Attendance and attention

Sue Greener

To cite this article: Sue Greener (2020) Attendance and attention, Interactive Learning Environments, 28:1, 1-2, DOI: 10.1080/10494820.2020.1712105
To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2020.1712105

Published online: 04 Feb 2020.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 106

View related articles

View Crossmark data
EDITORIAL

Attendance and attention

Many years ago, as a young undergraduate sitting on a French beach with an elderly priest, I was struck by something he said “There is so much I want to tell you, but it doesn’t work that way. You have to learn it for yourself.” I had just begun my first professional teaching role and, with youthful arrogance, was unaware that the priest had much to teach me; but there are some snatches of conversation which bob up in the memory throughout life and this is one of them. Ever since, the notion of learners having to do it for themselves has been strong in my learning and teaching philosophy. We see many learned papers arguing about the motivation of students, and the possible relationships between factors such as engagement, attendance, attention and satisfaction with learning outcomes. We seem to be captivated by the power of learning technologies to measure, and assume that measurement, through learning analytics of various kinds, will enable us to improve learning. Perhaps the early twentieth century ideas of programmed instruction and teaching machines have hoodwinked us into believing that if we can just get the programme right, learning will result. Today we hear more about eye tracking and emotional stimulation in genuine attempts to improve learning through design of adaptive screen content. But we also see much work on trying to improve attendance and attention, which presumably suggests that if we can just get students in the right place at the right time, looking in the right direction, then our pearls of wisdom will magically transfer into their brains!

I am being deliberately perverse here. None of our authors would suggest such a thing, but I am pursuing the idea that, in our never-ending search for engagement with and from the learner, we can stumble blindly into the use of proxies for engagement, which in turn are proxies for learning.

Motivation to learn is not something we can apply to the learner like a medication; it is something in which the learner must have agency. Yes, of course, learner satisfaction with particular software, gamified instruction, multimedia presentation or visually exciting representation of complex ideas is endlessly interesting and may result in increased attention, and possibly learning. But we are often seeing extrinsic motivators being applied to students, and this may have unintended consequences, perhaps even reducing intrinsic motivation to attend and learn.

We might extend this point to include the current trend for measuring attendance in tertiary education of all kinds, both physical attendance in class and through learning management systems (registers, swipe cards, tracking). It is certainly a common cause of frustration to the teacher who sees poor attendance as a personal comment on their abilities to teach, and an increasing burden to institutions who, unable directly to affect student performance, use physical tracking of attendance as a sign of student achievement. Yet, passive attendance, both in class and online, has little value for learning. It is easy enough to get someone to swipe you into class, to log in and go and make the coffee, or even to sit there and look as if you are interested while allowing attention to wander to more exciting fields.

There is much research which supports the idea that improved attendance (physical or online) is related to improved performance on assessment (see for example Gottfried, 2010; Moore, 2003; Nordmann, Calder, Bishop, Irwin, & Comber, 2019) but data measurements may fail to take into account mediating factors (such as entry qualifications, local culture and cultural background, paid work commitments and student assessment of quality of classes: see Halpern’s study 2007). In some cases, these data offer association but not causation (Massingham & Herrington, 2006). Strong independent learners may be more likely to attend as well as more likely to achieve well, though their attendance may not have a bearing on their own learning outcomes.

© 2020 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
So if attendance is an unsuitable proxy or focus for improvement, how may we improve learning outcomes? The message of this journal is always to focus on interaction, by whatever means, and interaction is far from the concept of attendance. It is closer to the concept of attention. Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory (1986) discussed mediational factors in learning which didn’t have to involve being there (attendance) but could take observational learning from examples or models to which attention was paid. Whether or not this resulted in learning would depend on further factors: the extent to which what you saw or heard or read could be reproduced and whether you thought yourself capable of doing this (self-efficacy). Modelling will usually have a major role in demonstrating desired behaviours to learners, whether these models are teachers or peer learners. The extent to which learners believe themselves capable of these behaviours will also have a profound effect and this latter point would suggest frequent formative as well as summative assessment tasks with positive and constructive feedback to enable the development of self-efficacy. These interventions are particularly important in transitions from one kind of study to another, for example when students first attend university courses, or when setting out on a new kind of online course. Once learners have worked out what needs to be studied, where to find it, and how they feel about their own competence in such study, the pattern will be set: confident independent learners will make choices about attendance, less confident learners will need more support and intervention, including personal demonstrations that they can learn what is required. So we can argue intensely about how to design the entry points, and the kinds of interaction that will encourage engagement, as we do in this issue and will continue to do in this journal. But it will be the learner who makes the choices – they will do it for themselves.

References


Sue Greener
Co-editor, Interactive Learning Environments
S.L.Greener@brighton.ac.uk