Effect of Lecture Breaks on Students’ Attention

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Background and Motivation

- Traditional lectures are still one of the best methods to teach “information” to students… but students typically have a **10 to 20 minute attention span**[1].
- When attention is inadequate, then encoding and recalling of information are negatively affected, and learning is hindered[2].
- **Classes at UoB last 50 or 75 minutes**, well beyond the average attention span.
- **Breaks are effective** methods to allow the level of attention to recover. Their efficacy can be enhanced by adding some kind of **mentally stimulating activity**[3][4].

Research Question

- **How effectively can the introduction of a break in a lecture help to recover students’ attention?**
Methodology

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No break

Break with no activity

Break with activity

Results – Pre-Cycle Questionnaire

1) How often during a lecture you feel that you need a break?

2) If you feel that you need a break

3) It’s often hard to pay attention in class because

- I check my phone
- I think about something else other than the focus of the lecture
- It is difficult to take in too much material
- After a while I get tired and I need a break
- Other 10%
Results – Pre-Cycle Quizzes

Performances of the students gradually decayed during the lecture, only to show an improvement towards the end of the class [5]

Results – Cycle 1

During the break….

Still performances of the students gradually decayed during the lecture, only to show an improvement towards the end of the class

Students’ perception of the break
Results – Cycle 2

During the break…

Students’ perception of the break

Improvement of the students performances in the question related to the material explained after the break

Conclusions

- There are biases and extraneous variables that poses numerous limitations to the validity in this study (small sample size, choice of the curriculum, the “teacher factor”…)

However…

- Breaks (with no activity) seem to have a positive impact on the emotion and enjoyment of the students.
- Introducing a mental activity can help to keep the students’ mind engaged, although they might not welcome this idea

Do I still have breaks in my lectures?

- No! Students didn't like them so there is no point!
A Final Thought on Action Research

- Action research helps you implement informed change!
- It does not need to be too big or formal... **Keep it simple to keep it manageable.**
- Try new, exciting things and all the while collecting measurable results!
- Keep an eye on students’ grades but also on their attitudes and excitement about learning.

References