



The Importance of Rote Learning

The 1850 edition of Noah Webster's Dictionary defines "rote" as: "To fix in memory by means of frequent repetition." That certainly is the essence of what we mean by rote memorization. My 1988 dictionary, however, defines "rote" as: "A fixed, mechanical way of doing something." That definition misses the mark of what memorization is all about. The true purpose of rote memorization in education is to create automaticity, so that, for example, when a child sees a letter or group of letters he or she automatically says the sounds. The child does not have to think about it. The response is automatic.



Repetition, in fact, is not only the easiest way to learn something, it often is the only way to learn something. Today's public educators, of course, look down on rote learning and consider it akin to a form of child abuse. Imagine, forcing a child to actually memorize something! They see rote learning as an old-fashioned teaching method associated with birch rods, dunce caps and other quaint paraphernalia of the strict, disciplinarian educational practices of the past.

But what is totally ignored by these educators is the fact that rote learning is the easiest and most efficient way to instill knowledge by memorization so that it forms a solid foundation on which to build an intellectual superstructure. For example, there is no substitute for rote memorization in learning the arithmetic facts. That knowledge is essential to being able to perform in one's head or on paper the four functions of arithmetic: adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing. Being given a calculator to perform these functions without having this basic knowledge in one's head gives the child no clue as to whether the answer on the calculator is right or wrong. But then, many educators no longer consider the right answer to be the goal of a math problem.

Rote learning is also important in learning to read, for the most important task in learning to read an alphabetic writing system is to develop a phonetic reflex, which is easy to do by drilling the learner in the letter-sound combinations. This is the way it was done in ancient times and the way it was done decades ago in America when literacy was much higher than it is today.

The best description of how rote learning was used in ancient Rome to teach children to read can be found in the writings of Quintilian, the famous teacher of rhetoric, born in about 35 A.D. He favored teaching children to read as early as possible, because "the elements of literary training are solely a question of memory, which not only exists even in small children, but is specially retentive at that age." Thus he advocated teaching children the letters and their shapes quite early. He then said:

As regards syllables, no short cut is possible: they must all be learnt, and there is no good in putting off learning the most difficult; this is the general practice, but the sole result is bad spelling. Further, we must beware to placing a blind confidence in a child's memory. It is better to



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repeat syllables and impress them on the memory and, when he is reading, not to press him to read continuously or with greater speed, unless indeed the clear and obvious sequence of letters can suggest itself without its being necessary for the child to stop to think.

What Quintilian was advocating was the development of a phonetic reflex so that a child could read automatically without having to stop and think of the letter sounds. In fact, drilling the child in the syllables was the way reading was taught in this country for at least the first hundred years of its existence. A perusal of any primer published in the early 19th century will show the columns of syllables, such as (long vowels) ba, be, bi, bo, bu and (short vowels) ab, eb, ib, ob, ub which learners were required to memorize before they were permitted to read words. That was exactly the sequence Quintilian recommended when he wrote:

The syllables once learnt, let him begin to construct words with them and sentences with the words. You will hardly believe how much reading is delayed by undue haste. If the child attempts more than his powers allow, the inevitable result is hesitation, interruption and repetition, and the mistakes which he makes merely lead him to lose confidence in what he already knows. Reading must therefore first be sure, then connected, while it must be kept slow for a considerable time, until practice brings speed unaccompanied by error.

Thus, almost 2,000 years ago, Quintilian had it right while today our educators, who reject rote learning, have it all wrong. Of course, back in Quintilian's time they didn't have primers with lots of pictures in full color to distract from the print. Alphabetic writing was understood to be a phonetic system that had to be taught phonetically.

Homeschoolers can use rote memorization to have their children memorize passages from Scripture, Psalms, poems, even parts in Shakespeare plays. When a child memorizes beautiful language and well-constructed lines, that knowledge will stay with him for the rest of his life. It will become part of his permanent memory that he can draw upon in times of difficulty.

Today, too many children, who don't know the Bible, memorize the words in satanic heavy-metal music that draws them closer to hell than to heaven. Therefore, make sure your child memorizes inspiring and Godly poetry and prose so that their minds create a bulwark against the satanic culture we live in.

Concerning memory, Quintilian wrote: "The surest indication in a child is his power of memory. The characteristics of a good memory are twofold: It must be quick to take in and faithful to retain impressions of what it receives."

The evil of whole language and the look-say method is that they destroy a child's memory by forcing the child to memorize what cannot be memorized at all: the written words of our language as if they were Chinese characters. That is why our public schools are full of frustrated, angry children who easily turn to violence in protest to what has been done to their minds.



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