



The Repeating Question

A reflective walk to direct your attention with intention

BEING | Presence

→ What you will need:

- 👤 6 – 20, preferably an even number
- 📋 Individual & group
- 🕒 20 mins preparation
- 🕒 1.5 hr execution
- 📝 Pens, paper or notebooks

→ Related Tools:



[Inside-Outside Presence](#)

→ Menu:

- [I. Overview](#)
- [II. Learning Activity](#)
- [III. Assessment](#)
- [IV. Key Advice](#)
- [V. References](#)



“Join a walking exercise to explore your attention and presence. Become aware of where your focus goes. Learn to direct your attention to what matters to you and experience more presence in the here and now.”

—Miranda Trippenzee, Margreet Smit & Maleah Knevel





I. Overview

Presence—the ability to be fully in the here and now without judgment—is an essential capacity for navigating a complex and uncertain world. This tool helps students to reflect on and experiment with how they direct their attention.

Through a structured walking activity, students explore the recurring question: “What do I find enjoyable and important in life?”, both as speaker and listener. By linking this question to the way attention moves within and between people, they become more aware of their patterns of attention.

The repetition allows for deeper reflection and uncovers what truly matters. At the end, each student defines a small, concrete step to intentionally shift their attention towards what they value most.

Learning outcome

- ✓ The student develops an understanding of the concept of attention and practices consciously directing their attention to what feels meaningful and enjoyable in daily life



II. Learning Activity

In a structured walking exercise with a repeated question, students practice being present to cultivate awareness of attention and happiness.



1. Exploring Personal Attention Patterns

🕒 20 mins

Begin with a short individual reflection. Ask students to jot down brief answers to the following prompts:

- What do you find important in life?
- What do you enjoy in life?

Clarify that this is a first brainstorm; their answers don't have to be complete. You can support the process by giving a personal or concrete example.

Then, let students share their reflections in pairs.

Tip: provide students with the handout with prompts to help guide their conversation.



2. What is Attention?

🕒 10 mins

In plenary, co-construct a shared understanding of attention.

Open the group discussion by asking, "What is attention? How would you describe or define it?" Write keywords or phrases on the board.

Optionally, you can also ask, "What is *not* attention?"

Then, introduce two key points (Stevens & Bavalier, 2012):



- Attention is the ability to actively process specific information while filtering out.
- Attention is limited, both in capacity and duration.

Invite students to reflect:

- Do they recognise this from their own experience?
- How does this relate to what they shared in Step 1?

Conclude that attention is both valuable and limited, and that with practice, we can learn to guide our attention more consciously to what truly matters to us.



3. Walk & Talk 25 mins

Now, students will go outside to practise directing their attention intentionally, while observing how it shifts in interaction with another person. The aim is for the students to observe their attention, they do not have to direct their attention yet.

First, take 5 minutes to explain *The Repeating Question* exercise. “We’ve explored what attention means and what matters to you personally. Now, we’ll practise shifting our attention deliberately, especially towards another person. You’ll do this in pairs, while taking a walk outside.”

Students walk in pairs, taking turns: 5 minutes as speaker and 5 minutes as listener.

Back in the classroom, give students 10 minutes to write individually about their experience in both roles.

Tip: refer students to the handout to guide them through the exercise.



4. Group Debrief & Attention Theory 15 mins

Facilitate a group reflection. Invite students to share what they noticed about their attention while listening, speaking or being silent.



Use their input to introduce key distinctions:

- Inward vs Outward attention
- Narrow vs Broad attention.

Using the Theory of Attention handout, introduce the model for attentional states to explain how attention shifts, often automatically, but also by conscious choice. Emphasise that attention can be trained. Encourage students to share examples from their experience.

Tip: refer to the suggested prompts to guide the group debrief.



5. Transfer to Daily Life ⌚ 15 mins

Ask students to formulate a small, concrete step they can apply in daily life, especially in situations they find enjoyable or meaningful.

Prompt them to be as specific as possible. For example:

- “When I start working, I want to do one difficult task before opening my email, so I give it my full attention while my mind is still fresh.”
- “During classes or meetings, I want to keep my phone in my bag more often to help focus my attention externally and selectively.”

Next, invite a few students (or all, in smaller groups) to share their steps with the group to inspire one another.

Use these prompts to guide peer feedback:

- Is the step concrete and realistic?
- What obstacles might come up?
- What could help in making it easier or more sustainable?

Students can share further ideas or tips to help each other:

- What would make the strategy more concrete?
- How can you deal with obstacles?



Tip: offer support where needed, using the provided guiding questions.





III. Assessment

Students write individual reflections throughout the learning activity. You may choose to assign a short individual reflection at the end of the session as well. Optionally, follow up after one or two weeks to revisit their personal attention strategy.



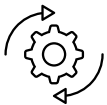
Purpose

Assessment for learning (formative assessment) aims to gather evidence and ongoing feedback on students' learning progress during the learning process.



Roles

Self-assessment



Characteristics

Authentic



Materials

Individual reflection assignment



Assessment

Individual reflection

Write a short reflection (200-300 words) based on your experience during the walking exercise. Use the following prompts to guide your writing:

1. What did you learn about your attention?
What patterns did you notice (e.g., distraction, internal focus, openness)?
What helped you stay present?
2. What small step will you take to direct your attention more intentionally in daily life? Describe this step clearly.
Why is it meaningful to you?
3. How will you know if this step is working?
What might you notice in yourself or your environment?
How could you adjust your approach if needed?

Optional follow-up

If time allows, revisit your strategy after one week and write a short reflection (100-150 words), using the following prompts to guide your writing:

1. Did you try out your strategy?
2. What worked? What didn't?
3. What would you change moving forward?





IV. Key Advice

The **Student handout** (Steps 1 and 3), the **Theory of Attention handout** (Step 4) and **Guiding questions** (Steps 4 and 5) can be downloaded below.





Key Advice

Step 1: Exploring Personal Attention Patterns

In pairs, discuss your reflections by asking each other the following questions:

- What do you find enjoyable and important?
- Do you notice any link between what you value and where your attention goes?
- Do you give enough attention to what matters to you?
- Are you able to focus on the things you enjoy?
- What helps you stay focused on what's important?

Step 3: Walk & Talk

In pairs, you'll practise shifting your attention intentionally, especially towards another person.

- One of you starts as the **speaker**, answering the question: 'What does being happy mean to you?' Speak freely and don't feel pressured to fill every moment. Silence is perfectly fine.
- The other is the **listener**. Your only task is to listen with full attention. You may repeat the question if needed, but do not respond or give feedback.
- Set a timer for **5 minutes**, then switch roles and walk back together for another 5 minutes.

When you return to the classroom, take a few minutes to reflect individually on what you noticed, both as speaker and listener. Answer the following questions in writing:

1. What did you notice about your attention?
For example, were you distracted or present?
Was your focus on yourself, the other person, or the surroundings?
Did you notice a lot around you or were you more inwardly focused?
2. Compare your answer to the question 'What does being happy mean to you?' with the notes you made before the walk. Did any new insights arise during the exercise?

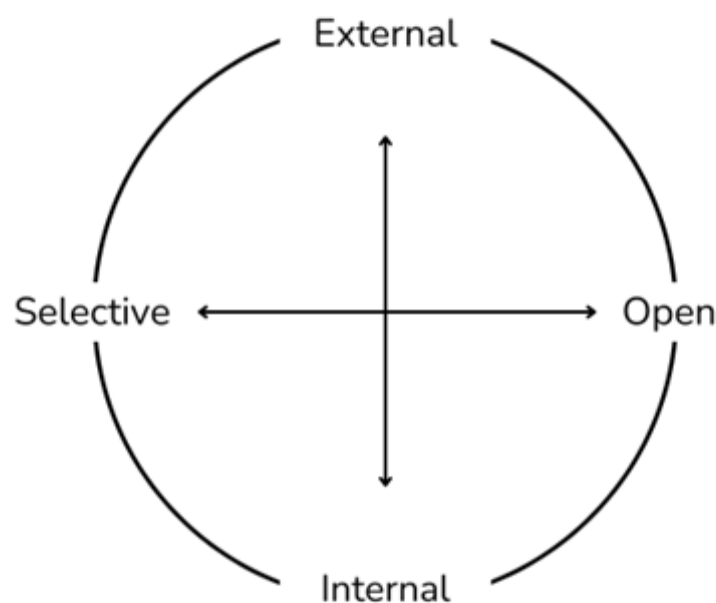




Key Advice

Theory of Attention

Your attention can exist in different states and naturally shifts between these, often without you noticing. However, you can learn to direct it more consciously. This figure illustrates a continuum of attention types to help you reflect on how your attention moves and how you might guide it more intentionally.



Selective attention

Your attention is narrowly focused on one point.

Helps you complete tasks efficiently and make fewer mistakes, but it's energy-intensive and not sustainable for long periods.

Open attention

Your awareness is broad and receptive to all internal and external stimuli. Enhances creativity by allowing new information to emerge.

External attention

Your focus is directed outward, on your surroundings, people or environment. Helps you learn from and adapt to external situations.

Internal attention

Your focus is inward, on thoughts, emotions or bodily sensations.

Increases self-awareness about your state of mind and supports impulse control.





Concentration is sustained attention; the ability to focus on one thing for a continuous period of time.

At any given moment, your attention is somewhere on this continuum between internal–external and selective–open. Here are a few examples:

- Checking the sign to see when the next bus arrives: external and selective.
- Focusing on your breath during a mindfulness exercise: internal and selective.
- Noticing your thoughts and any bodily sensations: internal and open.
- Walking outside while taking in sounds, sights, smells and movement around you: external and open.

During the day, we automatically shift to different types of attentional states when something catches our attention or we choose to focus on something. When we shift our attention consciously, we can focus more on what we find enjoyable and important in life.

Attention strategies

Attention is the ability to actively process specific information while ignoring other stimuli. This helps explain why we feel focused sometimes and easily distracted at other times. Three key factors play a role:

- Our interest or urgency in the specific information;
- The details to be ignored: or distraction;
- Our ability to steer in this: our 'attention muscle'.

1. Interest or urgency

Can you make the task more engaging or relevant?

- Connect it to your values or long-term goals;
- Spark curiosity or personal relevance;
- Set a clear, realistic deadline for yourself.

2. Distraction

Reduce external and internal distractions as much as possible.

- Use noise-cancelling headphones;
- Turn off notifications, close tabs and put your phone away;
- Choose a quiet, focused space such as the library.

Do you want to do this more systematically?

- Remove social media apps from your phone;
- Set screen boundaries (e.g. only Netflix in the evening);
- Close your door to minimise interruptions.





3. Ability

Focus is a skill you can train. The key is noticing distraction, and gently bringing your attention back to what you want to focus on.

Formulate a strategy:

- Look at regular moments in which you are distracted.
- Think about how you can systematically make this easier for yourself by:

- (1) increasing your interest;
- (2) reducing the distraction; or
- (3) starting a tiny habit to train your 'attention muscle'.

Even 1 or 2 minutes of focused attention builds the habit.

For instance, try [this one-minute attention practice](#).





Key Advice

Suggested questions for the group debrief (Step 4):

- What was your experience of the exercise in general?
- What did you notice about your attention while listening or speaking?
- Was your attention more internally focused (on your thoughts or feelings), or externally focused (on the other person or the surroundings)?
- Do you recognise these patterns in other situations?
- What did you do when you noticed you were distracted?
- How did you listen?
- How did it feel to speak without receiving any verbal response?

Tip: create space for open sharing and listen actively for connections between students' experiences and the attention theory introduced earlier. For example, if a student mentions feeling awkward, explore what kind of attention this reflects. Was it an inward experience (e.g. self-consciousness) or outward (e.g. awareness of being observed or judged by others)? If someone describes noticing many things at once – the speaker, ambient sounds, the surroundings – you can connect this to broad or open attention, as opposed to narrow or selective focus.

Questions to guide the transfer to daily life (Step 5):

- Where would you like to be more attentive?
- Why is that challenging for you?
- How can you support yourself in being more present in those moments?
- Is there something you already do sometimes that works? Could you do it more often?
- What obstacles do you expect in directing your attention, and how might you handle them?
- Why does this matter to you? What could change if this strategy becomes a habit?





V. References

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