James Lang, English professor and Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College, as well as author of a great book called Cheating Lessons, offers "4 quick ways to shift students’ attention from life’s distractions to your course" in a recent The Chronicle of Higher Education advice column (1/11/16). Lang argues that, in each class, "the opening five minutes offer us a rich opportunity to capture the attention of students and prepare them for learning." He thinks instructors can do so by:

- **Opening with a question or two**
  
  At the beginning of class, instructors can open with several questions on the board or the projector for students to consider. Then, at the end of the class, instructors can return to those questions to consider potential answers and to review what was learned. The questions can act as a bookend for the class period, reminding students at the very beginning that each session has a purpose.

- **Asking students to review what they learned during the previous class**
  
  Spend five minutes having the students try to remember the key points from the last class, without turning to their notes, texts, laptops, etc. This practice is well supported by research (see here, for example) that shows how powerful retrieval and repetition can be for learning: as Lang puts it, "the more times that students have to draw information, ideas, or skills from memory, the better they learn it." Students can share what they remember with the whole class, turn to a neighbor and discuss it in pairs, or even jot their thoughts down (see below).

- **Reactivating what students (think they) know about the subject matter**
  
  In addition to retrieving what was learned in the previous session, instructors can similarly use the first part of class to revisit what students already know about the subject matter, from other courses or their lives outside of school. Lang reminds us that "plenty of excellent evidence suggests that whatever knowledge students bring into a course has a major influence on what they take away from it." During this time, students may even reveal misconceptions they hold about the subject matter, which can then help instructors adjust their approach.

- **Encouraging students to write**
  
  All of the previous activities could benefit from having students write down their responses for the first few minutes of class. Lang writes, "Frequent, low-stakes writing assignments constitute one of the best methods you can use to solicit engagement and thinking in class." These writing exercises don't need to be graded very carefully, if at all; they don't even need to be collected. Rather, they can be used to help students make the transition from the outside world to the world inside the classroom and to gather their thoughts and ideas for the day.
As a reminder, previous short-form emails can be viewed on the Collaborative's website or in the archives of this Google Group.

-Emily

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