Asking Questions Improves Your Learning if You Ask the Right Questions

by Louise Rasmussen - September 15, 2015

https://thinkeracademy.com/questioning-improves-your-learning/

It's 2AM and you're cramming for a test tomorrow.

The Doritos are all gone and yours is the only light still on.

You stare at a richly detailed diagram of the reproductive system and think, "Looks pretty straightforward. I'll remember this tomorrow."

At show time, that detailed diagram is nothing but a fuzzy blur in your brain. Ouch. You've fallen victim to the "Total Recall delusion."

It's hard to imagine forgetting when the information is right in front of you.

Why is that?

The Total Recall delusion is part of a bigger problem – what I call the "Lazy Learner syndrome."

A lazy learner is someone who follows along just enough to check whether they understand what they hear or read.

This simple "check that" approach can be deceptive. You experience a comforting feeling of understanding. But, it's pretty useless for remembering the information later on.

Just because you understand something doesn't mean you'll remember it.

Fortunately, there's a simple study tip to overcome these two obstacles to learning:

Asking questions.

Yeah, the thought of asking questions in front of your friends can be enough to start your heart racing. Your not alone. Something to work up to?

Fortunately, you get some benefits of asking questions just by questioning yourself.

Research has shown that asking and answering your own questions helps you learn. To understand *and remember*.

But do some kinds of questions help more than others?

Do All Questions Help You Learn?

Julie Bugg and Mark McDaniel at Washington University in St. Louis set out to answer that question. They designed a study that would help determine if the [Benefits of Question Self-Generation and Answering](#) depend on the types of questions learners ask. They published their findings in the Journal of Educational Psychology.

In their study three groups of students read several paragraphs of text. Two groups were instructed to ask and answer their own questions as they read these paragraphs. Only, each group was asked to generate different types of questions.

One group was asked to generate *detail questions*. The other was asked to generate *conceptual questions*.

- *Detail questions* can be answered by referring to a detail or fact that could be found within a single sentence in the text. An example of a detail question was, "How many square miles in size is Antarctica's great ice cap?" The answer, "six million," could be found in one sentence.

- *Conceptual questions* can only be answered by integrating information from at least two different sentences. For example, "Give two reasons why it is impossible to create a map of the crevasses in Antarctica." To answer this question, participants had to combine two pieces of information.

Both groups were given examples of their question type and the opportunity to practice generating questions. The last group of students was asked to simply read the paragraphs twice.

After studying the paragraphs all students were asked to judge how well they would remember the information. Then they were all given the same test. This test contained both detail and conceptual questions.

No Stupid Questions, Only Better Questions

There may be no such thing as a stupid question, but some questions [accelerate your learning](#) more than others. Bugg and McDaniel found that the conceptual questions helped the students learn—the detail questions didn't.

The students who generated conceptual questions did much better than the other groups on the conceptual parts of the test. Their evaluations of how well they'd learned the information were also more accurate. It helps to learn and practice asking conceptual questions, as in our [study skills course](#).

Students in the other two groups were much more likely to overestimate how much they would remember. Interestingly there were no differences between the three groups in how well they did on the detail questions on the test. Those who focused on conceptual questioning, still came away with the details.

Take Control of Your Learning by Asking Questions

The Lazy Learner syndrome afflicts all of us at some point or another. It's difficult to self-diagnose because our minds often trick us into believing that we aren't being lazy even when we are.

Asking questions works because it makes you an active learner instead of a passive recipient of information. When you interact with information by elaborating on it, thinking critically about its context, or relating some pieces of information to others you increase the likelihood that you will remember it.

We all know that asking questions is a great way to get information. And to expose ourselves to new ideas. New perspectives.

You can also learn a great deal by questioning yourself.

Learn to ask smart questions. Privately.

Get smart. Get comfortable. You'll grow out from there.

Image Credit: Don Moyer

Bugg, J., & McDaniel, M. (2012). Selective benefits of question self-generation and answering for remembering expository text. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 104* (4), 922-931 DOI: 10.1037/a0028661

Retrieved: 01-04-2019
Updated: 01-03-2019
Published: 09-15-2015
thinkeracademy.com