Is Rereading the Material a Good Study Strategy?

By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

Lots of good writing on the science of learning is coming out now and it’s needed. For too long we have known too little about learning—I won’t digress into the reasons why. We need to take advantage of this opportunity to learn more about this science.

Here’s a case in point. Most students (about 80% according to survey data) “study” textbooks and other assigned reading materials by rereading them. Yes, I know. It’s a huge struggle to get some students to do any reading. We have addressed that problem here previously and you’ll find another good way to get students reading in the June/July issue of The Teaching Professor newsletter. But for this post, let’s consider those students who’ve done the reading and are now “studying” it to prepare for an exam. Most students do that by simply rereading the material.

“Rereading has three strikes against it. It is time consuming. It doesn’t result in durable memory. And it often involves a kind of unwitting self-deception, as growing familiarity with the text comes to feel like mastery of the material.” (p. 10) I was a bit taken back when I first read that. But part of the argument made sense immediately. I remembered all those earnest students who’d done poorly on an exam and were upset because they’d spent so much time studying. They’d open their texts and the extensive (often glowing) highlighting bore witness to the fact they had read and reread the material. But their exam scores told another story: they did not understand what they’d read.

I also recalled that when I asked students how they planned to study, most announced that they’d “go over” their notes.” I glibly suggested that “getting into” notes might be a more productive approach. Students want studying to be easy. As one writer noted, they think they’re doing the reading if their eyes touch the words in their books or notes, repeatedly touching eyes and words, means they’re really studying hard.

Cognitive scientists say that rereading isn’t a particularly good study strategy if it doesn’t involve retrieval, what they call the testing effect. “We’ve long known that the act of retrieving knowledge from memory has the effect of making that knowledge easier to call up again in the future.” (p. 28) Scores of studies document that if students read material and then take a test on it, they recall way more on the second test than students who prepare by simply rereading the material.

So, instead of rereading the material, students need to be testing themselves on it. Can you imagine the enthusiasm that would greet that recommendation? I wish those writing about the testing effect would come up with a different name. For students, tests are high-stakes, high-stress assessments, and the last thing they want is more of them. But the kind of retrieval that enhances long-term memory and understanding involves asking questions and coming up with answers. Think flashcards with a question that must be answered before checking the back of the card. Yes, answers to flashcards can be memorized and yet still not understood. But testing for understanding can come with more questions: And why is this answer important? What does it relate to? How does this answer connect with what I already know? Can I elaborate this answer? Can I illustrate it with an example?

You can see why a touch-and-go reread is the preferred option for students. Interrogating the text to test for understanding is hard work. It takes effort and persistence. “We’re easily seduced into believing that learning is better when it’s easier, but the research shows the opposite: when the mind has to work, learning sticks better. The greater the effort to retrieve learning, provided that you succeed, the more that learning is strengthened by retrieval.” (p. 43)

I expect disavowing students of the rereading strategy will not be easy. But do most students study effectively? If
they don’t, we need to start asking questions and suggesting alternatives.

**Reference:** Here’s another new, well written book on the science of learning—great for summer reading. It makes the case against rereading in chapters one and two.


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