

Getting attention back

(How to get student's attention back after they have received bad news, there was a disruption in the class, or after they have ended an activity)

All of the skills in the previous section were focused on getting student's attention. There is another subset of attention that needs its own set of skills. That is, how do you get the students attention back after bad news has been shared with the class and they are distracted? Also, how do you get attention back after they have been up and moving around during group work or a state change? This section, "Getting Attention Back" has four discrete skills that will help with these areas.

Back After Bad

Explanation and Research

Imagine this scenario: You are trying to teach, but the students are restless and keep talking. First you try joking and cajoling the students to quiet down and focus, which usually works, but not today. Finally, you have had enough. You throw your pen down onto the floor and have a good old-fashioned tantrum. After letting of some steam for a bit, you pick up your pen and, still breathing heavily, try to continue teaching.

This can be confusing for the students. You are in the same location as you were a few minutes ago when you were berating them, and now you are teaching material you want the students to know and love. The "teaching spot" is now contaminated by bad feelings, which may interfere with getting the input put in and stored into long-term memory.

Here's how you do it

Try these strategies for getting the teaching train back on track:

1. If there is bad news to give, make sure to deliver it somewhere other than your usual teaching spot.
2. Utilizing the concept of Prop Anchors, you may try using some artifact that can represent the bad news, such as a memo or as message written on poster paper, that is placed somewhere outside the teaching zone, so you can refer to it when relaying the bad news.

I have a friend who is a brilliant teacher who has an ugly necktie that hangs in an area of the classroom to which he rarely goes. He has described very seriously to the students that the tie represents his dissatisfaction with their behavior, and it represents his anger and disappointment with them. All he has to do is point in the direction of the tie hanging there and say “Do I have to put on... *the tie?*” Just the reminder is usually enough for the students to get it together.

3. Use a Location Anchor. You may consider having a corner of the room you don't often visit to deliver the bad news. I would suggest that this is the corner from which you let students know what the classroom rules and consequences are. It is recommended that you do a good job of acting stern to make sure that spot in the room is anchored strongly as the “No B.S. Zone”. If done well, you need to merely start walking toward that “No B.S. Zone” corner for the class to quiet down.

Body Gradient

Explanation and Research

Some students may get overly excited during a movement activity or state change, and have difficulty settling down and paying attention after the activity. While I believe strongly in getting students up and moving to learn and to change their state, few things are more discouraging to a teacher than to try a state change only to have students difficult to control and unable to settle down once it is over.

Some students may have difficulty settling down after a movement activity if they have sensory integration issues. When it comes to students with identified or suspected sensory issues, I place students in two main categories: Students who need more stimulation, and students who need less stimulation.

If there are students who are craving more stimulation, moving around the room and doing a fun state change activity could be just what their bodies and brains are craving, and therefore, don't want to stop.

Here's how you do it

1. Have a private conversation with the student and ask them if they like doing these fun activities. I tell them I need their cooperation to settle down afterward, or they will not be doing the activities anymore. This can work especially well if a strong positive rapport has been established with the student first.
2. If that doesn't work, perhaps some sensory issues are coming in to play. To help avoid the student becoming overstimulated, try limiting how much of their body is being used for the activity. If some students get too stimulated moving around the classroom, have them stand still and do an activity in which they just move their arms. If that seems to still be too much stimulation, have them do an activity where they just use their hands or fingers. If they can't handle that, then have them sit and do the state change. If even that presents too much stimulation, have them simply sit and breathe.

Say “Hi” to the Elephant!

Explanation and Research

Imagine that you are teaching, when all of a sudden, something interrupts you. Maybe someone came into the room, maybe a student’s cell phone is ringing. What do you do to minimize the disruption, and get students’ attention back as quickly as possible?

When I was facilitating a class for Super Camp (which is a world-class, accelerated learning academic summer camp) one summer, I was on a roll. It was one of those magical teaching moments when all of the students were in the palm of my hand, and you could have heard a pin drop, as the students were razor-focused on the information at hand. Suddenly, a guy with tools on his work belt clinking chose that *precise* moment to come into the classroom to inspect the fire extinguisher! What--*now*? Don’t those have to be checked only every five years or so? Really, right *now*?

I could have ignored the disruption, moved away to the opposite corner from where he was stationed, talked a little louder and tried to get the students’ attention away from this unusual event happening in the back of the classroom. Instead, I remembered the rule that was taught to me by Kevin T. Irvine, Director of Super Camp at the time: “Where the Attention Goes, the Energy Flows”. The students were already distracted, and everyone knew something was going on. The rule is “It is easier to ride a horse in the direction it is going”.

Here’s how you do it

1. Affirm their presence. Instead of ignoring the extinguisher inspector, I chose to affirm his presence. I turned to the class and said “Ladies and gentleman, look around. There is an inspector here making sure that we are all safe. That is a wonderful service. Let’s thank him for keeping us safe”. The group then gave him an acknowledgement, much to his surprise and obvious delight. The students then looked back toward me, and I had their full attention again.

2. When a disruption happens in your classroom, there may be times when it is appropriate to stop teaching for a moment and acknowledge the disruption. For example, if you have a visitor, such as the principal stopping by for a visit, I would suggest stopping and saying something like “Students, it looks like the principal has joined us to see the great work you all are doing in here. Everyone give her a wave and say ‘Hi’”, then continue teaching.