

Unit Reflection

Designing a unit on memory was a tricky concept for me to wrap my head around when I started planning it in February. While I had taken a course on psychology in college, it had been a few years since I revisited the concepts. As I surveyed my options for planning a unit, I decided upon memory because it involved the most biology – a subject I admittedly did not believe I would ever have to teach. Planning the unit, I spent a good deal of time conceptualizing how to teach science material. I spoke with several friends and colleagues from the science cohorts as I designed several different experiments for my students. At the time in February, I had not taught any psychology lessons, so it took me a long time to just get a framework for a unit on memory. However, I knew that the foundation of this unit had to be in practical uses of memory. I spent the majority of my time planning ways in which memory connects to students' lives. These connections were typically the periods that students seemed to enjoy the most.

As a result of my inexperience in biological subjects, I think I over-planned the unit. I researched all of the standards published for AP Psychology and tried to boil down key concepts from them. I intended this unit to be for the general psychology classes, so I did not want to focus too heavily on any of the minutia that can occasionally bog down the AP curriculum. I eliminated the days-long surveys of the history of memory studies – a common complaint of my AP students was that they did not like learning all the “wrong” theories before getting to the “right” theory that is currently accepted. With the unit on memory, I wanted to streamline my instruction and revolve it around the experiments I designed for the students to interact with the material. For many of my general psychology students, the experiments were the highlight of their experience in psychology. One of the hardest things to plan theoretically was how to stimulate substantive discussion before, during, and after my experiments. Because the bulk of

psychological experiments in class are contingent on reproducing the psychology concept it discovered, if the experiment is not designed precisely it can sometimes produce disastrous results. Therefore, I really struggled to make sure that the experiments and the discussions around them were able to mimic the conceptual psychology.

The two classes were largely designed to be direct instruction so that I could introduce important concepts of memory to the students while also exposing them to a series of experiments that could not be replicated. For example, while it is possible to find evidence of classical conditioning everywhere in our lives, it is not easy to replicate that clearly in a single class period (or even a unit). I still wanted students to be able to see examples of classical conditioning, so I showed them some videos of classical conditioning at work in various media (for example, in *The Office* when Jim conditions Dwight). During these first two classes, I covered a lot of different experiments which students were able to see online and discuss the results. I found that this was an effective way to cover the concepts in psychology – showing students the original experiments or a reinterpretation in modern media.

The next two classes were built around two major memory experiments – the first was a mental cartography lesson and the second was an experiment on forgetting. In the mental cartography lesson, I strove to illustrate to students the difference between episodic and semantic memory. Episodic memory is memory about one's own life while semantic memory is general knowledge. When constructing a mental map, I challenged students to use both types of memory and explain the differences between the two. As we discussed the difference between the two types of memory, students reflected on how those memories are formed. Where does semantic memory come from? At first, the answer seems simple, but when we looked at all the disparate maps and landmarks that students created, we wondered if the simple “culture” answer was

enough. Asking for students to reproduce random semantic knowledge about different landmarks in Virginia and the United States yielded an interesting discussion about the nature of recall itself. Students were curious, if everyone in the room had basically lived in Hampton for their whole lives, gone to the same school, and experienced much of the same things as each other, why did they have so few similarities in their maps? It was a question we could not fully answer, but the discussion helped us strengthen our understanding of semantic and episodic memory. The experiment on forgetting involved students participating in a complex game of telephone. One large group of students was asked to relay a news story they just heard to another student, who then relayed it to another student. The result would show the three main retrieval errors – sharpening, leveling, and false assumptions. Fortunately, it did, and students were able to make the connections between their own experiences with forgetting to these concepts.

To assess students for this unit, I designed a final test. Knowing that this was the first test students would be taking in this course all year, I wanted to make sure that students could pass the test. Knowing also my student population, I was fairly certain few would study for the test. The results were unfortunately quite poor. Many of my students did not pass the test, but I think the chief reason is because they lacked adequate content vocabulary. Distractors were far too distracting – in many cases students simply guessed concepts they never learned about in class. Going forward, I would spend much more time building students' vocabulary before throwing them into a testing situation in which many of the words are confusing or misleading.