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## Rote is an essential feature of teaching and learning

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Rote is an essential feature of teaching and learning

Emeritus Professor Don Watts and Professor Keith McNaught

Can we find a logical explanation for why we expect that those seeking to learn in school and then to proceed to university will have gifts of such a scale that hard work is unnecessary?

A significant part of the commentary on the outcomes of schooling suggests that 'learning by rote' should have no place in contemporary teaching. There is a widely held view that rote learning is an historical hangover in teaching and learning. Learning by repetitive confrontation with factual material is seen as a waste of brain capacity at a time when computer-based information services better serve one's information needs. This fails to recognise that some things must be learned and mastered and be available for immediate application, particularly those facts and experiences that form the foundation for the development of concepts and theory and of more sophisticated understandings.

There are facts, relationships, theories and concepts that must be learned, by rote since they form essential parts of students' inventories as they progress through the sequences that lead to understanding. There is potentially a relationship between the loss of rote learning of rhymes, poems and chants in the early education years and the recent dramatic increase in auditory processing disorders.

These observations demand a more enlightened discussion about what we should be teaching our children so they have understandings and factual knowledge that enhance their options for success in further study and training. These assets enrich their lives in terms of employment options and empower them to make informed judgments on the many complex issues that face a participatory democracy.

The recognition of the sequential relationships within knowledge in the planning of learning is critical. When ignored, planned learning is replaced by teaching through a smorgasbord of seemingly unrelated experiences. It is thus by ignoring the importance of sophistication in the conceptual development of disciplines that syllabi become burdened by the demand for the teaching and re-teaching of seemingly unrelated material.

The teaching of subjects as a sequence of

unrelated learning challenges seems to be possible in some learning areas, at least for a period of time. These subjects are seen in schools as 'easy'.

Subjects often mislabelled as 'hard' are simply those where linear and sequential learning is of critical importance. The 'easy' subjects, in contrast, tend to present a collection of material tainted by faddish ideas and undemanding content based on social commentary.

The 'hard' subjects demand the mastery of an essential core of sequential knowledge which brings coherence and understanding to what otherwise would be unrelated factual rote learning. Subjects, such as mathematics and the physical sciences are not necessarily more difficult but demand that mastery of previous learning has been achieved. It is this mastery ☐

There is little assessment that attempts to examine absolute standards of achievement. The scores we give our children are almost entirely based on a comparison with their peers'. Ranking of scores produces a distribution of marks for a population and the score follows from a child's position in that population. Many parents would validly express concerns if they were made aware of how many of the learning objectives their children failed to meet. They would only be partly relieved if they were told that a high percentage failed to meet more objectives than their child. Our greater concern is that by neglecting the place of rote learning we are, in effect, setting the bar too low. We fail to challenge too many of our children in the critical middle school years.

There was merit in the old ways in which children were told they had 'failed'. This information did no harm if supportive attitudes and endeavour led to new levels of effort. Too few school reports confront parents and students with the realities and thus support complacency. Boss and Sims (2008, p. 135) state: 'To live is to experience failure. There appears