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The Classroom as an Attention Sanctuary

In today's attention economy, faculty and students must work especially hard together to protect the classroom as a space for authentic learning.

By [Leonard Nalencz](#) and [Jahony Germosen](#)





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In May 2025, New York governor Kathy Hochul announced a “bell to bell” restriction on the use of cellphones in K–12 schools. This was an admirable policy decision, because it acknowledged the enormous importance of new regulatory protections in the present era of Big Tech exploitation. From the moment we wake up to the second we close our eyes, digital technologies designed to predict, modify and manipulate human behavior are there to pump streams of content through our eyeballs and into our brains and turn the resulting data into revenue. This is particularly harmful to children and young people who are trying to pay attention in school.

But these challenges require more than legislative bans and restrictive school policies—which in any case do not help those of us concerned with the college classroom. Therefore, we write to advocate for a complementary strategy for addressing the educational harms at stake in our current AI-driven attention economy. We believe in the importance of fostering spaces in which our attention to one another, and to ourselves, is valued; we call these crucial respites from commodified, screen-based platforms attention sanctuaries and argue that they are essential to the future of postsecondary education.

Already diverse groups of teachers and students are undertaking exactly this kind of collective action. Sanctuaries of attention are places where people can be sheltered from the incessant digital “fracking” of our minds for profit. An attention sanctuary is both a physical and a conceptual space, and it is communal, because there are some threats that we cannot fend off alone—it is not a lack of individual willpower when we submit to an algorithm that has been designed to derail us from thinking our own thoughts.

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We are a student (Germosen) and a university teacher (Nalencz) who met in the classroom. We have now worked together for more than three years, with many others, as attention activists. In this shared commitment, we are working to grow communities of intentional resistance to the exploitative attention

economy. Our use of the term “sanctuary” is ecumenical and draws on an emerging literature, as well as a fast-growing and diverse movement—we envision a very big tent, because we are *all* human instantiations of the resource that the attention economy is aggressively harvesting for profit.

What does an attention sanctuary look like? And how can this way of thinking affect (and improve) the college classroom experience? Let’s take a close and concrete look: It’s spring 2023, at the University of Mount Saint Vincent, in Riverdale, N.Y. Every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, students gather in Founders Hall for English 334, a survey of American literature. There are no screens, laptops or cellphones in sight—an intentional outcome of the collective agreements established on the first day.

The students sit in a circle, held in steady eye contact and mutual recognition. Before them, they have paper copies of the night’s readings. Throughout the discussion, the professor doesn’t ask for raised hands; instead, he moves deliberately around the room, engaging even the most reserved students—reminding them of the importance of their voice, their opinion and their presence in shaping the classroom. What starts on this day as a discussion of the animal representations in an Iroquois origin story carries us unexpectedly all the way back to the book of Genesis, tracing a few of the shared threads woven in human traditions throughout history.

The two of us were in that class together at Mount Saint Vincent three years ago, as student and professor, respectively. Classes at the Mount are small, and we got to know each other well in American lit, as well as in first-year composition and in English 271: Poetry, Seduction and Witchcraft. The discussions were really like that: No one checked their devices, we sat in a circle and we were serious about thinking with the assigned texts.

Our student-mentor relationship extended to a TedX talk we did in January 2024 ([“This Is What a Classroom Looks Like”](#)), and our collaboration continues today at the [Strother School of Radical Attention](#) in Brooklyn, where Jahony is the partnerships coordinator and Len is a part-time faculty member. Now we lead teacher trainings, co-teach seminars in attention activism, develop curricular materials and offer workshops on “Attention as Radical Pedagogy” around the country.

The Strother School, or SoRA, sits in a corner office above a cobbled pedestrian street in the picturesque neighborhood of Dumbo (“selfie alley”). If you visit, you’ll be greeted with a smile, a name tag and a request to sit beside someone you don’t know. There are cushions on the floor in the corner, a seminar table by a window with a view of the bridge to Manhattan, a table with water and snacks, and often an installation of visual art on the walls. The school holds in-person seminars on topics like clowning; flirting; plants, rocks and smoke; and seeing through walls (!). And then there are the [Attention Labs](#): free, public, afternoon-long group experiments in attention, during which we follow specific protocols and focus on a single object together. SoRA offers visitors an opportunity and a space where they can practice presence—with themselves, in community, and, in turn, with the world.

Both traditional institutions of higher learning like Mount Saint Vincent, which was founded in 1847 by the Sisters of Charity, and experimental institutions like SoRA (founded in 2023), are increasingly conceiving of classrooms as sanctuaries of attention, co-created by teachers and students. In *The Attention Merchants* ([Knopf, 2016](#)), Tim Wu calls for “reclaiming more physical sanctuaries, not only the writer’s backyard shed, but the classroom, the office, and the home, as well—any place where we mean to interact with one another or achieve something we know requires a serious level of concentration.”

D. Graham Burnett and Eve Mitchell (both of whom are associated with SoRA) also include classrooms among the essential spaces for “protecting and cultivating noncommodified human attention” in their recent publication on this topic in the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*.

Our proposal, then, is to reconsider educational spaces at all levels (if always in level-appropriate ways) as primarily sanctuaries of attention. Only spaces dedicated to our capacity to be fully present with one another can create the adequate conditions for traditional and nontraditional forms of learning.

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To be clear: We are proposing that educators at all levels rethink the established relationship between attention and education. Traditionally, the expectation in a given classroom has been that attention is

the prerequisite for education. *Listen up! Focus!* the teacher or professor would begin by saying, *and learn this lesson!*

In the age of the attention economy, and the brutal business models of the human frackers in Big Tech, we need to revise this order. We need lessons, exercises and mentorship from educators aiming to nourish authentic and constructive ways of being present with each other. Education must center on the cultivation of attentional habits and practices, so that we can, together, lavish our attention on ideas, on works of art and on aspects of the natural world. The author, educator and social activist bell hooks wrote in *Teaching to Transgress* (Routledge, 1994) that “one way to build community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice ... To hear each other (the sound of different voices), to listen to one another, is an exercise of recognition.”

Yes! In 1994, the attention economy was a twinkle in the eye of a few early web entrepreneurs. Mark Zuckerberg was 10 years old. What we now understand, in the wake of decades of human fracking, is the way that education for attention is an absolute prerequisite for the kind of educational experience for which bell hooks called. What we need, therefore, is something more than smartphone bans in middle and high schools. We need students and teachers alike to take up the collective responsibilities of teaching and learning within their community—by creating and cultivating classrooms that are authentic attention sanctuaries.

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Partners, 2024).

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Together, Nalencz and Germosen are contributing co-authors of Attensity! A Manifesto of the Attention Liberation Movement, published this week by Crown/Penguin.

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