

Teaching Tips

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

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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.

How can we teach to assist students to remember course content?

Many of us have reached a point in our everyday lives when we come upon situations that call for us to remember an incident or an occurrence that was important to our wellbeing and welfare. However, from time to time we must cry out in exasperation “I don’t remember.” At that point, we are experiencing a lapse in memory. This is obviously a common condition of humankind. Our students face such moments too and we might be able to assist them as they strive to recall important subject matter content associated with the course material. This might be achieved if we teach in ways that empower our students to remember the important concepts, or at least provide them with some tools that will assist this process. It therefore means that we might have to learn some of these approaches that help us to remember content. Much information is available from research done in the cognitive sciences on how human beings remember concepts (Herold, 2016).

Here are some tips taken from the research on memory:

1. Paying attention to course content.

Sometimes students are so caught up in their busy lives that insufficient care is taken to pay attention to the important concepts that are being taught and discussed in particular classes. In many instances, students are busy multitasking in classes, they might be texting, surfing the net, playing games on their tablets or phones and ostensibly listening and participating in the class. They fail to realise that they cannot do two things very well at the same time. Hence, they pay insufficient attention to the course content. However, they think otherwise. It is important to point out to them as forcefully as possible and with the help of empirical data what the research findings say about multitasking. Generally, there is much consensus that supports the conclusion that student cannot do two things very well at the same time. (Bowman, Levine, Waite & Gendron, 2010).

When our students fail to pay sufficient attention, this will result in content being learned in a superficial way. It will not be sufficiently encoded and therefore, when students

seek to recall course content, a significant chunk might be missing and cannot be retrieved because it was not encoded in the first place. To dramatize this point, ask your students to draw the features that occur on the face of a J\$20.00 coin from memory. They soon realise that they don’t remember what’s on the coin. The truth is that they have not really forgotten, they never properly encoded the information so there is nothing to retrieve. In the same manner, they will not be able to retrieve aspects from course content that they did not encode properly.

Cognitive scientists are telling us that to remember something, students must engage in controlled processing. This calls for the blocking out of other distractions.

2. Engaging in deep processing and self-reference

To engage in deep processing is to think about the meaning of the information and connect it to one’s experiences. To merely read over a paragraph of the text book or listen to a lecture will not cut it. Students need to do more than that to recall substantive issues of the reading or the lecture. They must do something with the information and they should think about how it relates to themselves or how do they react to the information. As a teacher, you must seek to find ways to enable students to insert himself or herself into the course content being taught so that ownership might be realised, at least more than nodding acquaintance is required for the content to be properly encoded. As you teach, provide suggestions as to how these connections might be realised, for instance, using the vocabulary associated with the content being taught in personal ways.

3. Generating Cues

Students will oftentimes ask for examples of the concepts they are learning. As course instructors, facilitators of learning and teachers, we should try to provide examples of the concepts we are teaching our students. However, we should do more than that, we should get them to generate cues and examples for themselves. Research by Mäntylä (1986) showed that learners recalled 36 percent more concepts when self-generated cues were utilised than when cues were provided by a teacher were utilised.

4. Create Context

Many students come to class unprepared and hence, they are unable to participate meaningfully in class discussions. They fail to do the readings and assigned work before class. Students must be encouraged to do the readings and skimming the chapter assigned for the class might be one approach that could be helpful. Students must be assisted to understand that when they are prepared for the class, the course content to be discussed or the lecture will make much more sense. Hence, in preparing for the class by, for example, skimming the chapter, they are positioning themselves to advance learning since, the context for learning would have been suitably established. Provide tips on how they should skim the chapter.

5. Test Frequently

There is now much research indicating that testing frequently improves learning. Therefore, incorporate brief tests and quizzes in your course since these will have an impact on student learning. Encourage your students to self-test as they study and create the environment that will enable this to be realised. You might want to use the Learning Management System (LMS) to set some tests or quizzes for your students to do for their own self-assessment. It is always good for students to check their understanding of course content as they go along. Hence, reading a passage and responding to a few questions is bound to be helpful.

References

Herold, D. S. (2016) "Remembering to Learn: Five Factors for Improving Recall" Paper presented at the *Teaching Professor Conference* held in Washington, D.C., June 3-5, 2016.

Mäntylä, T. (1986). Optimizing cue effectiveness: Recall of 500 and 600 incidentally learned words. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 12, 66-71.

Student Engagement Technique: Silent Discussion

This teaching strategy is important in classrooms where there is an interest in developing critical thinkers, active engagement and social and dialogic learning. From a brain-based education perspective, it also stimulates areas of the brain that oral communications does not. In this regard, it encourages the formation of important neural pathways (Herold, 2016). This approach also helps to build community in the classroom. It provides an opportunity for equalizing communication, enabling many of the quieter students to gain a voice.

Procedures:

1. Provide a question or a prompt that requires students to write a response. Ask each student to write a response on a sheet of paper.
2. Let students arrange small groups in a circular formation.
3. Ask each student to pass the written response constructed to the right. In this way, each student will receive a response and each student will pass on a response.
4. Having received a response from the student beside him or her, ask each student to read the response and write comments on the response received (respond to what they have received).
5. Next, after students have had time to respond, ask them to pass their papers again to the right. They will now be in receipt of a new silent discussion. Ask them to respond to this new silent discussion question/ comment.
6. Continue the process so that each paper is passed two or more cycles around the small discussion group that was established.
7. Ask students to have a mini open discussion in their affiliated small group before transitioning to a larger open discussion (plenary) for the entire class.

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