

Teaching Tips

A Forum for discussion and tips for advancing teaching and learning at Mona

Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, The UWI Mona



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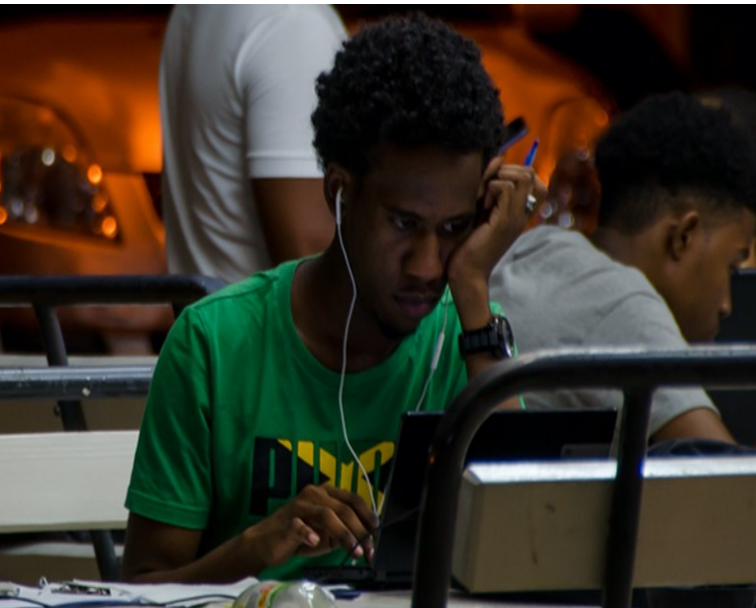
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Special points of interest:

- The Teaching Tips Newsletter is a publication of the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) at the UWI, Mona.
- The newsletter is published three times during each semester and once during the summer. It provides tips for improving teaching and learning in higher education and is available online (<http://myspot.mona.uwi.edu/cetl>) as well as in the office of the CETL.
- If you need additional teaching tips on specific classroom practices, please contact us.

Retrieval Practice

With the onset of remote learning, retrieval practice is being used more and more in our online classes. In fact, it is being positioned as one of those learning strategies that might be used to improve the academic performance of students whether online or in face-to-face classes. Research in the learning sciences tells us that retrieval practice produces learning. This seems like a good way to advance learning in colleges and universities and of course, this will obviate the need for more technology, money or even class time. But what is retrieval practice?



Retrieval Practice is a learning strategy...it is not an assessment tool

What is Retrieval Practice?

Retrieval practice is a cognitive strategy that is utilised all the time without us even realising we are using it. In this approach, we seek to get information out of memory and in the process bring the information to the forefront of our minds. In a very simple way, retrieval practice is the process of engaging in the recall of information without having it in front of you. As information is recalled or as we say, in the process of bringing the information to mind, the recall pathways are strengthened and this improves memory. In this regard opportunities are created for easier recall. This makes forgetting less likely to occur. Students oftentimes believe they

have learned some information and yet, in trying to remember it and properly explain it, they experience problems in structuring the information in coherent ways. Sometimes they struggle to demonstrate that they have created knowledge. This act of struggling to recall or answer a question is important since it ultimately leads to improvements in memory. This process also leads one to identify the gaps in learning and take the corrective action. The challenge therefore is to create opportunities in teaching and learning sessions for recalling of information.

This learning strategy (retrieval practice) is not just a readout of that which is stored in memory. Research also indicates that it leads to improvements in students' complex thinking and application skills. The act of retrieval changes memory since knowledge is reconstructed in the process of recall and this leads to an improvement in learning. Therefore, retrieval practice improves the ability of learners to organise content and transfer knowledge to new concepts. So, retrieval practice is not just about memorization, it is about improving understanding. Students will have a better understanding of course content by recalling and practising the use of the information.

How do students engage in Retrieval Practice?

Students engage in retrieval practice in several ways for instance, when they are asked questions in their classes in which they must bring back information to memory. Tests, quizzes and examinations are given and students are called upon to recall information. By recalling information taught/learnt, they must engage in retrieval practice. Faculty assign coursework /homework and many of these call on information that was learnt and stored in memory.

Activities that call on students to recall course content enhance this learning strategy. Quizzes and tests are a part of the teaching process and not something that occurs after teaching is done. Hence, retrieval practice should be done all the time. It must be remembered that it is best to use retrieval practice as a teaching and learning strategy and not as an assessment strategy since research shows that retrieval is a very good learning strategy. In fact, retrieval practice is better than some strategies employed from time to time in learning course content, for instance, reading over course material and note-taking. So, there must be use of retrieval practice in the classroom by asking students to retrieve information during teaching and learning sessions. Invariably, this improves students' retention and understanding of course content.

Using Retrieval Practice in your Classroom

You will want to help your students develop pathways to long term memory by utilising rigorous recall practice activities so include some in your courses. Some retrieval practice activities are as follows:

1. Frequent low-stakes assessment activities to get students into the habit of practising recalling information and strengthening their learning. You should also provide feedback on the activities they

have completed or create opportunities for feedback. This should help students identify misunderstandings and determine if additional practice is needed. These activities might include practice quizzes (practice quizzes on the LMS) or classroom tests, for instance, using clickers or some other student response system. Practice quizzes will help students since these have the ability to scaffold their learning. In setting practice quizzes, ask questions at the application level or higher. Students must think through such responses and not merely look them up.

2. Students might be challenged to summarise their notes from memory. This has great potential in strengthening memory.
3. Engage in a brain dump by asking students to write out all they remember on a topic from memory. They should not consult their notes.
4. Use flash cards for regular practice and various downloadable apps for instance, hot potatoes.
5. Concept maps and graphic organizers are easily used to get students to recall information, whether individually or in groups. In using these activities, students are involved in the lesson and with the concepts being taught.

Retrieval practice is superior to merely re-reading the text or notes (studying):



Studying: UWI students reviewing course content with a learning partner



Studying: A UWI student studying by reading the prescribed textbook.

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