



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

## PRACTICAL ADVICE: FOCUSING ON THE ATTENTIONAL NEEDS OF COLLEGE FRESHMEN

Over the years I have watched with dismay as the attention span of my college freshmen seemed to decrease annually. The usual “tools of the trade” were no longer effective in maintaining the focus of my students. Was this somehow my fault or the fault of my colleagues? Certainly not, but it is our problem! I began to theorize on the causes: a generation that has grown up expecting immediate gratification, technological advances that “think” for them, a sense of entitlement versus a quest for knowledge, or a lack of desire to concentrate. It quickly became apparent the root of the problem was not as important as the immediate solution. What could I do now to assist my students in the classroom?

After raising a daughter with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), I was in tune with the distractibility factors of students—or so I thought. I wondered if studying this population of students would assist my search for a solution. I attended the annual Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder convention in hopes of learning a few helpful classroom techniques. The wealth of information I acquired far exceeded my expectations, although in a form I had not anticipated. I did not return with the quick-fix classroom techniques that would remedy the situation instantly. Instead, the conference expanded my knowledge base, giving me insight into the daily struggles of students with attentional needs.

I began to view my speech course with a new perspective: seeing it through the eyes of the student who has trouble focusing. In a workshop session, I learned that fewer than five percent of college students classified with ADHD will graduate. So how could I assist students with this disorder? If I could reach these students, surely I could reach the majority. How could I make changes that would be effective within a university lecture-style course where flexibility is not always an option? I had been using the interrupted lecture tech-

nique for years but was seeking additional techniques specifically targeted to attentional needs.

### Graphic Representation

Based on the fact that students with attentional needs often are visual, not auditory, learners, I adjusted my lectures to include more visuals. In addition, I frequently have students take notes in a visual mode with colored pencils. This format encourages students to merge words with images so as to represent information graphically. As one might expect, the students are somewhat reluctant initially, but the process does seem to keep them more alert during presentations. After practice, some students actually prefer this method of note taking.

During my lectures I frequently refer to “connections”—how this lecture material “connects” to previous material—hoping to assist my students in establishing the importance of those connections early in the course. Students who complete the visual notes can often demonstrate those “connections” with ease. The process of drawing the visual notes appears to hasten the learning process.

### Mind Maps

Mind mapping is a variation of the visual notes approach. I prefer to use mind mapping as an assessment tool after a short lecture. This technique accommodates the auditory learner and still provides the visual learner, and thus most ADHD students, an outlet for demonstrating what has been learned. Simply put, mind maps are drawings with which students demonstrate the mental connections they make between concepts. I have found this technique especially helpful in assessing sustained listening abilities throughout the course and as a pre- and post-test for new concepts. Since I emphasize listening skills as a component of the introductory speech course, the mind maps have proven invaluable. To assist those students with attentional needs, I adapted the mind maps approach into a small group assessment activity. Each group was assigned the task of drawing a concept map to illustrate the connection of the day. The ground rules were fairly simple: everyone



needed to be involved in the planning and execution of the drawing. Some students were able to demonstrate only a minor degree of connection to previously learned materials while others demonstrated more significant levels, but everyone was able to demonstrate at least some level of connection.

## Recapping

In those classes where a lecture is the best method of delivery, I use a "recapping" activity at the end of the lecture as a means of maintaining focus for my students with attentional needs. At the end of the lecture, I ask for a volunteer (every student must volunteer one time per semester for extra credit) to highlight important points of the lecture. The students may use their notes, but they need to stand and summarize the material rather than just reading it back. Students in the class are allowed to ask the "recapper" any questions they like or add additional information.

The activity provides students with 1) an impromptu speaking opportunity; 2) a "second chance" on anything they missed in the notes the first time; and 3) peer-to-peer interaction. In addition, it allows for immediate re-teaching from the instructor and can be used as an assessment technique to determine where students place emphasis on lectured materials. Initially, I anticipated some resistance from my students for this activity, but the opposite occurred. Students embraced the activity, volunteered readily, and even offered feedback in the way of additional comments to their peers. One of my non-traditional students observed: "The recapping activity gives students a chance to clarify the information gained from the lecture. Having the main points of the lecture recapped brings a greater understanding of new terms. The recapping exercise allows students to exchange their summaries and viewpoints of the lecture. This exchange tends to lead to group discussion and questions rather than the silence that often ensues when the instructor finishes a lecture and simply asks, 'Are there any questions?'"

## Reducing Anxiety

Reducing anxiety is critical to success. Freshmen enter the classroom on the first day with high apprehension due to the course content, a condition that is often compounded for those with attentional needs. To combat this high anxiety, I have worked a number of stress-reducing activities into the early days of the course. First, I require all my students to deliver a two-to-three minute introductory speech within the first week of class. The students are given a model to follow. Tackling this first speech quickly serves to reduce their anxiety, immediately opening the door for learning

to occur. Second, I require that all my students have a campus email address and that they check their email daily. Often, students with attentional needs will not ask questions in the classroom; therefore, I encourage them to ask those questions via email. To further that cause, I send frequent emails to my students, ranging from speech tips, to general reminders, and even extra credit assignments. Students quickly become accustomed to receiving these emails, and it does not take long before they begin to respond. The quiet, shy student who never speaks in class will correspond via email. Perhaps the most unexpected result of this activity was the number of reserved students who began to speak up in class after several weeks of asking questions via email. It was as though they had reached a new level of security.

One of my students commented, "Having the ability to correspond directly with the professor is convenient and likely a more reliable source than (by experience) making plans to meet with the professor and never getting around to actually doing it." Another student commented that email saved her time. She went on to say, "You always send us little reminders about class and keep us up to date on everything. The speech tips are helpful in making us more comfortable with public speaking. Just opening us up as a class or as a whole instead of as individuals, we are becoming almost like a family helping one another out."

There is no doubt that these steps have made a difference in the classroom. Did I solve all the attention problems of my students? Certainly not, but I have identified techniques that are producing results and providing a platform upon which I can build. My students can and do sustain their focus and seem genuinely engaged with the content to a level I have not seen in many years. Scores on their post-tests, as well as overall course satisfaction, have improved. I am convinced that my success was due largely to my study of the ADHD population and their daily struggle to survive in a world that does not accommodate their learning style. Their struggle has inspired in me a new perspective and sense of flexibility even within the confines of a freshman-level lecture course.

**Lori Norin**, *Assistant Professor, Speech Communication*

For further information, contact the author at University of Arkansas-Fort Smith, 5210 Grand Avenue, P.O. Box 3649, Fort Smith, AR 72913-3649.  
e-mail: [lnorin@uafortsmith.edu](mailto:lnorin@uafortsmith.edu)

