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## Learning That Lasts: Helping Students Remember and Use What You Teach

By: Tyler J. Griffin, PhD in [Effective Teaching Strategies](#)

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How often do you hear the following sentiments from students?

- “I won’t ever use anything I am learning in this class, but I have to take it to graduate.”
- “I don’t care about this class. I just need a passing grade.”
- “I can’t remember anything I learned in that class.”

Granted, not all classes cover interesting material all the time. While we can’t always change *what* needs to be taught, we can change *how* we deliver it. If we make the right adjustments to our course design and teaching methodologies, we will hear less complaining in our classes. So, what can we do to achieve higher levels of student satisfaction and long-term learning that lasts far beyond the end of our class?

Begin by realizing that you don’t usually need a complete course re-design to teach more students at higher levels of engagement and retention. You can start making simple yet strategic changes that improve learning right away in the courses you already teach. Here are two simple yet effective techniques you can use in your courses to improve learning and retention: frontload the relevance and engage their memory.

### Frontload relevance

Have you ever gotten to the end of a class and excitedly “pulled back the curtain” to reveal the big moment of connection for everything you have taught only to see uninterested and expressionless faces staring back at you? It is likely that students in this situation have “zoned out” during the lesson, so any grand conclusions you make mean nothing to them. We cannot assume that our power to assign a grade is enough to get them to care about what we are teaching beyond a basic “do we need to know this for the test” level.

One simple way to help solve this “zone-out” problem is to give students a reason to stay focused from the beginning of a course or lesson by frontloading relevance. Relevance is something that is meaningful and interesting to your *students*—not you. What problems are *they* facing and what questions do they have outside of your course that your material can help them resolve? The intent of frontloaded relevance is to activate curiosity, pique interest, or trigger an innate desire to resolve problems they see in the world around them.

Initial relevance building need not be laborious. It can be accomplished using an applicable problem, short story, video clip, or case study followed by a prompt such as, “Now, let’s explore a few theories/concepts/processes/practices/or products that can help us make sense of this situation.”

You could also use one of the following activities to build relevant interest at the beginning of class:

- Poll students on their level of confidence in a widely held belief related to your lesson
- Show students an object or picture that could be related to your topic and ask them to make connections between the tangible object and your abstract concept
- Similar to seeing the picture on a puzzle box before putting pieces together, give context by asking your students to “Look for...” or “Watch for...” target objectives before having them read a block of text, watch a movie, perform an experiment, or work on an assignment

When determining relevance consider the following, “Whose questions am I trying to help the students answer, mine or theirs?”

### Make it Memorable

Consider the many and varied responsibilities of a student’s brain. In addition to regulating the physical operations of the body, it has to process large amounts of sensory input and determine what to forget and what to remember. It is therefore understandable that most of what they see and hear gets quickly forgotten. There are three factors that determine the strength of an item in memory:

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- **Recency**—How long has it been since last exposure?
- **Frequency**—How many times have they experienced it?
- **Potency**—What kind of impact did it have?

With all the sensory input our students experience, it should not surprise us that they quickly forget most of what is presented in our class. Rather than being frustrated with this process of forgetting, we can leverage it to help them learn and make that learning last.

Begin by selecting the most crucial facts, theories, skills, or processes you expect students to remember the longest from your course. Make sure they are exposed to these critical items more than once or twice in your classes (increasing the recency and frequency factors). Also make sure they interact with these vital elements in a variety of engaging and relevant ways (increasing the potency factor).

Build an expectation in your courses that students will be required to do more than just remember facts or understand foundational ideas. Find ways for students to do meaningful and applicable things with the material you teach (create something, or work on a real-world project appropriate to your discipline and the scope of your class). This will encourage them to stay focused and engaged throughout the learning process and retain the information and skills longer. It will also be more enjoyable for them than the traditional “zone-out/cram/test/forget” cycle.

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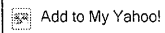
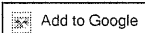
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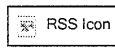
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