

Mnemonics as a Learning Tool

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Do you remember “My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nine Pickles” or “King Phillip Cuts Open Five Green Snakes”? These two memory tools or mnemonics have helped students recall the order of the planets from the Sun out and the order of taxonomy for biology for decades. Today, educators are saying that using mnemonics to help students “file” information more effectively makes it easy for them to retrieve learnt material over longer periods of time and with greater confidence. A mnemonic is a simple learning aid, which helps students to remember important factual information. It offers a method of presenting information in an easy-to-remember way, most times in the form of a rhyme, a sentence with a rhythm, or a sentence with humour.

Educational psychologists and researchers agree that everyone’s brain is unique and our brains are constantly in search of ways to connect new information and understandings to past ones. Whether memorization of something is hard or easy is determined by the learning connections between the cells in our brain. Several factors, including the way we were raised, the experiences we have lived through, and our interactions with our environment, influence the ease and extent to which we make this learning connection.

Mnemonics enhance or accelerate learning because they allow students to grasp facts, ideas, concepts, or sequences quickly by providing a structure upon which they can construct their own meaning. In many of our classrooms and at all levels of the system, teachers use familiar mnemonics, such as **Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain** (to remember the order of the colours in a rainbow), to help students train their minds in ways to remember facts. The concern, however, is that while these traditional acronyms and rhymes are very good at facilitating factual recall they do not encourage higher levels of mental cognition. Some educators argue that while this may be true, it is also true that processing at the higher levels of cognition can only occur if students are able to recall definitions, formulae, sequences, and other factual information, which can then be transferred into new situations where manipulations that involve higher cognitive demand such as application, analysis, and synthesis can be accommodated and/or facilitated.

To address concerns related to the use of this strategy as simply a recall tool, teachers have begun to move away from the traditional, well-known mnemonics and have instead produced new ones that they have either composed themselves or have encouraged their students to develop. The benefits of having students come up with their own mnemonics are obvious; having the double learning value of encouraging them to internalize and reflect on the topic/information provided, put it into a structure—that is meaningful to them based on the learning connections they make—

and experiment with different mnemonics until the material can be remembered easily. Additionally, creating their own mnemonics can be an interesting and fun class activity, which can allow students the opportunity to probe into their creativity and share their understandings with peers, especially if they are composing a rhyme or song mnemonic. One mathematics example that I heard a teacher use relates to remembering the sequence of instruction that must be followed by students when doing long division problems in primary school. After teaching the concept and using worked examples to reinforce the principles involved, students and teacher worked together to produce a five-word rhyme of the sequences involved—“into – times – subtract – bring down”—which students use to perform the operation.

Mnemonics as a teaching/learning strategy has found great acceptance among teachers and educators who work with students with learning problems/disabilities such as Attention Deficit Disorder and Down’s Syndrome. By employing creative and unique mnemonic approaches such as sound/symbol correspondence along with teacher directed instruction, special educators are realizing that their students are making more lasting learning connections and associations among concepts in disciplines such as mathematics, geography, and biology. Students who were initially thought to be slow learners are progressing at a normal rate, and the realization is that the use of mnemonic associations has allowed for information to be presented in a format that these students can easily assimilate. This was not the case without the use of mnemonics.

While recognizing the positive potential mnemonics can have as a learning tool, it is important to realize that no single instructional technique can solve all the learning challenges encountered in the classroom. Therefore, teachers must be guided by their understandings of their students when deciding on the choice of learning tool.

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