

Memory Work in a Content-Rich Biblical Education

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A goal of ALL of ours is that students would *know* some key things, and you can't know something without *remembering* it. So, although talking about "memory work" seems like an elementary school skill, every teacher really needs to think through how we're going to help students retain content. How much new content do we introduce? How much do we review? What content do we commit to memory? Are there best-practices that we can follow?

Let's start with a bit of the research about learning and memory. *Brain World* magazine did an entire issue on memory that I found interesting. And I don't think this opening fact will surprise you, but apparently, "All memories naturally decay." We have to retrieve and rehearse information with some frequency for it to stay intact—it is like traveling down a dirt pathway in order to *keep* it a pathway. If it's not used, it becomes lost.

BUT ... "Memories can be strengthened by active use and by forming connections." ([link](#)) If you think of the Alzheimer's patient who has forgotten much vital information but can nevertheless recite the Lord's Prayer, that is an example of a pathway that was traveled down SO often, it has never been lost. It was also actively used—the Lord's Prayer isn't just something we sit and hear, it's something we actively recite out loud. Active use is, of course, where we practice and use a fact that we have learned; we didn't JUST write it on a test.

This is what *BrainWorld* had to say about forming connections: "New information ...gets integrated into the complex web of existing data, rather than acquired and stored in isolation."¹ "Because the elements making up a memory reside in multiple cortical areas, the stronger the network linking the associated pieces together, the more resistant to it will be to forgetting."² I thought that was interesting, that the brain is always looking for connections, trying to figure out how THIS piece of information fits with the other pieces of information it's already stored. Apparently, when the brain can't figure out the connections, or the connections are weak, then it's much more likely forgotten. Kenneth Wesson adds this: "Thus, **integrating** the curriculum enhances content retention when subject matter enjoys the benefit of multiple, integrated connections."³

If we are ABLE to integrate even what's been learned in history or literature into our Bible class, those cross-curricular connections are stronger and more resistant to forgetting. Maybe you could ask students to be on the lookout for connections, and have some sort of reward incentive, because the more connections that are drawn between classes, the better.

Finally, one last factor in what we remember is **personal motivation**: "Mere exposure to content information (lecture, text, etc.) is no guarantee that it will reach the personal / emotional threshold of 'personal importance' to the learner, where encoding the information for permanent memory storage is deemed warranted." We as teachers know that this is a big factor! If a student finds something interesting and engaging, they're more likely to hold onto that information, and there's only so much that we as teachers have control over that. We can do our best to make lessons engaging, but in a sense, we're serving a meal that students will partake of in different amounts.

¹ Kenneth Wesson, *Brain World Magazine*, 2017, reprint of Issue 4 Vol. 2.

² Kenneth Wesson, *Brain World Magazine*, 2017, reprint of Issue 4 Vol. 2.

³ Kenneth Wesson, *Brain World Magazine*, 2017, reprint of Issue 4 Vol. 2.

So we tend to remember:

- Information we've retrieved over and over
- Information we actively use
- Information that is connected or in a pattern
- Information with emotional / personal impact

We've all had times where we memorized something QUICKLY to pass an exam... Maybe a driving test when we moved to a new state!—but we forget that information again pretty quickly, don't we? Why? Well, knowing how many drunk driving deaths there were last year is: ... not personally meaningful (#4), we don't actively use it (#2), so we have no need to retrieve it (#1), and the statistics, whatever number it is, is kind of random to me; it's not connected to anything (#3). If it happens to be a pattern—like, it matches my phone number! That would be a pattern and a form of organization that would help me remember it, but otherwise, that fact will disappear from my short-term memory about 2 hours after taking that exam.

But knowing these 4 things about the memory, we can use this in our teaching to strengthen our lessons and aid our student's long-term memory. I think in the internet area, some schools have reduced the requirement for *memory* and *mastery*, because we have technology to help us. We have Google! Why would we learn that by heart? But we don't want to go that direction, particularly with the Bible. We want this book percolating in our students' minds and hearts.

We don't want this to be just short-term information – A single Bible verse we memorize once and then forget. We receive so many pieces of data every day that we can't possibly store it unless it is repeated often and it's connected to other pieces. The UK publication the Telegraph estimates that “We now receive five times as much information every day as we did in 1986.” So I think particularly with something like Scripture memory, what we're looking for is not a one-time memorization but choosing content that connects to other ideas, it's in context, it's in a pattern, it can be actively used, etc.

We're going to spend some time brainstorming practical advice about memory CONTENT and memory METHODS, but I thought it would be meaningful, first, to consider how the LORD aids our memories and accommodates himself to our weakness. He did not just drop a Handbook of Doctrine into our laps and tell us to memorize. He knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust, and HE uses MANY things to call us back to himself: Emotion, Repetition, Patterns/Rituals, five Senses.

So, let me give you 5-7 minutes to think through the memory tools that the Lord uses with us, and we'll come back together to share some of these afterwards.

<p>Emotional impact</p>	<p><i>God has broken into history in ways that evoke surprise, love, wonder, fear—a whole range of emotions—chiefly in THE INCARNATION. We are a faith that SINGS, because doctrine is emotional! We are a faith that translates Scripture into the heart language of every person. Why? Because that emotional connection matters to God.</i></p>
<p>Patterns, rituals and 'memory devices'</p>	<p><i>God has given us many memory tools. For OT Jews: The structure of their week reminded them of God (work/rest). The structure of their year (feasts and festivals). key Scriptures they recited often (The Shema)</i></p>

Repetition / Intentionally retrieving a memory	<i>Our tendency to forget is the reason we need weekly and daily practices like corporate worship, prayer at meals or bedtimes, Christian fellowship, sacraments, church calendar</i>
Active / Using 5 senses (not just listening)	<i>OT Jews didn't just read the story of Passover; they acted it out. They tasted and reenacted what took place. The children were involved in question-answer format. God has provided the church with visual and sensory reminders, from the smells and tastes of the Lord's Supper to the water of baptism. We can use traditions, symbols, holidays, and spiritual disciplines as reminders. Catechism is Active. Godly Play is active.</i>

***Our experience:** Moving for the sake of centering our children's identities in a local church and a Christian school. We had been in a church preaching solid theology but community was always very tough, since it was a busy, success-driven university culture. We wanted our kids' identity to be centered on Christ and His Church—not just their own ambitions, nor just our nuclear family. Now, our school and church communities are much more the center of our kids' identities, and we love that the school orients the whole year around the Christian calendar. During morning "calendar time," they include a church-calendar "clock" so that time is marked by sacred events, not just secular: i.e.: All Hallows Eve, All Saints Day, Advent, etc. It's been wonderful to see how our kids see the entire world through the lens of faith. We were driving by grocery stores and businesses, and one daughter asked why they already had Christmas lights, and the other daughter said, "Because it's ADVENT!" As though Kroger is anticipating Jesus. I see them responding to these structures and patterns and rituals, because the church calendar and stories of church history have even made it into their imaginary play.*

Since we tend to remember things we've retrieved over and over, things we actively use, things that are connected or in a pattern, with emotional / personal impact—and since the LORD accommodates himself to our weakness—we as teachers should strive to: Increase repetition, Increase active use, Organize and connect ideas into patterns, and Seek for meaningful engagement.

Consider:

- Repetition – how do we build review and repetition into lesson plans so that knowledge is revisited? It's been said that "Repetition is the mother of learning." AND content that can work across grade levels or be repeated through the year
- Context – a whole passage instead of single-verses
- Connections – a passage that is key to the book, or can be used multiple times in curriculum
- Pattern – Romans Road to Salvation

Before we think about traditional memory work such as Bible verses or doctrinal statements, I'd like to begin with one of the MOST beneficial ways of working the memory and aiding the memory in the world of the humanities. In some of the maths and sciences, there is need for rote drill, like multiplication facts, learning the technical Latin term for anatomy, etc.

But in the humanities—literature, history, Bible—our best assessment for whether our students "Got it" is usually open-ended responses: Essay questions, written assignments where students phrase back to us what they understood of what we taught them. Of course, essays can be a pain to grade! But let's consider for a moment the value of narration as a form of memory. When students narrate back to

us a story or a history, they have to use a lot of different faculties: Remembering all the important pieces, organizing them, sequencing them into cause-and-effect, summarizing in their own words. It requires them to form connections and patterns, to use context, etc.

The Bible wasn't given to us as a list of information; it was given as a story, and that is good for us. We don't easily memorize lists of events or trivia; it is much more natural to remember a narrative—the flow of cause-and-effect. I was asked to teach Roman history, and the textbook was great—it was narrative history where it told a story and connected the details very memorably. But the workbook wanted to just pull out any random details to make a list of facts to test the students on. And it became a joke when we were reading, "Oh, I bet they chose THAT random detail for our test," and sure enough, if it was a point of meaningless trivia, it was on that study guide.

So I dropped the workbook, closed each chapter with having students give written or oral responses to the BIG topics of the chapter, and to connect whole stories through the flow of cause-and-effect. And by repeating these stories often, they were able to remember and retell defining moments of Roman history well beyond the end of the course. It's a much more useful skill, isn't it, because they can share what they've learned with family, they can drop it into conversation—and in composition class, in literature, they repeatedly kept pulling their examples from Roman history. They came up with connections to Harry Potter, and baby Moses in the basket, and to proverb about hatching the egg rather than smashing it. They will REMEMBER that Roman history so much more because they have retold the tales and connected the stories across the curriculum so many times.

Now, when needed, we can help students with narrating back a Scripture story with tools like pictures/visuals, outlines, acronyms. I'm curious if some of you have a favorite memory device for connecting larger plot-lines of the Old or New Testament; I've heard different acronyms that can be used to outline the plot through the entire Bible.

What I chose to do was teach them story-telling with help of visual tools—remembering how effective the Bridge diagram is in sharing the gospel. Because drawing the diagram gives you the mental cue to share that part of the story. I happened to see an article in *Christianity Today* called, "From Four Laws to Four Circles," which showed a new way of narrating the gospel that some InterVarsity staff were using, and it involved drawing 4 circles for creation, fall, redemption and mission. And I thought, that's great, because that follows the biblical story! So we started modifying the 4 circles diagram to go Creation-Fall-Israel-exile-and then Jesus. This is what we used in the OT/NT survey with Christian Schools International, if you've seen that—it has crowns and temples and glory sparkles. But the idea is to help students narrate the big story of the whole Bible, and it's not hard to create a rubric to see whether a student included all the key pieces (whether you're evaluating them orally or in writing).

I do understand that essay questions like these can be a bear to grade, but my advice personally would, instead of veering toward making tests "objective," keep essays, keep written projects, and just simplify or reduce your grading burden—make it a really simple rubric where you could trade and grade, or I certainly admit to having students write out a one-page summary or narration and not really grading them at all or just glancing at whether they filled the page with relevant information, and that counts as an A. But the students themselves learn so much through the process and connect so many dots that it's worth doing.

Memory Content

(SLIDE) Consider:

- Context
- Connections
- Pattern
- Repetition

Now, when it comes to content that we **do** ask students to commit to memory, whether that is Scripture memory, doctrine, etc., I thought we might do some brainstorming. On the question: How could we select *choice* content and things that hang together as a unit, so that we can increase connections and increase repetition?

For instance, (**SLIDE:** memory verses out-of-context vs. in passage) if we change from memorizing isolated Bible verses to longer passages, then it puts the verses in context, gives them more coherence, and allows us to repeat the whole passage more easily. As a child, my husband memorized full passages of Scripture which they would recite somewhat regularly, and to this day, when those passages are read in church, he can quote 1 Cor. 13 on love, or the Beatitudes. If we choose passages that reflect key themes of the entire book/author, they serve as mile-markers for Scripture.

The idea with this handout is for your own use in selecting your foundational content—"fertile" content that other ideas can connect to. I listed Biblical knowledge, theological knowledge and historical knowledge (but you could add other connecting categories like ethics, worldview, art, etc).

If they could only memorize a few things well, what would those be? And which content would serve your students well even in multiple categories. Bible memory that we can come back to for doctrine? Each line or arrow you can draw from one categories into the others represents more repetition, more connection. If you'd like to talk with another person or two, feel free.

5-7 minutes to fill out handout 2, then review as a group: "What practical tips have worked well for you all with helping students commit things to memory? (Frequency of review? Tools? Songs?)

Additional Memory Tools & Patterns

- 1) **Frequency of Repetition** – A practice I have in Latin class that I think would work well in Bible is just setting aside a certain number of minutes every day for recitation. In Latin, there are so many conjugations and declensions that we have sort of opening exercises where we recite and go through many of our chants and ditties, as well as maybe adding on some new material. IF we have longer passages that we've committed to memory, it wouldn't be hard to cycle through those as an opening exercise. It may feel harder to stay on top of reviewing a lot of scattered facts, but longer chunks are easier to incorporate. BUT, coordinating goals across grade levels so that there is some repetition from year-to-year is even better. Your school may use a curriculum that helps you revisit the same material at different grade levels.
- 2) **Rhythm of the Language** – Use and heighten the natural rhythm of the language to accentuate the pauses, the meter, shift in meter, etc. (Example: verbal rhythm of Pledge of Allegiance)
- 3) **Patterns / images / acronyms** – Organize material for students using images as powerful ways of assisting memory. (Example: Ten Commandments via images)
- 4) **Songs** – Yes, but easier in younger grades. Talk with teachers of younger grade levels about sending home CD of songs for memory-work, for rising students you will inherit. Try to capitalize on these young years! Music sent home will be heard in the car by both children and parents, which will help parents teach their children.