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The Difference Between Thinking and Knowing

Memorization doesn't deserve its bad name.

by Claudia Winkler
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A RECENT PIECE in Newsweek prompts an editor to reflect on that subversive phrase "rote memorization."

Reporter Paul Mooney uses the term--correctly, for once--in his story on the revival of Confucian education in China. Five-year-olds, it seems, are being taught to recite the Confucian classics by heart. Explains an official at the National Studies School in Beijing, "They don't necessarily understand what they're reciting. But gradually it will have an impact on their thinking." Critics, writes Mooney, complain that China's schools already suffer from "too much rote memorization, not too little."

To learn "by rote," according to Webster's dictionary, is to learn "by memory alone, without understanding or thought." That would appear to be exactly what the Beijing school has in mind: Plant precepts in small children's heads, and you'll shape their thinking and their actions as they grow.

But not all memorization is learning by rote. To commit something to memory isn't necessarily to learn it "without understanding or thought." As anyone knows who's tried it, retaining facts is much easier when you see how they fit into a larger picture that makes sense.

Yet in a subtle bit of linguistic sleight of hand, the pejorative term "rote memorization" is commonly used as synonymous with memorization tout court. It's almost always contrasted with comprehension and critical thinking--as if knowing things and thinking about things were mutually exclusive.

Thus, to cite an altogether commonplace example, an article praising a new schoolbook on local history, in the Queens edition of Newsday, notes, "Activities in the booklet



Claudia Winkler, managing editor

draw on an array of skills, stressing thinking and analysis over rote memorization of facts."

One can't help wondering what it is the children are to analyze--what exactly they are to think about--if their starting point is not to be a command of the specifics recounted in the book.

This conflation of mindless, blab-school, learning-by-rote with the necessary, if sometimes painful, committing of information to memory has a sordid effect: to dress up ignorance as superior thoughtfulness. Implicitly, it disparages the intake of knowledge--once the very essence of classroom learning--as an activity fit only for drones.

I give the last, depressing word to Kay Hymowitz, a seasoned critic of American child-rearing and the author of [Ready Or Not: What Happens When We Treat Children as Small Adults](#). In her review in the June issue of Commentary of two new books about high schools, she's

clearly talking about an educational scene where facts are out and analysis is in when she asks:

"Why, then, do so many middle-class Americans now act as if education is nothing more than a 'game'? . . . Along with any serious commitment to subjects like English and history, the idea of education as a way to sharpen mental discipline, to cultivate higher cultural interests, or to teach civic principles has simply disappeared."

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