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Sarah Grison  
*Parkland College, sgrison@parkland.edu*

Steven G. Luke

Aya Shigeto

Patrick D.K. Watson

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Using Low-Stakes Repeated Testing Can Improve Student Learning: How (Some) Practice Makes Perfect

Sarah Grison a, Steven G. Luke b, Aya Shigeto c, and Patrick D. K. Watson a

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign a, University of South Carolina b, and Nova Southeastern University c

Abstract

Two studies in Introductory Psychology classes explored whether repeated low-stakes testing can augment learning. In Experiment 1, answering more in-class questions with student response systems (SRSs) predicted better learning when students had not read the text. In Experiment 2, taking online practice quizzes predicted better learning, especially when questions on a concept were grouped. Repeated low-stakes testing can aid learning, but we must develop evidence-based pedagogical tools to maximize effects.

Theoretical Basis

Repeated testing encourages retrieval and improves retention (Carpenter, Pashler, Wixted & Val, 2008; Roediger & Karpicke, 2006), thus the testing effect may improve student learning. This effect has been studied in labs or using high-stakes course exams, but fast, easy, and non-threatening low-stakes tools may also benefit learning. Two examples include answering multiple choice questions (MCQs) in class using SRSs (Caldwell, 2007; Morling et al., 2008) and online practice quizzes (Narloch, Garbin, & Turnage, 2006). Our classroom experiments in Introductory Psychology manipulated use of SRSs and the design of practice quizzes to determine which parameters of repeated testing elicit long-term learning benefits.

Exp. 1: Methods

Participants: 297 students across 30 sections
Materials: SRS Qs in class on Learning and Memory
Design: Crossed between TAs and classes & reversed Sect 1-Low # Qs (½ Lect, ½ Not) Sect 2-High # Qs (½ Lect, ½ Not) Sect 3-High # Qs (⅔ Lect, ⅓ Not) Sect 4-Low # Qs (⅔ Lect, ⅓ Not)
Procedures: Pre-Test: 16 MCQs online 2 weeks before classes In-Class: Crossed design to present SRS Qs Post-Tests: 16 MCQs online 2 & 12 weeks after classes

Exp. 1: Analyses

Logit Mixed Model Analysis: Best-fit models for 2 post-tests (correct/incorrect per item) account for predictor effects and control random variables.
Predictors: Number of SRS Qs; (Low=4 / High=8) Coverage: (In Lecture / Not in Lecture) Read Text: (Low=<40% / High=>60%)
Random: Student; Question; Section

Exp. 1: Results

Learning After 2 Weeks Predicted By High Number of SRS Qs Only for topics NOT covered in lecture (z=4.7, p<0.001)

Exp. 2: Methods

Participants: 203 students from 1 section
Materials: MCQs on text in online practice quizzes
Design: Crossed between graded quizzes & reversed Sect 1-Low # of SRS Qs Sect 2-High # of SRS Qs
Procedures: Pract Quiz A: 10 concepts distributed Pract Quiz Ch B: 10 concepts massed

Exp. 2: Analyses

Linear Mixed Model Analysis: Best-fit model for percent correct on 9 graded quizzes accounts for predictors while controlling random variables.
Predictors: Practice: (Yes / No) Number of Practice Quizzes: (1 / 2) Type of Practice: (Distributed / Massed)
Random: Student; Chapter; Question

Exp. 2: Results

Learning After 2 Weeks Predicted By High Number of SRS Qs Only for “Low” readers (z=-2.3, p<0.05)

Discussion

The results add to the understanding of testing effects by revealing that repeated low-stakes testing improves student learning. Importantly, the results also indicate when repeated testing does, and does not, aid learning.

1. Using more SRSs to answer questions improves long-term learning when students have not read about the concepts in the text.

2. Answering questions on online practice quizzes aids long-term learning more when questions on a concept are grouped together.

3. The testing effect may not only be due to retrieval processes. Instead, attentional orienting to key concepts and development of schemas, as well as storage of this information, affect how repeated testing aids learning in the classroom. In sum, although practice can make perfect through repeated low-stakes testing, this depends on how teachers design the practice.

Implications

Psychological science theories and methods can aid development of evidence-based pedagogical tools. Teachers may consider making small changes, as suggested below, to facilitate student learning:

- Have about 8 comprehension checks in class.
- Ask about text material not covered in class.
- Provide non-threatening practice quizzes.
- Group similar concepts in practice quizzes.

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