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Voice of the Educator



Practice questions for inspiring effective studying, learning and benchmarking

By *Jean Seok and Nina Berler* on January 13th, 2015 | [Comments \(0\)](#)

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For college students, January marks a new semester and a fresh start. For K-12 students, it means looming tests and increasing amounts of work. It's a time when many students resolve to study more.

But what if their study methods aren't effective to begin with?

In **Improving Students' Learning With Effective Learning Techniques**, researchers from Kent State University looked at 10

learning techniques used by students and evaluated how those students performed in terms of memorizing, comprehending, applying and transferring knowledge.

The results, published by the Association for Psychological Science, may surprise both students and educators. Popular techniques such as summarizing, highlighting and rereading were found to have low utility. Generating explanations or explaining steps to solve a problem were shown to have medium utility.

And the highest-utility methods for learning? They involved answering questions, specifically, taking practice tests. Students performed better when they kept answering questions correctly more than once, particularly with longer intervals between study sessions.

These findings are similarly documented in a **guide published by the U.S. Department of Education**. The guide recommends activating prior knowledge not by administering formal exams, which would take too much time and generate too much anxiety, but rather through "quizzes and informal testing situations such as playing a Jeopardy-like game."

Benchmarks may be used to compare students' mastery of material. A **California Department of Education publication** points out the usefulness of vertical benchmarks to assess consistency across grades and horizontal benchmarks to check consistency across classrooms.

Vertical assessments, when used properly, help reduce redundancy from one year to the next, allowing teachers to maximize time for new learning. Meanwhile, horizontal assessments pinpoint areas where individual student instruction or supplemental resources are necessary to even out the levels of student knowledge. This is especially important if students in different classes and with different teachers will take the same exams (i.e., midterms, finals, state or national assessments). As the California DOE document explains, "These benchmark assessments provide valuable information for classroom practice and school- and district-wide decision making. They are a powerful extension of the learning process."

If improving learning is as simple as practicing questions diligently, why do students keep relying on less effective methods? According to the Kent State researchers, "One possibility is students are not instructed about which techniques are effective or how to use them effectively during formal schooling. Part of the problem may be that teachers themselves are not told about the efficacy of various learning techniques."

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The authors of **Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning**, offer a slightly different perspective. “Most productive practices are those that feel slow and unrewarding and are seldom adopted by learners.” Popular methods of studying, like the ones mentioned above, might “create the illusion of mastery.”

So how should educators encourage students to practice more in the new year? They can begin by incorporating practice testing with feedback into their lesson plans. Classes can begin with questions on an important idea from a previous lesson; those questions can be revisited over the course of several classes. The flipped classroom, with its emphasis on exercises during class time, is also an **effective way to introduce more practice testing**.

In “Make it Stick”, the authors note that electronic student-response systems, which are increasingly prevalent, provide instantaneous feedback and recommend interleaved (mixing up different questions and question types) rather than blocked practice (“drill and kill”).

So resolve to spread the word in 2015: Using practice questions with explanations leads to more efficient studying, better learning, and improved benchmarking.

Jean Seok is the CEO of Learningpod, a platform that offers free, high-quality practice questions for K-12, higher education and beyond. She was the Executive Director of UX at Kaplan Test Prep, the product owner for LSAT On Demand, and winner of an EDDIE award in 2013. Prior to this, she was the Director of User Experience/Design at a number of startups, including Six Apart and Fotolog. She was the frontend developer for the Media That Matters Film Festival, winner of best nonprofit website at SXSW.

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