

Memorization Is Still a Necessary Skill

With another school year about to start, here's a bit of advice from a recently retired college history teacher. Beware of teachers whose opening day gambit assures all new students that they have little or nothing to worry about on the following front: none of that dreaded memory work will be asked for, much less required, in this course. (Hooray, hooray!!)

If you hear something like that from your instructor/professor, you can certainly be sure that the individual who is theoretically in charge of the class is doing his or her best to make nice. It's also a good bet that something else, something larger and more damaging, is going on: you're essentially being told that memorization is old-fashioned, passé, and otherwise beside the point.

Really?? After all, how was it that you first learned a whole lot of things that, once upon a time, you didn't know how to do, but which quickly—or gradually—became second nature? Such would include everything from tying your shoes to stringing words into sentences.

But I'm a college student, you say. Memorization may have been necessary in grade school; it may even have had its ever-shrinking place in junior high and high school. But I'm ready to do some real thinking, especially some really critical thinking. Besides, I have a computer to do my memory work for me.

Good for you! Computers are helpful tools, and it certainly is time for some real thinking, especially if it means "thinking critically about," rather than simply "being critical of."

Actually, either critical process can always benefit from the

application of memorized, even recently memorized, information. And, while both can certainly benefit from computers, neither can be replaced by a computer. Nor should the importance of storing information in one's head be minimized or otherwise dismissed. Computers, after all, are nothing more than tools.

To be sure, memorization is not the highest level intellectual skill; but it is, and will always remain, a necessary skill. I would always assure my students that memory work was part of the deal for any of my history classes. In fact, I would add that if you had a teacher spouting that first day "make nice" pabulum with which I began this essay, you should be aware that one or two additional things likely just happened: either you were just lied to or it should have immediately dawned on you that you were embarking on a college course that had minimal substance to it. Or both.

Of course, memory work is necessary, assuming that your course of study DOES have real substance to it. Of course, you will forget much of what you did memorize. But you won't forget all of it. And you are less likely to forget that which you applied to any genuinely critical thinking that you did in the class.

Any good college course, history or otherwise, should require both skills. Memorizing without "thinking critically about" leaves you with isolated bits of information that may or may not be useful and will likely float into and out of your head. And either "thinking critically about" or "being critical of" is worse than a waste of time unless you have information in your head in the first place. To avoid either extreme (meaning free-floating facts/tidbits or free-floating ideas/opinions), it's always a good idea to be on alert for what is said on that all-important first day. That way, you're better able to make sure that your teacher-to-be is more intent on making you work than in making nice.