What is the most important factor in successful learning?

Professor Stephen Chew, a cognitive psychologist at Samford University, asks his students about their beliefs regarding effective study strategies. His question is phrased something like this:

What is the most important factor in successful learning?
1. The time you spend studying
2. The intention and desire to learn.
3. What you think about while studying.
4. Paying close attention to the material as you study.
5. Learning in a way that matches your own learning style.

Before considering Dr. Chew’s answers to this question, it is important to note that our ability to think and reason on any subject fundamentally depends upon the learned schemas we have stored in long-term memory. From this perspective, Dr. Chew’s question may be rephrased as “What is the most important factor determining whether or not students will remember the content we teach in class?” After all, how many times have we heard students say things such as “I just don’t understand why I didn’t do better on this midterm. I studied for hours and still got C-,” or “I can picture exactly where in my notes I had that written down, but I couldn’t remember the definition.” For that matter, why is it that one of us remembers a great number of details about the time he dissected a bovine eye in high school biology, including the fact that his scalpel was so dull he had to rip at his specimen with bare hands, but he has no recollection of what it was he was supposed to learn from this experience?

Getting back to Dr. Chew’s question, he would agree that four of the responses have some merit (and one definitely does not!), but the most important factor determining whether or not students remember what we teach in our courses depends on what our students spend time thinking about. In other words, students remember what they think about.

This conclusion may seem obvious, but the more important question is whether we consistently teach with this in mind. Do we give homework assignments that are consistent with this model? Do our PowerPoint slides have so much information presented all at once that it is impossible for students to know what to think about? Are the projects and papers we assign likely to result in students spending the bulk of their time thinking about the meaning of the content we want them to learn, or do they spend a lot of time thinking about less important things? When students are using their laptops to look at PowerPoint slides in class, how do we know they are thinking about what we want them thinking about and not watching replays of March Madness? Pedagogical questions like these are instructionally useful because they prompt us to think about the overarching consideration: Who is doing the thinking? This answer, then, can drive how we design our courses and put together our lectures.

Crystal Bruxvoort, Jim Jadrich, and Kyle Heys, Teaching and Learning Network

From the Faculty Activity Reports

• **Corey Roberts** (Germanic and Asian Languages and Literatures), “Insights of Perspective in German Literature, Culture and Thought” (lecture, American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies Annual Meeting, Denver, CO, March 23, 2019).

• **Laura Smit** (Religion), *Judges*, Brazos Theological Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2018).

Be sure to [fill out](#) your Faculty Activity Reports regularly. If you have questions, see the [FAQ page](#).

**Coming Up on Campus** *(Check the campus calendar for a full list of events)*

**Monday, April 8**
- Chapel. Jazz Prayers with Jazz Combo. 10:00 a.m., Chapel
- The 4:04 Gathering. Ralph Stearley (Geology). 4:04 p.m., Hekman Library, third floor

**Tuesday, April 9**
- **NO CHAPEL**, due to advising
- Faculty Senate meeting. 4:30 p.m., Hoogenboom 280

**Wednesday, April 10**
- **NO CHAPEL**, due to advising

**Thursday, April 11**
- Chapel. Taizé. 10:00 a.m., Chapel
- CALL Noontime Lecture series. Suzanne McDonald, “Holy Saturday: Insights from a Neglected Day in Holy Week.” 12:00 noon, Chapel
- Mathematics and Statistics colloquium. Esther Billings (Grand Valley State U.). 3:40 p.m., NH 276

**Friday, April 12**
- Chapel. Gospel Choir. 10:00 a.m., Chapel