



Presence in the Classroom

As the semester progresses, it's not uncommon for students to tune out from their classes, even when they are physically present. The same can happen to instructors around the last half of a semester. Semesters that have encountered additional stressors and disruptions may cause this typical dip in energy to be exacerbated. Below are approaches that may help you regain both your own and students' cognitive presence and engagement in the class.

Mindful Learning

Ellen Langer examined how creating contexts that insist on mindful presence can benefit learning and creativity. Below are some of the elements you can try incorporating.

Source: Langer, E. J. (1997). *The Power of Mindful Learning*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.

- Turn "work" into "play"

Simply avoiding the use of the word "work" can help make learning in your classes feel less tedious and more approachable. Consider reframing your course "work" as "learning activities" or another suitable (but non-work) term. As you introduce upcoming assignments or activities, encourage students to "have some fun" with the concepts, or to "play around" with ideas.

- Have students draw distinctions

Noticing "distinctions" among or between concepts, objects, or other ideas (referred to as "items" below) requires a fuller presence of mind. Introduce activities that encourage students to look for distinctions:

- Have them notice and discuss the variations among 2 or more items
- Have them note and discuss differences between seemingly similar items
- Have them note and discuss similarities between seemingly different items
- Encourage them to take a novel perspective (e.g., physical perspective; role) as they examine an item

- Have them consider the item in an alternative context
- In smaller groups, have them take an item that is already categorized and ask them to create new, different categories
- Encourage students to notice novelty

As you introduce material, encourage students to pause and notice what new things are bubbling up that inform what they already know. Perhaps students can create a concept map of the information they should already know to this point (in the course, the unit, or the chapter), then periodically pause to have them consider what new ideas they could add to their concept map.

- Use qualifying language toward creative purpose

Langer's research indicates that if we stop presenting material as immovable facts (e.g., "This is a rubber dog toy"), but instead present them as possibilities ("This could be a rubber dog toy"), better creative thinking and solutions can occur. [In the dog toy example, those in the qualified language condition were more likely to suggest using the toy as an eraser for the researcher who needed one.]

Consider using more qualifying language (*maybe, could be, might*) as material is presented, and then encourage students to use that information in creative applications.

Signature Activities

Hopefully you encourage students to regularly be active in your classes (on ground or online). However, it's likely that by now, you have a predictable pattern that students don't fully tune into. It may be time to create a *signature attention activity*, suggests James M. Lang – one that jolts everyone out of their routines and reignites energy and interest in your course and its material. Creating and implementing such an activity in your classes could also give you that needed spark of enthusiasm, too.

Source: Lang, J. M. (2020). *Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It*. New York: Basic Books.

- Help students find focus

"Focus" signature activities are very much like those suggested by Langer (see above,

under *Mindful Learning: drawing distinctions*). Some examples provided by Lang include

- Very slow reading, insisting that students focus very carefully on a passage, read it slowly several times, and notice what phrases or ideas surface (to them) in the reading. Students then discuss these phrases with others.
 - Collaborative activities using groups of individuals that will intentionally bring different perspectives to the topic. Hearing other perspectives pulls us out of our attentional limits. We should treat differences “not as a deficit but as a point of distinction” (Lang, 2020, p. 183).
- Encourage creative thinking

Lang recommends including some brief activities that encourage and give time for creative thinking – but that can lead to a concrete outcome. Methods to accomplish this include:

- **Worksheets**, guiding students to think speculatively about some concepts or a sample item, recording those ideas on the worksheet as they go
 - **Concept maps** that, instead of recording what students are learning, are used to propose new ideas that stem from key concepts or items in the class
 - **Short-answer polls**, where students think creatively (and perhaps conduct quick cell phone research) about ideas and write them up in a few sentences to enter into an online poll/MS Form
 - Having students locate **memes, images, tweets, and/or quotes** that they think represent or relate to a concept, to share on a common slide you make available to them (e.g., Google Slides). Students could also create their own!
- Make connections

Offer opportunities for students to make connections between the course content and things students know very well, including

- Their own lives and personal interests
 - A film, TV show, or book
 - Content from any other class they are taking/have taken
 - Their future careers
 - Prior concepts from this class
- Use your own creativity

Have fun by creating a one-time event that is very different from your norm. Consider game shows or other contests you might see on television, and use them as inspiration for a non-graded, in-class team competition of some kind. Being playful and injecting an element of joy into instruction can bring students back from the Twilight Zone.

Alternatively, introduce a single-use, high-impact teaching practice that you might have heard about but have never tried. Some options can include POGILs (Process-Oriented Guided Inquiries), QFTs (Question Formulation Technique), debates or ABCD (A Better Civil Discourse) discussions, Chalk Talks, gallery walks, campus-as-text, and more. Explore other ideas in our High-Impact Teaching Practices Toolkit.

Include the Whole Learner

Susan Hrach (Keynote Speaker for CHIIPs 2025!) reminds us that students are not “brains on sticks.” Use these methods to tap into the *whole* student – physical, emotional, and social – to assist with their reengagement in your class.

Source: Hrach, S. (2021). *Minding Bodies: How Physical Space, Sensation, and Movement Affect Learning*. West Virginia University Press.

- Encourage movement

As part of your in-class activities (if your learning space permits, which isn't always possible), find ways to insist students move around. Some examples:

- Randomly assign students to color-coded small groups (see this Random Group Generator which will also provide your colors!) and set up color-coded stations around the room that students must move to.
- Randomly hand out animal image cards (e.g., the rabbit group, the frog group) and have students locate their group members and find a spot to locate themselves. Perhaps they can also discuss their animals in some way as a quick social ice-breaker before getting down to business.
- Have small groups post their products on a large wall sticky note. Then conduct a gallery walk. Be sure to include a purpose: Have students look for themes, their favorite idea, the best question a group posed, etc.

- Encourage students to go outside (set a firm return time!) and find a metaphor nearby on campus that relates to the course concept under discussion.
- Tap into the senses

Vision tends to be the sense we utilize the most in our teaching (reading, visuals, slides, observations), but we can do much more that is sensory in our teaching. Some examples include

- Have students pause to notice how an idea or concept makes them feel emotionally – and the physical sensations that accompany that sensation. Perhaps this is something they can discuss with a neighbor.
- Have students spend very dedicated time observing a specimen, with guidance to notice several things. For example, have them write down 10 things they notice about a rock, or have them sketch a key detail they notice. Encourage them to apply the vocabulary you are teaching them to this observation. Perhaps they can then pose questions they have about the object and ways they might find out the answers.
- Engage students in an immersive listening activity, playing a recording or voice or music and having them identify what they hear (tone, pitch, emphasis) and consider why these qualities might change around the variation of content presented in the recording.
- If you teach in a context with distinct smells, such as a lab, permit students time to explore, describe, and connect to those distinct odors. If you don't teach in such a context, perhaps you can bring in an object with a smell related to your topic. Have students notice and describe the smell.