

Paradigm Trust Pedagogy Newsletter #23

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The 'cocktail party effect'

"Picture yourself at a friend's party, in a crowded room. You're having a conversation with someone and are fully focused on what they are saying. Your brain is tuning out all of the surrounding noise, enabling you to zero in on the words being spoken by that person. Suddenly, you hear your name mentioned in a conversation nearby. Your ears prick up. Despite myriad sounds around you, your brain has detected a seemingly relevant piece of information (your name) from the auditory jumble and immediately shifted your attention"

Both of these processes – the initial tuning out of other sounds and the response to hearing your name – are part of what is colloquially known as the "cocktail-party effect."

This can apply in classrooms as there are a whole manner of distractions: internal personal distractions that a pupil carries and external distractions – someone calling out or flicking a pen!

So, how can we hold pupils' attention long enough for them to transfer knowledge to their long-term memory, whilst also providing stimulating lessons? Attention is the gateway to both short-term and long-term memory, so it's a vital consideration in any learning experience. If something isn't paid adequate attention, it's much less likely to get into memory and stay there to be recalled later.

The article I have quoted, published in the TES: 'Want pupils to play more attention, change it up,' states that in order to achieve this we need originality and unpredictability in the classroom. However, if we take this too far, pupils could end up focussing on the novel aspects of their learning instead of the learning you intended in the first place!

It is important to consider attention as a factor of learning, but also the type of attention that is required for different tasks. What is it that you want pupils to take away? How can you concentrate their attention on this aspect of their learning?

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