking can occur at any time and may happen when a small situation escalates to a point where several small situations are perceived as being a total catastrophe.

Fatigue

Arguably, fatigue is more of a physical event that is beyond a teacher's control. Let's face it, if you are tired then you ARE tired! However, a consequence of fatigue may be a reduction or indeed total loss in attentional focus. ***If you are able to identify fatigue as a factor in your performance, you can then deal with it appropriately***. Chapter 7 on healthy living and Chapter 9 on relaxation may provide you with strategies to overcome fatigue. Research in psychology has shown that a short, 'micro-sleep' is far more beneficial than trying to fight tiredness and keep going. We are sure you will have seen the motorway signs warning that 'tiredness kills, take a break'. While this is undoubtedly the case on the roads, thankfully this is not the case in school. However, ***if you are ill-prepared you must adjust your teaching to suit the resources available to you***.

Motivation

Motivation is key to successful teaching. If motivation levels are inadequate, attentional focus may be lost or at very least, reduced. We will discuss motivation in depth in Chapter 3. Suffice to say, for now, ***motivation helps teachers to stay focused*** on the task in hand. If you work in a school where there are highly driven teachers, the challenge will help to keep your motivation level high. If, however, you are surrounded by colleagues who no longer feel the same passion for teaching as you do, or who 'know best' as they have been teaching for years, your motivation may be reduced. Nevertheless, motivation can act as an internal distractor and this should be borne in mind if lack of attentional focus becomes an issue.



Activity 2.6

- As noted above, there are a number of internal distractors:
 - Reflecting on past events;
 - Predicting future events;
 - Choking under pressure;
 - Fatigue;
 - Motivation.
- Consider an example and analyse it in the following structure:
 - Antecedent – what caused this to happen?
 - Behaviour – what did you do as a response?
 - Consequence – what happened as a result?
- Now, reconsider your response to the distractor. In light of what has been discussed, how could you have dealt with it differently? What would you expect the consequence to be?

External distractors

External distractors, in contrast to internal distractors, are firmly located in the environment. They are provided by the sensory systems of the body. Humans have evolved as a visually dominant species and, as such, the auditory system can be a source of external distraction, both to students and teachers. An example of this is when studying or working hard on your preparation and requiring solitude, away from any noisy distractions. Furthermore, within your teaching, you may prefer just the noise from your classroom without

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any unwelcome, additional noise. Memories of workers fitting a new school roof while on a final teaching practice come to mind. Trying to coincide speaking in between the hammer blows was something one could not prepare for!

Visual distractors

Visual distractors can be found everywhere and, without training to overcome them, are unavoidable. Both our offices overlook the campus road, pathway and AstroTurf beyond. There are three opportunities for visual information to compete with our attentional focus every day. Cars, pedestrians, football and hockey players use these facilities constantly, entering our field of vision and drawing our attention. We have trained ourselves to overcome this problem and instead focus on the task that we are working on at the time. Similarly, within your school, you will experience distractions in the form of other classes, lessons being conducted outside your window, unexpected visitors (governors being shown around, students from other classes) and many other distractions, all competing for your attention and inadvertently preventing you from doing your job of teaching. These factors will not change or go away. ***You should aim, therefore, to 'switch on and off' from them as you choose.*** You will need to practise this. It does not just come easily. Such distractions may be different for different teachers but nevertheless, if you allow them into your attentional focus, you may have less 'space' for relevant and effective thought processes to take place.

Auditory distractors

Schools are noisy places. Even the most calm and settled school 'hums' with residual noise. A school we experienced close to Heathrow Airport had triple glazing (and air-conditioning as the windows could never be opened due to the noise!), yet every 90 seconds, the distraction of another jet engine ascending or descending could still impact on concentration. Perhaps the class next to you is involved with a music lesson, while your class is trying to engage in a sustained writing task.

Noises not only cause the teacher to lose their concentration but also hinder the concentration of students. Even if you are able to exclude some noises, another unpredictable noise may occur.

One way to negate this is through having classical music playing in the classroom, which can help 'screen' unwanted noise while also providing a complementary auditory stimulus conducive for sustained work. This is known as the 'Mozart Effect', a term originally developed by Alfred Tomatis. There are several studies into this arguing the benefits although opinion appears divided as to the benefit. It wouldn't hurt however to give it a go as it must be better than other background noise!

Comments from others

This category could be included with the auditory distractors, although this is where such comments may be said to affect your concentration. Whether the comments are 'throw away', disposable comments, they can sit in your mind and distract you considerably, which in turn may undermine your performance in the classroom. Such comments could include, 'I never like taking that class', 'are you sure you should be teaching ...', 'I wouldn't have done it that way', and so on. Ironically, compliments can have a similar effect. Being told how good you are at a certain aspect of teaching can cause you to think about the process, whereas before the comment you didn't need to think, you just did it.

The message here *is do not allow any comments to disrupt your attentional focus in any way, shape or form*. Be wise to what people tell you, listen to the comments, rise above them, evaluate and take them on board or dispense with them. You should be in control of what affects your performance in the classroom!



Activity 2.7

- Make a list of external distractors.
- Consider how each of these could be negated.
 - For example, if you know when the class next door has a music lesson, could you plan your timetable for a different lesson which may require less focus from your students? Or could you negotiate with the teacher to develop a complementary timetable?
 - For visual distractors, could the classroom be structured differently? Could the windows incorporate some 'screening' (blinds, displays, and so on without losing too much natural daylight?)
- The purpose of this activity is to consider the working environment and how you can make it work for you opposed to against you. Focusing on the ideal can set in mind what you want to achieve and how you can achieve this.
- You may similarly want to consider your home environment, making a list of aspects to help prepare your time for quality work.

Developing, improving and refining attentional focus

So far in this chapter we have discussed what attention is and how it relates to concentration. We have introduced the idea that attentional focus is not fixed, but rather, changes as conditions dictate. It is necessary

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to practise techniques aimed at retaining attentional focus long before the actual event. Shifting of attentional focus is not an easy thing to do unless you have practised it beforehand.

In practising for improved concentration, you do not need to learn a new technique, beyond those described in this book. *The key lies in using the techniques we discuss in Section 3*, so we will not go into them in detail here. You may, for example, use cue words or self-talk (as detailed in Chapter 10) to provide a direction in which your attention should be guided: 'Complete my planning by 6 p.m.', or 'Be attentive to student engagement'. Alternatively, you may set process or performance goals and, in turn, evaluate these when in the classroom, that is, you are allocating resources to a particular task (see Chapter 8). You may establish so-called 'pre-performance' routines that come into play during the minutes before school starts, so that you know what you should be doing at different times, that is, you are putting the spotlight onto one or several tasks requiring your attention. Essentially, you are filling your mind up with relevant things to do, in order not to become distracted when there is seemingly nothing to do. It seems far harder to distract somebody when they are focused on something than when they are not. Try having a conversation with a friend or partner when they are engrossed in an activity. They appear not to be able to have a conversation, or if they do, it is usually minimal. (Our wives identify with this comment every time they need an answer from us when we happen to be writing!) Alternatively, you may benefit from using mental imagery as a way to avoid distractions. Practise visualizing a lesson you are to teach and gather evidence to plug into your mental image to enhance it.

In the Sport Psychology laboratory at the University of Worcester, we encourage not only athletes but groups of students from different courses to use the Batak wall. The Batak wall helps improve reaction times and consists of a set of nine lights that light up in random sequences. The participant is required to extinguish as many lights as possible and as quickly as possible in a period of time. Essentially we believe that the strengthened connections within the brain will allow people to react quicker when they need to. Why shouldn't you adopt the same principles to enhancing concentration in teaching? Indeed, tentative research on computer games may indicate that these can aid reaction times (for example, Taylor and Berry, 1998; Klicka et al., 2006) although getting the balance between playing on such games when you could be planning or marking needs to be balanced! Most sporting activities would also enable you to develop your reaction times and have many additional benefits for overall health and stress reduction, as discussed in later chapters.

Combine any of these techniques to achieve your aims, but also learn to avoid 'judgemental thinking'. Judgemental thinking is the scourge of daily

life. As we previously noted, teachers seem to be under the impression that they need to be judged continually, whether this is their self-reflection or through numerous lesson observations. The end result is usually negative and adversely influences future performance. For example, if you have made a mistake in one lesson, it does not mean that that you should reflect on that error for the remainder of the day: if you do, your performance will be poor. ***Deal with the mistake, evaluate it quickly, and then move on.*** It has happened, you can do nothing about it but you can change how you tackle the same issue next time around. ***A mistake is not a mistake if you learn from it.*** Experience comes from making mistakes as this allows you to acquire experience. We would be the first to acknowledge our mistakes yet each one has improved our performance.

Mindfulness

As noted in Chapter 1, mindfulness is keeping in the present moment, keeping your attention focused solely on what you are doing ... here ... now. It is being aware of and paying full attention to the moment, letting thoughts come and go without engaging with them, just observing them. The past or future are of no concern. For example, are you reading this book or has your mind 'wandered'? No doubt you have not been thinking about a black cat, until these two words have been mentioned. In your mind is a black cat – how long will that image be held while you continue reading? Or have you 'forgotten' about it and are now attending to how this sentence will finish?

Although mindfulness may be traced back to Eastern contemplative traditions (for example, in Buddhism and other meditative practices) mindfulness is currently undergoing a surge in popularity due to the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn (among others) to help deal with psychological and physical conditions. The paradoxical debate occurs whether a person can be in a full state of mindfulness, as being so, you would not need to train in it – you would be completely lost in the moment without realizing you were trying to bring about the 'state'. Yet, mindfulness training is acknowledged as a way of focusing (and relaxing) the mind and body.

Mindfulness may be practised in any everyday engagement. The example above is whether you are 'mindfully' reading this paragraph. How does the book feel in your hands? How are you sitting? Is the chair becoming too hard? Are your muscles feeling tired from sitting in this position? How does your intention move your eyes across the page? How are the words processed in your mind? How are the concepts forming in your mind? Indeed, being fully aware, or mindful, of the 'event' and the actions and processes involved is the essence of mindfulness.

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Activity 2.8

Mindfulness may be practised at any time as discussed above with the example of reading this book. To this extent, being aware of all your senses involved in the process can help facilitate mindfulness.

Consider mindfulness the next time you eat:

- What are each of your senses telling you at this moment about the food ... the smell, the look, the taste, the texture, the colour.
- What physical movements are involved in the process of eating? Reaching for the food, perhaps cutting it, lifting it to your mouth, and so on.
- Are you mindfully eating, or are you watching the television while you eat? Are you focused on biting then chewing each mouthful? Or are you just 'wolfing' it down?
- How do your teeth feel as you bite/chew? What flavour is released into your mouth? How does your jaw move, your tongue?
- Can you track the food as you swallow?
- At what point do you feel 'full'?

Consider when else you could practise mindfulness, for example, when walking, driving, speaking, breathing ... make the intention to 'mindfully' engage once a day with an activity.

One-minute summary

Attention and concentration are crucial to effective performance. If a teacher is not competent in switching attention, focusing and refocusing when things go awry, this can cause loss of focus and in turn create a variety of problems.

Concentration consists of the following elements:

- focusing selectively;
- maintaining focus over a period of time;
- awareness of the situation as it develops;
- being able to alter attentional focus;
- sharing the time by dividing your attention to different tasks.

If any of these elements are not synchronized, then you may have difficulty. The key is to ensure you are aware which element is not working well in order to address it.

There are several attentional distractors which may be external (for example, noise) or internal (for example, motivation or reflecting on past events). Again, it is necessary to identify the distractor in order to

deal with it. Ultimately, the key to success is being able to maintain attention and this can be trained specifically through increasing attention to relevant information while decreasing attention to irrelevant information. The various chapters in this book will unite to help develop attentional focus, specifically those outlined in Section 3.

Being 'mindful' can certainly help aid your concentration, along with promoting relaxation (Chapter 9) and reducing stress (Chapter 5).

Short-term strategies for the here and now

- Limit as many distractors as possible. (Of course the key is to identifying what the distractor is in the first place.)
- Try this sequence:
 - Keep focused on the present moment, on what you are doing.
 - If you find your attention wandering, STOP.
 - Close your eyes.
 - Focus on your breathing completely.
 - Count nine breaths concentrating fully on the breathing process.
 - Next, say in your mind what you will focus on when you open your eyes.
 - Back this up verbally with an intention 'I will continue my marking'.
- Although this process may take a couple of minutes, in the long run it will save you time on the task you are engaged with.
- If, however, you need to bring your attention to the present within the classroom context:
 - Focus on taking a few breaths.
 - Close your eyes momentarily (a second may be long enough): this will signal that you have stopped and will refocus when you open your eyes again.
 - Mentally say the phrase 'bring your focus back to the NOW', 'be HERE, NOW' or something equivalent.
 - Open your eyes.
- Be mindful!

Mentoring issues

One of the tasks previously noted is that you may want to consider with your mentor the different 'resource pools' required for success within the classroom.

You may also want to discuss whether they perceive you lack of attentional focus within any part of your lesson. (Observers can sometimes

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hone in on some aspect you may be totally unaware of!) Furthermore, you may want to discuss how attentional distractors could be limited.

Further reading

As with most of the chapters in this book, guidance and strategies in one area may well impact on another. Although the benefits of meditation (or concentrating on one thing, if you prefer not to have any esoteric connotations!) will be discussed further in this book, any resources that enable such meditation will be of benefit: the key is finding one that you feel happy with.

There are limited resources available for improving concentration and attention. However the following would be worth looking at:

Bruce, B. (2003) *Mental Aerobics: 75 Ways to Keep Your Brain Fit*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.

The book provides exercises for mental agility including developing focus and concentration.

Horn, S. (1995) *Concentration! How to Focus for Success*. Menlo Park, CA: Crisp Publications.

Although this is a relatively short book (and quite dated now!) it provides a series of exercises to develop mental discipline and to remain focused while also being able to prioritize.

An academic reference focusing on concentration and attention that may be applied to the teaching context is:

Nideffer, R.M. and Sagal, M.S. (2006) 'Concentration and attention control training', in J.M. Williams (ed.), *Applied Sport Psychology: Personal Growth to Peak Performance*. 5th edn. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.

A couple of studies into the 'Mozart Effect' are also listed here, should you wish to examine this further although further searching of academic databases will provide additional resources.

Wilson, T. and Brown, T. (1997) 'Re-examination of the effect of Mozart's music on spatial task performance', *Journal of Psychology*, 131(4): 365.

Thompson, W.F., Schellenberg, E.G. and Husain, G. (2002) 'Arousal, mood, and the Mozart Effect', *Psychological Science*, 12(3): 248–51.