

Memory is the residue of thought



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What's the idea?

'We remember what we think about.'
(Willingham)

What does it mean?

It is surprisingly easy to forget things. We couldn't cope with the sheer volume of sensory or cognitive information we encounter so we prioritise remembering things we have thought about because there's a good chance we might need that information again. This does mean, however, that we can sometimes remember things that are not very useful or forget things we wanted to remember just because of the nature of our thinking at the time.

In a school context, for example, a student might remember that they built a Tudor house in year 4, but not remember anything about the Tudors; they might burn some magnesium and remember the flash, but not remember the chemical equation that was 'taught' later that lesson.

What are the implications for teachers?

Plan lessons so that students spend the maximum time thinking about the specific learning at hand – the meaning of the words and concepts – not extraneous material, distracting activities or excessive additional references or layers of complexity.

If you want students to gain fluency with a word, for example, they should use it, practise saying it, writing it, and organising it (amongst others things), instead of painting a picture related to the word. Students will remember what they do and think about – you don't want them to remember how to paint if confidence in using a word is what you're after.

The same applies to science. Theory and practical work each have an important role in science, but don't do one if you want students to learn the other – they will learn the one they think about the most at any given time.

Take care with high engagement 'attention-grabbers' (Willingham) too. These might cause students to think about the exciting activity, not the underlying content that you intended. Instead, design activities that keep the focus on the main ideas in hand. Use story-telling or narrative structures within say history, geography and science, to link ideas together to keep students thinking on the right lines which, in turn, supports their long-term memory.

TOP TIP / Review every lesson plan in terms of what students are likely to think about. Strip out the distractions.

Want to know more?

Willingham, Daniel, T: Why don't students like school? (2009) Jossey-Bass. Chapter 3: Why do students forget everything I say: p79

