

Foreword

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Memories Are Made of This

“Every time I write, I lose my memory.”

“I always understand stuff when she, like, explains it to us in class, but then I completely lose it on the test.”

“Paul seems to have no trouble learning procedures in math, but then he can never seem to remember how and when to apply them when faced with a problem.”

“We drill Myra over and over on her spelling words — it’s incredible how hard it is to get new material into her head. But I will say this: once she knows something, she really knows it — forever.”

“Why is it that Billy can remember what color tie Uncle Stan wore at Thanksgiving five years ago but can’t remember his vocabulary words from last night?”

“Keisha knows what sounds go with what letter combinations, but when she sounds out an unfamiliar word, by the time she gets to the last sound, she’s forgotten the first two, so she has trouble re-blending the word and putting it all back together in her mind.”

These authentic quotations capture the agony and confusion of the many children who struggle valiantly but are overtaken and overcome by the unremitting onslaught of memory demands in school. Too often their obstructed remembering goes unrecognized by their teachers, their parents, and by the student victims themselves. To rekindle such students, we need to start with greater adult awareness of the kinds of memory processes required for academic success. Additionally, educators and clinicians must be able to identify and treat the diverse forms of memory shortfall that impede learning and academic output in otherwise competent students.

The Source for Learning & Memory Strategies will contribute substantially to our grasp of the wide-ranging memory issues that confront all learners while it will enable us to recognize and help those underachieving children and adolescents who may be much

better at understanding than they are at remembering. As we absorb the pages of this volume, there are certain points that should be borne in mind (if not in memory):

- ✓ *School work demands far more memory agility than is required in just about any career you can identify.* Our grown-up occupations allow us to open up the same general kinds of memory files day after day for years and years. During elementary, middle, and high school, students are expected to transition with efficiency and precision from memory for math to memory for Spanish to memory for chemistry and on to memory for history. A seemingly unending succession of files must be opened and closed every 50 minutes or so, and for the most part, these files contain mainly new acquisitions. Kids with memory impairments need the justified reassurance that if they “hang in there,” life will become easier, as their chosen career niches will inflict far less strenuous memory wounds than they had to contend with at school.
- ✓ *There are numerous forms of human memory.* No one of us possesses a uniformly good or poor memory. We always have to inquire, “Which kind of memory” and “Memory for what?”
- ✓ *Memory is not monogamous; it is wedded to multiple partners.* It relates intimately to attention, language, sequencing, and even motor function. Trouble with memory may masquerade as an attention deficit (i.e., why listen if you can’t remember the input?), a language dysfunction (such as weak memory causing trouble with word retrieval), a sequencing weakness (trouble remembering steps in the right order), or a motor deficit (poor recall of letter formations while writing).
- ✓ *It is easier to remember something you understand than it is to remember that which makes little sense to you.* Education, therefore, always must calibrate the precarious balance between understanding and remembering. Imbalances lead to tenuous learning.
- ✓ *Some students endowed with high memory capacities may come to over-rely on rote storage and recall, receiving exemplary grades and gratifying teacher plaudits because they are so phenomenally talented at regurgitating facts and mimicking procedures on examinations.* Consequently, their understanding and their joy in learning may be underdeveloped. In fact, teachers should take care not to administer tests that are pure memory assessments (i.e., fail to tap into authentic comprehension, conceptualization, and critical thinking).
- ✓ *There exist intuitively endowed memorizers; they know how to operate the intricate memory circuits that support learning.* They don’t need our help to remember. But other learners have to be taught to apply conscious strategies in order to retain information and skills. Fortunately, memory is one component of neurodevelopmental function that is most amenable to the application of clever cognitive tactics, the well-targeted approaches readers will encounter on the pages of this book.



Clearly, the roles of memory and the manifestations of impaired memory are complex and varied. Yet, those of us who work with students, whether we realize it or not, are forever grappling with the mysteries of memory. We must offer well-informed support to the many frustrated learners who have trouble storing and accessing skills and information. With the publication of *The Source for Learning & Memory Strategies*, clinicians, teachers, and concerned parents will have a worthy opportunity to peer into the recessed vaults of memory in order to help children and adolescents become much more effective and gratified learners.

All too often, children and adults have little awareness of how memory works and how to best work with it. This book addresses directly the practical measures that can be so highly effective in priming and maximizing memory capacity without sacrificing memory's learning co-star, insight. In a clear and totally sensible manner, Regina Richards describes the various pathways for retaining knowledge and skill while providing readily applicable methods for assuring optimal storage and retrieval. Hopefully, readers will use this volume as a springboard, custom-fitting the author's suggestions to students whom they know, while generating additional techniques of their own.

The Source for Learning & Memory Strategies should serve as one of the vital road maps for exemplary schools of the future, guiding them along a well-lit thoroughfare upon which the informed education of students derives from a keen understanding of learning processes, along with a compassionate view of the widespread differences in learning that beckon us to value and nurture all kinds of minds.

Preface

In presenting workshops on learning strategies, teachers frequently ask questions about their students whom they describe as “seeming to have no memory.” That, of course, is a fallacy. What they mean is that some students struggle much more than others to hang on to and retrieve school-specific information.

These questions, combined with my own curiosity, led me to explore memory and learning issues. As I began to investigate these areas, it seemed as if memory materials were everywhere: technical and strategy chapters in books, whole books devoted to the topic, and articles in popular magazines. In one issue, I ran across the following recommendations for improving memory:

1. relax
2. concentrate
3. focus
4. slow down
5. organize
6. repeat the information
7. visualize the information

These general strategies can help many students of differing ages in either traditional or special educational classrooms. What is interesting is that these strategies are also applicable for adults. The strategies were printed in an issue of *AARP*, a newsletter for retired persons.

The moral of this story is that we can all benefit from knowing more about memory and using memory strategies throughout various life stages. It is my hope that this book will add in a positive way to this goal.

The strategies in this book were developed because of my work with students over several decades. Many techniques resulted from brainstorming sessions with other professionals in workshops, classes, and school environments. It is difficult to directly identify the sources of all the activities I have used. Even those that I feel are original may actually have a root in a suggestion presented by another professional. Schacter calls this phenomenon by the wonderful name *cryptomnesia*, which he defines as a situation wherein people misattribute novelty to something that comes from another source (Schacter 2001, p. 108).

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Regina