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One of the occupational hazards of teaching history is worrying a lot about what students will and won't remember. Partly, that's because we history teachers like to think of ourselves as stewards of collective memory--as links in the chain that preserves the wisdom of the ages. Or so we might say in our more self-aggrandizing moments.

But we history teachers also share with colleagues in other departments another reason to worry so much about what our students will remember. Like most teachers, we must face the fact that *students will forget much of what we teach them, even if we teach them well*. So the question becomes: why teach all this stuff in the first place? If students will forget most of it anyway, can we justify making them pay attention to all the detailed content that fills our curricula?

To sharpen that question, let me offer some examples of what I've forgotten since high school. When I was in 11th grade, I could recite trigonometric identities in my sleep. I also knew why chemists measure atoms in units called "moles" and how to use moles to balance a chemical equation. I could tell you the name of the character who was shot near the end of the Great Gatsby (sorry for that spoiler), and I could define a whole array of exotic rhetorical devices with names like metonymy and synecdoche. *I've since forgotten all of that stuff*, and much more.

And we haven't even gotten to history yet. Here are just a few of the many historical facts that most American adults have learned and since forgotten:

1. What the city now known as Istanbul was called before it was called Constantinople
2. The name of the first Holy Roman Emperor
3. The causes of the War of 1812
4. The name of the battleship whose explosion helped touch off the Spanish-American War
5. The name of the Congressional Act that authorized the use of military force in Vietnam

I'd venture that many of you learned all of these things when you were in high school and would recognize the answers if I told you. Maybe some of you still remember them. But if not, I suspect you'd be in good company.

The human capacity to forget once-familiar information is really quite impressive. It's also entirely functional. I'm no neuroscientist, but I imagine that the brain is adapted to push out any data that it doesn't regularly use to make room for new information that might prove more useful. Otherwise, we'd run out of storage space! So when you think about it, our forgetfulness is really not a "bug" at all; it's the feature of our brains that makes life possible.

Nonetheless, the perfectly normal tendency of students to forget so much of what we teach them should surely give us pause. So let me return to the question I began with: what does it mean for our curricula that our students will inevitably forget--next year or even next week--most of the specific facts and procedures we've taught them? What are the implications of that reality for what and how we teach?

I think there are two ways of answering this question, both of which contain some wisdom.

The first response is to *reaffirm the importance of helping students memorize as much specific knowledge about the world as possible--with the goal being that they'll still remember it when they're my age*. This is a somewhat old-fashioned position. In recent years, it has become commonplace to suggest that memorization is obsolete because, after all, we can instantly look up anything with a couple taps on the supercomputers we carry in our pockets. I don't think it's that simple, though. Just consider the importance of vocabulary. It's true that we could look up the meaning of any word or phrase we might come across. But it's also impossible to read anything if you have to look up everything. Nor could you think critically about anything without a ton of information stored in long-term memory. Critical thinking means searching our mental database for relevant examples, concepts, or other information that might help us better understand or solve the problem at hand. The more information we have stored in our heads, the more likely it is that we will be able to see patterns, make connections, and generate insights.

If memorization is not yet obsolete, then we teachers have our work cut out for us. First, we have to figure out which of the many things in our curricula actually fall into the category of things we want students to remember in 20 or 30 years. Do I want students to remember that the Spanish Armada occurred in 1588, that it occurred during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I of England, that it occurred at all? On what basis would a certain fact be deemed worthy of long-term memorization?

Then, once we've settled on a suitably selective body of knowledge, the next challenge is to convince students of the value of committing it to memory. It sounds a bit hokey, but I try to frame memorization as an act of love. The idiom, "to learn something by heart" is wonderfully suggestive--it points toward the emotional connection we forge with the material we memorize. For instance: while we could always look up the words of the Gettysburg Address or the Declaration of Independence, it is a very different emotional experience to go through life knowing at least some of those words by heart.

Finally, once we've motivated students to memorize, there's the challenge of strengthening their *ability* to memorize. Deliberately teaching students how to memorize may seem at odds, at first, with an emphasis on stimulating critical thinking. But it doesn't have to be.. In fact, it is possible to frame memorization as an exercise in critical thinking. After all, it's terribly hard to memorize a sequence of people, places, and events that have no apparent connection to one another. But if you've thought about the information hard enough to see the patterns and

connections--if you can weave the information into a meaningful story--remembering becomes a lot easier and more pleasurable.

Perhaps I have convinced you of the joys of memorization, and perhaps not. Either way, I don't mean to suggest that our lessons have value only if students remember them in their entirety. This brings me to the second way of responding to the reality that students will forget most of what we teach them. The second response is to acknowledge that in many cases, *the value of an educational experience has little to do with the learner's memory of the specific information presented*. To illustrate that point, I want to share some examples from my ninth-grade world history class.

Example #1: I was recently telling my students the story of Julius Caesar. One detail in that story is his report back to Rome following his military campaigns in the land the Romans called Gaul, which is present-day France. As the story goes, his report consisted of just three Latin words: *Veni. Vidi. Vici.* I came. I saw. I conquered. I spend a good 10-20 minutes on this detail. Why? One reason is that it feels revealing of Caesar's personality--a testament to his no-nonsense self-confidence, or something like that. Another reason is that students just might encounter a reference to this minor historical detail at some point in their lives--maybe in a movie or a comedy sketch--and I'd love for them to get the allusion. But for me the most important reason to dwell on those three little Latin words is that it gives me a chance to draw students' attention to the prevalence of Latin roots in the English language. The students are able to spot the Latin word "Veni"--I came--in the English word "adventure." They spot the Latin word "Vidi"--"I saw"--in the English word "video." And they spot the Latin word "Vici"--"I conquered"--in the English word "victory." My hope is that students will retain the habit of looking for Latin and Greek roots in English words long after they've forgotten these *particular* words and their role in Roman history.

Example #2: Earlier in the year, we were trying to imagine the lifestyle of our hunter-gatherer ancestors. Did they get married? What kinds of spiritual beliefs did they have? Were they well-fed and comfortable? Were they happy? Why did the simple act of domesticating a few plants and animals so drastically change their lives? Our conversation about these questions drew on many different sources of information. We analyzed cave paintings. We looked at timelines and maps. We read a provocative book chapter arguing that prehistoric hunter-gathering societies were in some ways more "affluent" than our own. I'd wager that students won't long remember much of the specific information I insisted they learn, such as the name of the cave in France where some of the most famous cave-art was found. They may not even remember, in any kind of conscious way, having the conversation at all. But if the conversation went well, students will have exercised their imaginations. And each time they exercise their imaginations--whether they remember doing it or not--they strengthen the habit of trying to see the world through another person's eyes.

The longer I teach, the more I tend to view the content of my courses as a vehicle for developing habits of mind. Looking for patterns and connections is a habit. Crawling into someone else's mind is a habit. Asking questions is a habit. Refusing to accept vague or illogical explanations is a habit. I remind myself each day that the habits acquired through the process of grappling with specific content will persist even after the memory of the content itself has faded. This, indeed, is one of the most marvelous things about learning: *that we can be changed forever by experiences that we've mostly forgotten*. But here's the rub: although the details might be soon forgotten, they were nonetheless indispensable. We needed them. Why? Because those soon-to-be-forgotten details are what draw students into the experience and keep them

engaged. It is the specific details that give students something to think about, and it is that sustained engagement that fosters the new habits we're aiming for.

Now, it's only a matter of months, days, or maybe hours before you all forget what I've said here. Don't worry: I won't take it personally. That's just your brains doing some prudent pruning. But if you remember only one thing from these remarks, let it be this: I am so grateful to teach at a school where the faculty is encouraged to think deeply about the kinds of questions I've been raising. There are no easy answers to questions about the role of memorization in learning, about what we want students to remember in 20 years, or about how to instill in students the habits we prize as adults. Perhaps the only certainty we can fall back on is that young people deserve teachers who actually wrestle with these questions. For me, it is a gift to teach at a school that expects such thoughtfulness.

That gift, of course, is made possible by the generosity of so many of you. So thank you.