

Quizzing: The Single Best Teaching Tip

If you wanted to reduce *Walden* to its most fundamental and powerful concept, you would probably cite Thoreau's famous advice—"Simplify, simplify, simplify!" If you were to ask us for our single best teaching tip to enshrine in the Pedagogical Hall of Fame, we would have to say, Quiz, Quiz and Quiz again.

In each of our first books for New Forums, *It Works For Me* (1998) and *It Works For Me, Too* (2002), we devoted a section to testing and quizzing. Now, whenever, we observe classes and/or look over faculty syllabi, we always check the quiz policy. In the former book, we offered a simple rationale for the quiz strategy, and among the reasons were the following:

- "Students tend to actually read the material.
- "Students tend to show up for class on time.
- "Students raise their grades by simply reading the material.
- "The quiz provides a good lead-in for either a lecture or discussion of the material.
- "Students grow curious about the answers.
- "Students are provided with a real foundation for intellectual growth" (33).

Sixteen years later, our belief in quizzes is even stronger both because of our experience and the research. We'd like to focus on a book we read recently, *Make It Stick* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2014), that provides additional support for quizzing. Back in 1998 when we discussed "a real foundation for intellectual growth," what we put in our own words is what we consider the goal of higher education, **deep learning**. According to the book's authors, cognitive psychologists offer another reason for quizzing: "if we stop thinking of testing as a dipstick to measure learning—if we think of it as practicing retrieval of learning from memory rather than 'testing,' we open ourselves to another possibility: the use of testing as a tool for learning" (19). The key concept is **retrieval**, which has two major benefits: it "tells you what you know and what you don't know" and "recalling what you have learned causes your brain to reconsolidate the memory, and strengthens its connections to what you already know and makes it easier for you to recall in the future" (20).

What effect does the concept of multi-retrieval have on you as an instructor? Quiz at the beginning of class. By all means, ask questions on the reading for that session, but throw in a question or two from past classes. The spacing between the original exposure to new material and the quiz, "allowing some forgetting to occur between tests . . . [ellipsis ours] leads to stronger long-term retention than when it is massed" (32). One study, the authors report, demonstrated that the "kids scored a full grade level higher on the material that had been quizzed than on the material that had not been quizzed" (35). In short, quizzing promotes

deeper learning than cram sessions (even group studying) and rereading (and it reduces test anxiety).

Also, quiz at the end of class as an alternative to reflective writing. No rule exists we know of that prevents double quizzing. If students know the quiz is part of their grade, they will not only show up every day on time but actually stay the whole period, as well as pay closer attention to the session's content. Consider setting up a ratio of dropped quizzes to reward attendance. For instance, if you permit five absences per semester, for each unused absence, allow the student to drop a low quiz score. Then students are really rewarded for attendance.

And lest we forget, go over the quiz answers (yes, you can wait till the next class). According to *Make It Stick*, "giving feedback strengthens retention more than testing alone does and, interestingly, some evidence shows that delaying the feedback briefly produces better long-term learning than immediate feedback" (39). When students begin studying for your exams, your feedback on what it is they did not know will help them, and evidence suggests they will learn more than peers who were not quizzed.

In short, the authors conclude, "the testing effect is real—that the act of retrieving memory changes the memory, making it easier to retrieve again later" (41).

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Submitted by:

Charlie Sweet

Hal Blythe

Rusty Carpenter

Eastern Kentucky University