Transcript

[0:01] (music)

Derek Bruff: [0:06] This is Leading Lines. I'm Derek Bruff. I am very excited to have on the podcast, my friend, mentor, and editor, James M. Lang, talking about distraction and attention, the subject of his new book. James is a professor of English and the director of the D'Amour Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption University in Massachusetts. He's the author of five books, including *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* and *Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty*. And his most recent book, *Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It.*

[0:48] Jim writes a monthly column on teaching and learning for the Chronicle of Higher Education. And he edits the Teaching and Learning in Higher Education series of books for West Virginia University Press, which full disclosure includes my book, *Intentional Tech.* I can testify that he's a fantastic editor.

[1:07] When I heard that Jim was writing a book on distraction in the classroom, I knew I wanted to interview him here on Leading Lines. Since the conversations we like to have here about technology in the classroom often involve discussions of distraction and attention. Jim puts a ton of research into his books and he's an amazing communicator, as you'll hear in this interview. We talk about laptop bans and classroom norms, the ethics of attention and cognitive diversity and much more. Enjoy. (music)

[1:40] Well, Jim, thanks for being on the podcast and taking some time to talk with us about your new book.

James M. Lang: [1:46] You bet. Thanks for inviting me.

Derek: [1:49] Yeah. I'm excited to have this conversation. You and I go back a ways. I think I

met you when you came to Vanderbilt. I don't know how many years ago.

Jim: [1:56] Yeah, you interviewed me for a podcast, I think, which at the time, had no idea what that was.

Derek: [2:02] (laughs) I did. I did. You were one of my very first podcast interviews.

Jim: [2:05] I remember sitting in that little room with you going, what is going on in here?

Derek: [2:10] That's, I'd forgotten about that. Yeah, I'm going to have to dig that episode out. Special release on the Leading Lines feed, archival footage of James Lang.

[2:24] Well, I want to talk about your new book, *Distracted,* but first I want to ask you a question that I've started asking most of our guests here on the podcast. And that is, can you tell us about a time when you realized you wanted to be an educator?

Jim: [2:38] Yeah. So I mean, I think I would say like the originating moment for me was, I had gone into graduate school, you know, like a lot of people who probably go into graduate school in English, with sort of aspirations to be a writer. And kind of was just sort of going to bide my time in the English department and see how long I could get my degree before I wrote like the great American novel. But I was looking for a part-time job in my PhD program. And I found one at the Searle Center for Teaching Excellence, which was at that time, directed by Ken Bain.

Derek: [3:16] This was at Northwestern?

Jim: [3:17] Northwestern, yup. And so Ken did me sort of one of the great favors of my life by sort of when I first started there, he wanted me to sort of help out with graduate programming on teaching and learning. But there was a room which had like all these resources. It had like file cabinets full of articles about teaching and learning. And it had a couple book cases full of books. And he just said, get yourself acquainted with this stuff, like start reading. I just was astounded by like all the research on teaching and learning and the good ideas that were there.

[3:48] And I had been kind of floundering as a teacher in my master's program and in my PhD program, as well, just kind of teaching as I had been taught and trying to make my way,

without much guidance from anybody. And so I just, I found this stuff really fascinating and then I found it really interesting to try to like read these ideas and try them out in the classroom and then go back.

[4:19] So there's this kind of, the way in which these ideas played out in the classroom became really interesting to me and has never stopped being interesting to me. So I would say that was probably the foundational moment in which I really committed to being a teacher, even though I had been teaching as a graduate student for a few years, I still wasn't really sure about that. So yeah, that was probably the biggest moment for me.

Derek: [4:44] That's great. That's great. And I know I had those moments too where I realized that teaching wasn't just something that I kind of did myself, but there was a whole community of teachers out there who had studied it, who had written about it, who wanted to have conversations about it. And it sounds like that was your introduction to that wider community of teachers.

Jim: [5:04] Absolutely. And the other thing that Ken really did for me, is he demonstrated to me that the problem of how you help another person learn was a really interesting question and challenge that was worthy of sort of scholarly debate and discussion and research. And again, I've never lost sight of that.

[5:23] And that in fact, you could, see that kind of my, at least the last two or three of my books have been kind of taking that approach like, you know, why do students cheat? Why are students distracted? Like those are to me, like questions that are worthy of deep thought and engaging with the scholarship and inviting communities of people to get together and talk about those issues. So anyways, those, those kind of two things, he really helped launched my career in this field.

Derek: [5:59] Yeah. Well, and you know, I kind of owe him a debt as well because not only did he start the teaching center at Northwestern, he started the teaching center at Vanderbilt University.

Jim: [6:07] Right.

Derek: [6:09] So my center wouldn't exist without Ken Bain.

Jim: [6:11] He has a long legacy in higher education.

Derek: [6:17] Yeah. Well, let's talk about this distraction issue. So your book is about distraction and it's also about attention. And one of the places that these issues are discussed a lot in my world is this question of students and their digital devices that they bring into the classroom, laptops and phones and iPads and such.

[6:41] And I looked it up. I had to look it up on our CFT website. But there was a workshop I facilitated in 2010 titled, "Wireless in the Classroom: Is a Ban on Student Laptop Use During Class a Good Idea?" And I realized, I think we've been having the same debate in higher education about laptops in the classroom for a good, solid ten years. So I'm wondering, what elements of that debate do we get right and what does that debate get wrong?

Jim: [7:15] The debate, it's worth having the discussion, because it does relate to the kind of attention that students bring to the classroom. And so I think it's worth us asking these kinds of questions and also of course, the role that the devices can play in learning, right? So like the devices, like anything, you know, they can be used for good and for ill. And they can have positive and negative effects on student learning and on the community of the classroom. And to me, that's an important part of this, as well.

[7:45] You know, one of the things that we're trying to cultivate in the classroom is a sense of community. And so how are devices supporting that or interfering with that? The bigger issue for me here is, this is a simplistic question that we're asking about a really complex issue. And the complex issue really is like, what are we doing in order to support student attention and learning in the classroom? And devices like sometimes they help with that and sometimes they interfere with it.

[8:16] So in my view, there is no like I'm against tech bans and I'm against bans of tech bans. In other words, we need to have a more kind of nuanced approach to this. And we need to think about like what is my goal for what should be happening in the classroom right now? And then, therefore, what are the tools, the strategies, the practices that are going to support that goal?

[8:37] So like in some cases, it's of course going to be beneficial for students to have access to their devices. In other cases, it actually may interfere with what I'm trying to do in the classroom. So I teach literature. I regularly teach a class which requires me to sort of put

some literature in its historical context. And then of course, I want to get to the next stage where we talk about what it means and why it's important and why we still read this literature and how can it enhance our understanding of the issues that it addresses?

[9:10] So like when I'm giving students that sort of historical overview, right? Like I'm teaching, you know, I work with 19th century British literature. Great, I want them to be able to retain what I have and use it and think about it and maybe remix it in their notes and whatever. There's no reason for them not to have their devices.

[9:27] And yet, when we switch to that second part where it's like, okay, what does this mean? Why should we care about this? Like, we don't need our devices in those moments, right? And they probably are going to interfere with that kind of a conversation. So it's like we have to think about what we're doing and why. And then we make the decision about whether the device belongs in the room.

[9:47] To ask the question from the beginning to me is like a wrong-headed approach. And it's also, it doesn't make sense for me to make like blanket judgments about this. Like sometimes the classroom should be a tech free zone and sometimes it should be a zone in which we are using our technologies to promote learning.

Derek: [10:05] So one thing that occurs to me in that response, which I like, I like some nuance here. I like that there's not always a right answer. There's not one answer that applies to all situations with this. I did hear from you an assumption that the instructor is the one kind of making the call here, right? These are my goals for the classroom. This is the environment that I want to create for my students.

[10:31] What about students who have strong opinions either for or against their own use of devices or the use of devices by other students? How do you kind of manage the kind of student choice in this decision space?

Jim: [10:45] So I do believe that we have to be transparent with students about the role of devices in the classroom. Because as we know from a lot of research, student use of devices, off tasks, for example, impacts not only that student, but the students around them. And so we know, for example, the students watching YouTube video on the laptop, that draws the eyes of nearby students and that can interfere with their learning as well.

[11:10] So students sometimes think, well, it's my choice whether or not to distract myself, which is true, but your choice impacts other people around you. So we want to think then about like making sure they understand that. And then of course we want to invite them to help us make a decision about the best practices that we have in our courses.

[11:29] So I actually have like a sort of a draft contract that I give to students at the beginning of the semester, which kind of says, here's why we want to think about our device use in the classroom. It kind of outlines my beliefs about like what's going to be most helpful to us. I give that to students and then I invite them to read it, to post comments on our course website. I create like a, you know, in our LMS, I created discussion posts where people can post their responses.

[12:01] And then we, the next class period, we formalize it and students actually sign it and say, okay, these are the rules that we've all kind of agreed to abide by. So I do think inviting them to have a voice in it is a good idea. And what I have found that is, some students really have strong opinions about it. I found that the stronger opinions are actually on the side of the students who don't want the devices in the classroom because they know it interferes with their learning. And they have trouble managing sometimes their own relationship with their devices, as we all do.

[12:35] And so they kind of are asking for me to create a policy that helps them. And of course, there's a lot of talk in this area about like, well, we need to make sure that students who need devices have access to them. There is another side to this, that there are students who kind of have challenges with attention. Those students are often left out of this conversation because the devices around them actually can really hurt them. So we need to take account of like kind of both sides of this, of these issues and listen to what the students have to say.

Derek: [13:10] Well and I think some of the most persuasive arguments I've heard to ban the bans is that some students need laptops for note taking purposes, right?

Jim: [13:23] Absolutely.

Derek: [13:24] They have learning differences that mean that they actually thrive more if they're able to have a device in the classroom. And so I think having some flexibility in one's policy. And it sounds like some kind of mutual understanding of kind of what, why we have a

policy and why we have the classroom norms around devices.

Jim: [13:43] That's exactly right. And the pitch I make to students about this in explaining my own convictions and the policies that I'm going to recommend is all about the community, is all about the fact that, and this is to me is the most fundamental thing here is, we owe, in a classroom, you know, we can give each other the gift of our attention. And so like in a community, the community is going to be best fostered when we are listening to one another and not just me, but like to each other.

[14:14] So like, I don't want a student raising their hand and sort of making a comment about something meaningful to them about. And everyone else is just looking at their devices, right? Like and not paying attention like the other students owe that student their attention like, right? So like we want to be able to like give our attention to one another because I think there's an ethical component to that. And it helps form our community if we are able to support one another with our attention, as well.

Derek: [14:43] I love that. I love the idea of the classroom as a learning community because it decenters the instructor in some useful ways, right? Our students can learn from and with each other, if we foster that kind of environment. I do wonder, since I'm thinking about all the different listeners we have out there, if I've got 250 students in a lecture hall, what advice might you give me in that situation?

Jim: [15:11] So, I mean, in that context, it's going to be a little bit more challenging to try to. I mean, first of all, you have to be realistic about these things, right? Like in a classroom of 250 students. And if you know, if you're sort of even having sort of a context-driven policy for your laptops, you're going to have some students who distract themselves. And there's, you know, there's enough of a kind of critical mass in that room that you're still going to have enough students who, who want to do well and who are engaged and are doing their best to participate.

[15:40] So you have to be realistic. You can't, I don't think you could police 250 students and their distractions and their devices. Having said that, I do think that's still an instructor of a large class can do some things to foster community. So in the book I actually looked at some research. One really interesting study about the use of name placards. And so this was a study in which instructors in a large class had the students use named placards. And the instructors regularly called on the students by name using the placards, right? Like when they

were having discussions or inviting students to participate or whatever it might be.

[16:18] The students afterwards, so the, you know, the research kind of did some stuff with this, having looked at this class like and then sort of asking students questions as well as the faculty members questions. The students at the end of the semester, 80% of them thought that one of the instructors knew their names. Only like, when the instructors were actually shown the students, they only knew about half of the students' names.

[16:44] So it was, but it was the use of their names and the students then we're asked afterwards, like did it make a difference that you felt the instructor knew your name and the student said yes, of course, like, I feel like an anonymous cog in a lot of my classes, but in this class, I felt more value because the instructor used my name. Like, you know, learning students names and using them is a simple thing. There's lots of good reasons to do it. But actually, for the purposes of attention, it can be a really powerful thing.

[17:12] We like totally perk up at the sound of our names, right? Even as infants, like in the book, I actually kind of go back and look at some of the research on like how infants respond to their names. My wife is a kindergarten teacher. When students are first learning to read and write, it's all built around their names. Like they learn to recognize their names, they learned to write their names. So like, there's a lot of good reasons for us to think about using names and trying to learn names in the classroom. And I think one of those is about attention. So like when I'm inviting students to participate, use their name, not just say yes, you go ahead, right? That's a simple practice, but I think it could contribute to that sense of community.

Derek: [17:57] So one of the things I hear from instructors and I'm going to move away from the large class. I'm just thinking kind of generically about the college classroom, is that they're worried, and I hear this a lot actually this year as we've shifted to remote teaching and online teaching. They're worried that the students aren't paying attention to me, the instructor. Should I even care if my students are not paying attention to me?

Jim: [18:23] (laughs) If your only purpose is the transmission of knowledge and you see your purpose as a teacher as sort of like delivering knowledge into the heads of your students then no, you shouldn't, actually, because there's no reason why you couldn't have the teacher lecturing and a bunch of tape recorders and the seats, right? Then the students, can then just be there and do whatever. They can get the information whenever they want and need it.

[18:50] However, if you don't view your role as a teacher as primarily or exclusively just delivering knowledge into student heads, then yes, you should care. Because the goal of, the reason that we're in the classroom together is because we believe that the collection of all of our minds together is going to produce something greater than what I alone as teacher can produce, or what the students individually can produce. The point of being together in the university is that sort of all these minds and ideas are jostling against one another. And from that jostling emerges new stuff, new knowledge, new ideas, innovation, creative thinking, right?

[19:31] But if anyone, every person that is left out of that sort of mixing of ideas is going to make it slightly less rich. Right? So like I want as many voices in my classroom as possible contributing their ideas. And if they're not paying attention, if they're checked out onto their devices, I'm going to lose that. And so the discussion becomes less rich with each person that steps back from it. And so it does matter to me.

[20:00] You know, it's not like the, when I'm teaching a poem or something, it's not like there's, there's one correct way to read that poem, right? My understanding of every, of the literature I teach is enriched every semester by the students' contributions to our discussion. And so I know that just from my own experience as a teacher, and I certainly know that and hope that it's true for my students as well that both my contributions and their fellow student contributions are helping them develop richer and more creative thinking about the core subjects. So yes, it does matter to me whether students are paying attention.

Derek: [20:38] And this is a flawed analogy, but I think about watching the Super Bowl or the Oscars and one could do that in isolation, right? But it's a much richer and more interesting experience if you have friends over. It's hard to do these days, but right, you would have a Super Bowl party. You want to have an Oscar party.

Jim: [20:57] Well think about it too just like in relationship to like a business trying to solve a problem, right? Like you put a bunch of people together in a room trying to solve a really difficult problem, you know. Do you want one person in there just sort of thinking hard? Or do you want a few people in there who are kind of again, like bouncing ideas off one another and like, you know, putting all their kind of creative efforts into that challenge? We want those many minds together.

Derek: [21:18] Well, speaking of creative problem-solving, when is distraction a good thing

for learning?

Jim: [21:35] I mean, one of the things that we've done with these debates that we're having is we've really narrowed down our view of attention to make it look like a theater, right? Like so where I'm sitting in my sort of chair facing the stage. And everything that's interesting is happening on the stage. And I've got to like zero in on there for 75 minutes or 15 minutes or whatever.

[21:55] We all know from experience that one of the best things you can do sometimes when you're stuck on a problem is to get away from it, right? Like so this morning I was trying to do writing on my next project and was feeling diminishing returns. And I went and took a half hour walk in the woods near my house, right. And I come back from that refresh and rejuvenated. And so sometimes the best thing we can do, actually, is to let our minds wander, right, and have a little free play.

[22:24] Or another good thing that we can sometimes do is like I'm stuck on a problem. I bring in a new source or new idea like a new thinker, whether that's from my reading or it's from, you know, just again, like Twitter, you know, we all have, a lot of us, I'm sure, have had the experience of just kind of scrolling through Twitter and saying huh? And then you go sort of pursue that rabbit hole for a little bit and you come back to like a project or an idea, and it's enriched by that experience.

[22:50] So, you know, the lines of distraction often look like the lines of creative thinking. Steve Jobs once said, like, you know, creativity is about putting unlike things together. And I think there's a lot of truth to that. So one of the things that the sort of, you know, the internet and Twitter and just like going and doing something else can do, is it helps you like, put unusual things together. And that's a lot of times where our most creative thinking emerges.

[23:19] Now, I think what teachers can do is structure, create a structure in which that happens. And so that's one of the things that we can do in our course, or design our classroom practices and say, how am I going to get students together in this room? And then I'm going to bring in some really unusual inputs or I'm going to show them how to put together some different ideas. So sometimes that means we're all going to jump on our devices and do something, right, like and see what cool stuff emerges from that. Or it might just be that are different minds alone or doing it. Or it might be like my mind and this book, and your mind, like that's enough, right?

Derek: [23:53] Yeah, yeah.

Jim: [23:54] We actually want to provide like a variety of these kinds of experiences. One of the things I argue in the book is that we're so used to doing it and our technology right now, or I like this has become the normal way that we sort of bring ideas together. We pull out different ideas together, is that we want to offer actually alternatives to that in the classroom.

[24:13] So the classroom should be a space in which we show students, yeah, it's great to use your devices for this and to go on Twitter and your social media accounts, but there are other ways, actually. And so let's not forget about the fact that we can sometimes emerge with great ideas from just you and I talking together, right? Or from just like looking at this text. Like those are also sources of originality and creative thinking and problem-solving. So in my view, what we should be thinking about is how we create the most expansive possible way for students to engage with different things and be creative and solve problems.

Derek: [24:50] Which speaks to the role of community in the classroom. Because if half of your students are not engaged in that process, that's a whole lot of new ways of looking at things that are not on the table, right?

Jim: [25:02] Exactly, exactly. You've left those minds out of the conversation. As a result, it's going to be a less rich conversation.

Derek: [25:11] Most of our listeners here on the podcast are interested in using technology in kind of productive and intentional ways. Are there ways that we can leverage technology to help create these spaces in our classroom where more student minds are attentive and engaged and collaborating?

Jim: [25:30] Yes, absolutely. I mean, I think there's all kinds of things we can do. One of my favorite, the examples I give in the book is a biologist on my campus. And she was kind enough to let me observe her class after I had heard her describe this practice. She begins every class with a microbe of the day. So she puts up on the slide an image of a microbe and the name of it. And there's always like six things that the students are trying to discover about this microbe.

[25:58] Microbe a day goes up, students come in, they jump right on their devices. They

spend like 5, 10 minutes like looking up everything they could find about this microbe. And then she then starts the class with, you know, ten or fifteen minutes, what do you find out? What did we learn about this? How does it connect to other things? What does this remind you of? What category is this microbe and what other things have we've seen in that category, right?

[26:20] And, you know, the students were completely engaged. I was sitting in the back so I could kind of see you know, what everyone was doing on their devices. They were totally engaged and absorbed by the activity. And then it was a great transition away from the devices and then into the community conversation. And that's the kind of thing that, you know, creative thinking about like getting the students engaged and attentive at the beginning of the class period, having them use their devices productively, and then having them prepare for what was going to come next.

[26:48] So, you know, and I think there's lots of other things, ways which we can combine the technology with the kind of collaborative thinking that I'm arguing for here. For example, having students. One of the things I've been doing a little bit more recently, like for example, in my writing classes is posing a question or problem or challenge to the students and having them jump onto a Google Doc. And like in groups like work together on what they can find, what they can discover.

[27:14] And then we look at those together as a class. I like having students do things like, for example, Canvas, Twitter to see like what, what does this sort of common perceptions that people have about this, right? So this is a great way to provide an entry point to a topic is to say, okay, we're going to talk about this, first let's see like what do people think about this? Like what does this kind of state of affairs, what's the popular perceptions of the subject matter? Then we're going to get into a deeper, of course, and more complex understanding that experts have.

[27:45] But let's start with what the popular perception is. Jump lists, great, so let's jump on Twitter and see what we find. Let's take ten minutes and do that, right? So there's lots and lots of ways that we can think creatively about how to leverage technology for both attention and learning.

Derek: [27:58] One of my favorite new techniques that I learned this summer on Zoom. I learned this from my wife who experienced it in an online class that she was taking. The

professor posed a question and then asked all the students to respond to the question in the text chat on zoom, but not, just to compose their answer and not to hit enter until he said go. And so all the students have a chance to think through their own answer to this, right? And then he says go, I call it a ready, set, go question. Ready, set, go. And then everyone hits Enter.

[28:32] And you see, in this case there were 20 students in the class. You see 20 responses roll by, and then you take a couple of minutes to read through them. Everyone can read through them. And the professor could call on students to elaborate, right? Turn your mic on and say more about that particular answer. But I loved it because it's asking every student, it's inviting every student to really participate and giving them all at least a small space to have a voice before the kind of whole class discussion, rolls on.

Jim: [29:00] So this is a brilliant little thing, it relates to something that I've been arguing actually in face-to-face classrooms. I had a student, a student fellow at our teaching center who wrote a blog post for us about how she was in a math major and she said, it takes me a little bit longer to sometimes work out the problems that the teacher is posing to us. And so I often, I don't get to participate because the teacher calls on the first two or three hands that go up.

[29:27] And she said actually, one of my faculty members did something, which really broke that pattern for me. Her rule was five hands had to go up before she called on anybody. And I just thought, oh my gosh, what a simple way to get more students participating in class. And you could easily do that in a chat room as well, right? Like, so I'm going to pose a question to you. I'm going to start processing the chat after ten things had been posted. But what you just recommended is like even better. It totally accomplishes that. Everybody participates in the chat.

[30:01] And then what's great about that is the teacher can say ok, can start being a little bit strategic about the hands they call out. So you're not always calling out the same three students. So I love that kind of creative thinking about how we can solve these little problems in higher education.

Derek: [30:17] Yeah, it just, it seems so obvious in hindsight, like of course we would do it that way. That's yeah, yeah, I love that. So we talk a lot, you know, you and I work at teaching centers and we talked with teaching center people and we talk a lot about active learning and

engagement in the classroom. How do you think of attention as something distinct from more general concepts of active learning or engagement?

Jim: [30:45] Yeah, that's a good question. I mean, engagement. I typically think about like is when students are kind of, you know, doing activities like in my classes, we often do like, well, we have regular sort of whole class discussions or small group activities, but sometimes, you know, I'll give them a poem on a piece of paper and have them annotate it, for example. And then we talk together about what their annotations look like.

[31:10] I guess I would say that there's two parts of this. One is that activity, but there's also got to be the kind of preparation for that activity, right? So prior to them doing something like that, you know, I may try to set them up with like ok, here's what we've talked about that's going to help you understand this poem a little bit better. Here's a little bit of historical context or biographical context that might explain some strange things that you might see in this work, for example. And so I kind of need their attention there as well.

[31:40] Like again, their understanding of the poem is going to be enriched by having some knowledge about it, right? And so attention actually matters in both of those things that matters. It matters in like, I'm not a believer in not lecturing, like I think mini lecturing to help kind of provide context knowledge to inspire students and get them the kind of background knowledge that would need to help enrich their discussions is a good thing and I do that.

[32:09] So again, like if a student, if I give a 15-minute lecture on like a sort of a, you know, prior to an engagement activity with a poem, right? And I've kind of made a point about like some strange thing they're going to find in the poem and then a student afterwards in the engagement activity is talking to the group and like, well, this is weird because they didn't listen to that part, right? And then they just come up with some sort of strange theory about it that would have easily been dispelled if they had heard the 15-minute. That's going to kind derail things, right?

[32:39] Like so again, you know, it is, there is a component to listening. It's listening to me and it's listening to their fellow students. And that can be kind of active listening as well as that's important as well as the kind of active engagement in the activities.

Derek: [32:56] Well, and this may lead to my next question, which is, I think a lot of our discussions around distraction and attention focus in the classroom itself, whether that's a

physical classroom or virtual classroom. But I wonder if you have any advice for helping students practice more attention outside of the classroom when they're preparing for class, or when they're working on homework, or when they're studying for exams or writing papers.

Jim: [33:21] I think the only thing we can do here, there's two things I think we can do and neither of them is a guarantee. We're kind of, we're in a cultural context in which there's a lot of kind of frequent engagement with multiple devices and streams of information. The two things, in my view, that we can do are on the one hand, we can talk to them about it a little bit and I talked to my own children about this, you know, put your phone down on its face for 30 minutes, do your work, then you get to take a break and you can look at your social media and stuff, right? And I will talk to my students about the same thing. Here's the most productive way for you to study and to engage or not engage with your devices when you're doing that.

[34:00] I don't give like long lectures about it. But, you know, when they're preparing for a project or papers. I'll talk to them too about like the writing process and what I think is going to be most helpful to them and that writing process and how to manage their distractions during those moments. So we can do a little bit of that.

[34:18] The other thing though is, you know, I think we can sort of model for them what it's like to be attentive to something and provide the classroom. This to me is another reason why we want to have times in which we put our devices away and just kind of like engage with one another and with our minds. To model for them like something productive can come from that and something that you normally don't get in your life, which is normally so engaged with devices and with the internet and social media and all this stuff. Here's a different kind of experience for you.

[34:51] So like in the classroom, in the conclusion of the book, I kind of make the case for, at times thinking about our classrooms as attention retreats. These are spaces in which we can sometimes get away from all the stuff that's going around and like just savor the pleasures of conversation about things that matter, right? Like this is something that is increasingly challenging for us with the kind of speed of technology and all that stuff. So I think we want to be able to provide sometimes an alternative experience for them.

[35:23] And just like, you know, when people go on retreats at first it's very difficult, right?

Like you're sort of aching for your normal experiences. But eventually, most people find that you get somewhere different as a result of that experience, you put aside your normal cares and habits and everything, and something new emerges from that.

[35:40] I believe the classroom can be a place for this. Maybe not all types of classrooms, maybe not all types of disciplines. But I believe, actually, that almost all of us can find room for an experience like that. And that, the more, the more of us that are doing that, and the more times that student's experience that, they might sort of take away from that. You know what, this is a worthwhile thing for me to do occasionally. Or it's worthwhile for me to kind of approach this in a different way. Because I've seen how approaching in a different way can lead somewhere productive or interesting or creative.

Derek: [36:16] Yeah, I do wonder if that has changed some over the last ten years. So I think about my children who are in elementary school, middle school, and high school. And so you know my oldest, she got an iPad in sixth grade. She got a smartphone not long after that. And so not to sound like the old foci, but like I didn't have that experience in middle school. And I wonder if there are elements of our technology used today.

[36:39] And I don't want to be agist here, right? Like my own use of technology is different than it was ten years ago. But I do wonder if there's something in the technology space that's changed in the last five to ten years, that does have an impact on the relationship between distraction and learning.

Jim: [36:55] Of course, I mean, you know, the book begins with a couple chapters on the history of distraction, which is a long and storied one and on the biology of it. Like why are we susceptible to distraction? And that we learned from both of those things that we've always been distracted and we've always been sort of unhappy about it, actually. We've always kind of wished our minds were better able to focus.

[37:17] And I was just reading. I'm participating in an online course right now about Newman's idea of the university. And in the preface of that book, he talks about like the speed of information and like, you know, how the university needs to be a retreat from that kind of fast thinking that he's experiencing like in the middle of the 19th century.

[37:36] So like, you know, these kinds of issues have cropped up repeatedly and these kinds of complaints and concerns. At the same time, I think what we're experiencing that's a little

different now is the technology companies understand like how our brains work. They've invested a significant amount of money and research into understanding what captures the attention of the human being. And they're putting that research and those dollars into the creation of our devices and our apps and programs and all that stuff.

[38:07] So 100%, we've always been susceptible to distraction, but it's also 100% true that our distractions have gotten better at distracting us, right? And you know we're fighting, not fighting, but like we're, this is like a multibillion-dollar industry, right to capture our attention and keep it in the device. Like your device is really good at continuously drawing you into it.

[38:31] So I think what a lot of us experienced, you know, people who are like my generation. We definitely, there was, we probably went through a phase in which we were kind of completely drawn into our devices in the way that like we maybe complain about and see our children being completely drawn into their devices. And I suspect like what I've experienced is what a lot of people have experienced as well. There has been a kind of stepping back too, to say, okay, I need to kind of recapture some of the things that I used to do, like walking in the woods like I, you know, I need to start reminding myself like, there are other things out here like and so I suspect like what a lot of what adolescents go through is what a lot of us have gone through it. We've all gone through this, right?

[39:15] There was a sort of explosion of access to our devices and information. We got sucked into it because it's good. Because we like novelty and information. And there's a lot of good reasons for that. And then we kind of were like, okay, that's great. Like I can keep doing this, but I also want to get some balance back in my life, like and so I think that kind of back-and-forth thing is just sort of going to continue to happen and it's going to happen with our children.

[39:42] I see it in my own students, some of whom will tell me about like, you know, oh, you know, I put my phone away for a few hours and just go do something with my friends. They, I think they recognize it as well, that you can only spend so much time with this thing and eventually it starts to, it doesn't make you happy. It like it kind of starts to degrade a little bit. Like your sense of community, community with other people, like the way you're thinking about things.

[40:16] So I think we're probably at this point in time always going to be kind of going back and forth between, you know, I love this thing. I want to be with it all the time. And this thing

is driving me crazy and making me unhappy. And so, you know, we just are going to have to, we probably are at a stage in which we're still figuring out the balance. I suspect that we're going to get better and better at figuring out that balance as time goes on. Both individual humans, like in the course of our lifespan, but also I think culturally and globally.

Derek: [40:57] Yeah.

Jim: [40:48] The whole thing is very new, right? So we're still figuring it out.

Derek: [40:52] Yeah. Well, I think about my sister who's a little younger than I am and she walked away from Facebook. It was just too much nonsense for her.

Jim: [41:00] Absolutely.

Derek: [41:01] Or my mom who is older than I am, who has realized that when she goes to bed at night, her phone needs to be out of her reach, right. And so yeah, I think we're all figuring this out.

Jim: [41:15] Yeah.

Derek: [41:16] Well, so usually at the end of our interviews on Leading Lines, historically, we've asked our guests a question about their favorite analog educational technology, but this has been a strange year. I stopped asking that question in 2020 because, you know, I'm not in the classroom with my students anymore physically. And so I have a different question for you, Jim. So with this year of remote and online and hybrid teaching, is there anything you've learned about educational technology that will continue to inform your teaching when we go back into safe physical classrooms?

Jim: [42:00] Yeah. I mean, it was a simple thing for me in the spring semester when we switched online. I started using discussion boards, which I had never really done with my students before. I like to have students come in and do a quick writing activity at the beginning of the class period. And that writing activity is the basis for our discussion. When we switched online, obviously that writing activity switched to the discussion board posts. And I loved it. I loved seeing what students came up with when they had kind of more of an opportunity to think through their responses and write their responses in maybe a more careful and thoughtful way.

[42:35] So what I'm going to do going forward is I'm going to mix the discussion board and in-class writing exercises. The in-class writing, I still like because it kind of for me as a transitional moment, like you've been on your phone, you've been talking to your friends, you're coming from lunch or whatever, like those five or ten minutes of writing to me are a good kind of like now we're kind of funneling down into the classroom. So I like that. And I'll continue to do that in some cases.

[43:00] But I think for the more kind of complex questions or issues that we're going to have, I'm going to keep the discussion boards. And I also just love the way it enabled me to kind of call out a lot of different students. So I made little videos after each of the discussion boards. And each of those videos, every time they have a discussion board posts due, I made a five-minute video, which was my response to the discussion board posts. And I kind of kept a checklist to make sure that I referred to every student's discussion board posts at least once.

[43:30] And I don't do it that systematically in the classroom, right. So I liked the fact that it enabled me to say, Derek, your post was great and here's why. And everybody got one of those mentions over the course of the semester. So it, to me it helped democratize participation, it helped raise the quality of the discussion. And so I'm going to keep it for that reason.

Derek: [43:53] Yeah. I love that. I love that. Well thank you, Jim, for coming on the podcast, back on the podcast, I guess in some sense. And thanks for all you do for the higher education community. I know your writing has had a huge impact on my work. I share it with people all the time. Both your books and your columns and the other outlets that you have. I know a lot of people benefit from your examination of these teaching challenges that we all face and the strategies and ideas that you share. So thank you for that.

Jim: [44:24] Thank you and thank you for all the sort of good, sensible thinking you bring to kind of educational technology, which you've been doing for many years now. I appreciate that as well. I've learned a lot from that, myself.

Derek: [44:36] Sure thing, Jim. Thank you so much. (music)

[44:41] That was James M. Lang, professor of English and the director of the D'Amour Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption University. We spoke about his new book, *Distracted:*

Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It, which is now available everywhere from Basic Books.

[44:59] One of the reasons I pitched my book on educational technology to Jim and his series at West Virginia University Press is that I am always impressed by Jim's writing. He has a way of taking years of research on teaching and learning and sharing it in ways that are both relatable and practical, using examples from his own teaching and his colleagues' teaching. That's the kind of writing I strive for. And it's why I recommend his books to my faculty all the time.

[45:28] In the show notes, you'll find links to James Lang's, website where you can learn more about his books, both old and new, and his writing for the Chronicle. You'll also find a link to that 2008 interview I conducted with Jim for the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching's old podcast. We both sound a little bit younger, but I still think about his comments on teaching first year undergraduates from that interview, now 12 years ago.

[45:52] Leading Lines is produced by the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching and the Jean and Alexander Heard Libraries. This episode was edited by Rhett McDaniel. Look for new episodes when we publish them. I'm your host, Derek Bruff. Thanks for listening and be safe. (music)