Attention is changing in the digital age

If contemporary approaches to learning are to be successful, they must take advantage of new forms of attention

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February 26, 2018

When I was a student, I used to read a book every week, and often more. I would read both fiction and nonfiction – because I was interested in a certain topic, for professional reasons, or simply to be entertained. I was captivated by reading.

Since I began reading on digital devices, my reading habits have changed. Over and over again, I find myself setting aside my book to look up something on the internet or respond to a message.

Digital communications have changed my attention. When asked about the effects of digital communication, people often note that concentration has changed. At marketing seminars, participants learn this statistic: The average person’s attention span has dropped from 12 seconds in the year 2000 to less than 8 seconds today – which is shorter than the attention span of a goldfish.

Scientific evidence indeed suggests that attention is changing – but not that attention spans are becoming shorter. As psychologist Gemma Briggs points out, “The average attention span is pretty meaningless. It’s very much task-dependent. How much attention we apply to a task will vary depending on what the task demand is.”

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As a task, reading has not changed; the attention structure that needs to be in place for reading a novel is no different today than in the past. But our expectations of the user experience have changed. Studies have shown that those expectations are shaped by our experience of similar products. If I am an active participant on social media, the form of a novel will fail to meet the expectations I have developed for an interactive experience, a reward, or communication.

This is probably why “social reading” startups like Sobooks and BookShip are seeking to integrate social media functionalities into the reading process.

How does attention function on the internet?

In contrast to the pre-digital era, when we are on the internet we deal with multiple stimuli simultaneously instead of concentrating on a single, primary stimulus. Our attention is constantly balancing different activities against one another. Although this is always the case when different things compete for our attention, studies have shown a dramatic increase in multitasking.
especially in a digital context.

On the internet, attention is cyclical – content goes viral because attention is fueled by social criteria. In other words, I notice what others have already noticed. And particular attention is directed to content that has been identified by algorithms or placed online by campaigns of various kinds.

When I interact with content on social media platforms, my attention is steered by my own preferences as well as by external forces. The “affordances” of such platforms – what they offer psychologically – cause my attention to focus on specific content without any conscious decision on my part. Attention on the internet is closely connected to feedback; reception and production frequently short-circuit.

Interactive platforms function in much the same way as slot machines, which capture the attention of compulsive gamblers. They lead us to believe that we will soon hit the jackpot, that we will gain the respect of our friends, that we will be given relevant information – and that all of this will bring happiness. Attention has long since become a kind of currency, as Georg Franck suggested in a 1998 essay entitled “The Economy of Attention.” Attention is a commodity that is traded in the market, so it can be measured and exploited.

According to the theory of the transfer of user experience, the characteristics of online attention are transferred to other learning and work tasks. Thus when I read a novel, it feels as if I’m investing my attention – which is a social and cyclical type of attention. Indeed, reading apps like Amazon’s Kindle allow users to mark certain passages, share on Twitter, and see what others have highlighted.

Learning programs must keep up with the attention market

These are important insights for those who design learning settings and provide learning support. For the past 15 years, I have taught high-school German. When I read books or discuss films with my students, this merely supplements a broad range of entertainment options that are readily available to them. Students have always been distracted by games and other types of entertainment, of course. However, digital media are designed by professionals to capture the maximum amount of attention.

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This means, in short, that the value of my learning programs in the attention market has declined. Film series, games and social media exert a pull that cannot be matched by reading Goethe’s “Faust.”

It is understandable – but futile – to wish for a different kind of attention. A more helpful approach is to use digital means to focus attention in learning situations – for example with sketchnotes. These are visual notes that allow listeners to play a creative role as they receive input, concentrating their attention.

The social component of attention can be integrated into a real-life setting with the help of digital backchannels. Conference participants often use Twitter for that purpose. In seminars or school classrooms, chat groups take advantage of this technique: Those who are unable or unwilling to participate verbally can play an active role using such channels, simultaneously following how others are experiencing the respective learning phase.
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Attention is changing because of digital platforms, and that trend is irreversible. Nostalgia would be the wrong response; human cognition adjusts to the world around us. How I used to read is no better than how I read today.

I delude myself that my life was less hectic in the past, and that I used to process content at a deeper level. But today, too, there are ways for us to engage in intensive learning. They need to be tested and improved, because the internet’s attention mechanisms are shaping our expectations.

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