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## Understanding or Memorization: Teaching that Promotes Long-Term Retention

Why do we remember some lessons and forget others? Is it that some are perceived as more important, exciting, or possibly just easier to comprehend? Perhaps the answer has elements of all of those in its makeup; however, I would suggest it is through true understanding—i.e., understanding rather than memorization. This is the message I try to convey to my U.S. history classes. A concept that I feel transcends any specific or particular academic discipline, lending itself to all educators who hope to make a true and lasting impact on their students. So, the question is how do we accomplish this excellent but difficult goal of teaching lasting lessons?

The answer, as many educators can attest, is through practicality. Nothing is worse in a student's eyes than learning something that they judge to be useless. During my first day in class, I tell students, "We don't learn through memorization, we learn through understanding." I then give an example: "When you go to the local cell phone store to buy new 'smart phone,' do you sit there in the store to study the instructions and ensure that you have properly memorized the correct way to use your new phone before leaving?" As you can imagine—considering I have yet to hear of anyone doing this—the answers are an astounding "no!" I explain that most people have the store associate show them the basics and then go home and use it. Sounds simple does it not? Yet, the last phrase, "use it," is anything but simple from a pedagogical point of view. Through "playing" with our phone, we learn how to use it and ultimately understand the phone's applications through its practicality. We essentially learn through understanding what we have to do to achieve our desired result. These simplified teaching methodologies are exactly what classrooms need to promote engaged students and ensure that long-term lessons are retained after the course has concluded.

As my classes are required for college freshmen, the challenge of engaging students who have no desire to learn the material is a continuous element in my lectures. The question that I consistently ask myself as well as my students is how is the material relevant to you? Essentially, historical dates or events by themselves are meaningless, unless we give them meaning. For instance, 1776 is just simply the date of the U.S. declaring our independence. To give it significance, we explore what lessons from the conflict are applicable today. Discovering the spirit of such "radical" individuals such as Jefferson, Franklin, or Thomas Paine offers a great example of the benefits of rebelling against the status quo. Perhaps this status quo is the continued discrimination of certain cultures or socio-economic classes seen today. Another may be lessons of how to deal with politics of today. My classes have discussed the uplifting examples of great individuals who are flawed in so many ways yet still make great achievements/contributions to society. The specific conclusion of one of my history lessons is not as important as the larger idea that making the class have

practical relevance to my students is what will make my lectures stand the test of time.

Arguably, this is easier said than done, yet very much achievable. Through sitting my 28-30 students in a large circle, I have promoted collaborative discussions. My lectures have morphed into a unique balance between informal and structured discussions, rather than the conservative lectures we all know so well. The results have been excellent. As it seems to be an innate characteristic that we all want to add our “two cents” in, I tell my students that the old saying that two heads are better than one holds true. Except in this instance, it turns out that 30 heads are even better than two! They make observations and inferences that would not have occurred to me, essentially teaching me as much as they are being taught.

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