

A Case For Repetition

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A frequent student complaint is: "Teachers repeat things too often. They ought to get on to new information and delete the repeated stuff." This complaint, at times, has validity, if the primary or sole reasons for repetition are: (1) to create lecture filler due to a lack of teacher preparation; (2) the result of teacher unawareness of previous student learning experiences; or (3) if done out of poorly trained or lost professional interest habit. These are not justifiable reasons for classroom repetition. However, instructional repetition can and often does serve several positive ends. My goal here is to argue that repetition is not necessarily a wasteful practice for the teacher nor a use-less experience for students, but that prudently selected and carefully placed instructional repetition can, in fact, be effectively used as a valuable classroom teaching strategy.

I limit my claims to two classroom repetition types: (1) that repetition of material which occurs within a given class; and (2) that material redundancy which occurs from class-to-class. Admittedly, there are alternative foci of repetition that could be argued (ie: repetition employed by specific teachers, in specific subject areas, or at different levels). These discussions, however, have too many complex variables to be addressed here. Here, I limit myself to the more general and frequent classroom repetition.

Repetition within a given class may be valid in at least four ways: for prioritizing, organizing, emphasizing learning material; and for motivating students to learn more effectively. Repetition can be effectively used to prioritize relationships, concepts, consequences, and causes. Those repeated elements can be seen

to have greater weight in the learning process than those elements not repeated if the teacher plans such repetition and the students are made aware of such a strategy.

Students can be assisted in organizing presented material through the use of repetition. Major points might be repeated and summarized; intermediate points only repeated or summarized; and minor points neither repeated nor summarized. Such use of classroom repetition requires skill and consumes instructor time; but if done well, this practice usually promotes better student conceptual organization.

Another instructional repetition strategy involves repeating material that requires special emphasis. Specific examples of such emphasized items are those likely to be considered as test items, those needed for laboratory or field safety, or those needed for upcoming assignment or essay preparation. To better assist teachers in using repetition for more than one purpose at a time, the emphasizing function can be linked to the time and context in which classroom repetition occurs. That is, during times set aside for summaries or reviews, the emphasizing aspect of teacher repetition can be made clear and unambiguous to the students. Clear prefacing remarks may also be employed to set off repetition for emphasis. Some teachers habitually emit recognizable non-verbal cues in conjunction with their repetition for emphases; thoughtful care must be exercised here not to mislead students.

Lastly, intra-class repetition can be instructionally useful in motivating students to explore subject matter that enhances comprehension, expands retention, and/or better focuses their attention. Repetition can be used as a guiding, focusing, or interest inducing strategy. Care needs to be used in this regard not to overdo repeating

so as to avoid its losing its impact and utility.

Repetition in a given class, then, can be used to assist students prioritize, organize, and emphasize material, and as a motivation force as well. The second major use of effective classroom repetition involves presentation of material between multiple classes.

Class-to-class repetition advantages also incorporate the four strategies discussed in the earlier part of this essay. There are four additional facets of repetition that are common in multi-class settings. These include: (1) demonstrations of the universality of certain ideas, tools, mental constructs, problem solving strategies, and outcomes; (2) generalizability of concepts and results across time, place, and circumstance; (3) the dominance of certain material being presented due to its saliency, general acceptance, or cogency; and reinforcement of repeated ideas; and (4) refinement and new perspective offered to select concepts. Repeating particular ideas exemplifies and focuses universalities, generalities, a dominance of certain principles, axioms, theories, or outcomes, and provides for refinements to ideas. These points of commonality may not be so obvious to students without employing repetition.

All material previously covered in other classes is not equally retained by students; however, reinforcement of needed material gleaned from other classes can be achieved through judicial repetition. Repeating one overriding concept can, and often does, stimulate and facilitate the recall and examination of other related ideas.

Presenting old material in new contexts, in varied settings, and under differing circumstances promotes students viewing ideas in multiple perspectives and enhances their opportunities for concept refinement.

We see, then, that inter-class repetition can demonstrate concept generalities and dominance; reinforce previously learned subject matter; and illustrate new perspectives or add useful refinements to already known material. Repetition has been shown to be useful in the classroom both within given classes and between classes.