Pay attention to the task

Last time I wrote about how we focus our attention — what we pay attention to. This time let's talk about the intensity part of attention — how much attention we pay.

So, what determines how much attention we pay to a task? Well, some of it is related to the type of task. Some activities require us to pay more attention than others. So, when we are designing them as part of a learning experience, it helps to design something that is both worthy of attention, and requires attention to complete.

To illustrate the impact that a task has on how much attention you pay, try this "armchair experiment" from Daniel Kahneman's (1973) book Attention and Effort:

"First, try to mentally multiply 83 by 27. Having completed this task, imagine that you are going to be given four numbers, and that your life depends on your ability to retain them for ten seconds. The numbers are seven, two, five, nine. Having completed the second task, it may appear believable that, even to save one's life, one cannot work as hard in retaining four digits as one must work to complete a mental multiplication of two-digit numbers pg.15."

The idea that the nature of the task can help determine how much attention we pay has implications for anyone that designs learning. So how can we design learning activities that are worthy of attention and require attention to complete?

There are all sorts of theories and frameworks to draw on, but here are some examples that we use in our team at CORE:

Universal Design for Learning: Getting to know your learners helps design activities that are worthy of their attention. What do you know about their mindset coming into the course? What barriers may they experience when completing this task? What supports can we put in place to reduce those barriers? How can those supports help the widest range of learners?

Challenge: Related to Andragogy as lots of the learners that our team design for are adults. We want to design a learning experience that includes activities that are challenging, yet achievable. Too challenging, and learners may experience a sudden rush of attention only to quickly have that attention shut off as they think, “I can’t do this”, and the focus of their attention shifts elsewhere.

Dale’s Cone of Experience: This model is useful when asking how close to the “real thing” are the activities you are designing? Many times, the activities learners will have to do outside of a lesson at school, or course of professional learning, require considerable attention to complete. So, when thinking of learning activities, it may be that the activities that are closer to a direct, purposeful experience are the ones that are worthy of your learner’s attention, and require more attention to complete.

This is a glimpse into the thinking that informs the design of learning tasks. And this post is not meant to paint the picture that every task has to be cognitively draining (attention is a limited mental resource after all). Rather, it is meant to illustrate how the nature of the task influences how much attention people give to completing it.

The attention that we pay as designers has an influence on how much attention learners pay to the activities we create.

Helpful resource:

For more about designing inclusive learning experiences you could start with the TKI Inclusive Education page.

References:

Kahneman, D. (1973). Attention and effort. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Credits:

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