



Mind Your Memory

by JUDY BERANGER

Have you ever pondered how the memories you choose to hold on to can influence your present and future behaviours, and indeed your overall life? Memories such as the 9/11 attack and what was happening in our schools that day is but one example. As we share the memories of hearing the broadcast with others who were with us, some of the details now differ significantly. If we were to discuss these memories again in five or ten years, the differences would increase still further. Imagine what can happen to the memories that we consider much less significant! Wikipedia asserts that memory is not a perfect processor and that it is affected by many factors. This is especially true when linked with our emotional state at the time. If we are anxious or not giving full attention when a memory is being formed, it will be altered.

Dr. F. Brynie, author of *Brain Sense: The Science of the Senses and How We Process the World Around Us*, says that memory has a distinct, negativity bias. It highlights unpleasant experiences. Scientists suggest this is due to an evolutionary adaptation of always being on guard, watching for danger, known as the “flight or fight” response. As teachers, this gives us insight, not only into our own reactions to stressful situations, but to those of our students. This automatic defensive behavior can cause us to unconsciously get caught up in complaining and finger pointing using a selective memory that may or may not be accurate. Negative experiences leave an indelible trace in the memory, even when efforts are made to “unlearn” them. Author Doug Johnston says, “there is nothing in the world that clings like a memory that stings!” Blaming and complaining about others – just in our mind – is enough to cause collateral damage to ourselves and to others.

Regardless of how our day is unfolding, the challenge is to stay strong and focused to ensure we are creating meaningful memories. We need to be very cautious when other people try to convince us of their negative version of a reality when we know it is not our version. If we are not careful, their version of reality might influence our own memories. If we have a choice between being right or being kind, being

kind will stimulate the gentlest memory that brings joy in the recall – tough though that may be to do at the time. Ancestral aboriginal leader Chief Seattle reminds us that we did not weave the web of life, we are only a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

The Memory Illusion

In her book, *The Memory Illusion*, Julia Shaw suggests that we sometimes change details of events in our recall. She says that even cherished memories are prone to alteration and that we can be convinced that we experienced things that either did not happen to us or did not happen at all. There is significant literature that refers to this distinction. Take, for example, what children can go through if their parents have had an acrimonious divorce and the children become estranged from one of their parents. In some cases, this may go on for a lifetime as the children grow into adulthood and maintain their loyalty to the parent who supports the distancing. Our version of reality can, and often is influenced by another’s version. However, with self-reflection and re-examination, we can explore and choose actions that create memories that are more life giving. We can focus on making it a positive version to stimulate our ability to make the best of the best of each day.

The Human Memory website reminds us that our memories are formed in several different areas of the brain that act in conjunction with one another. If there is any damage or deterioration in any of these areas, our memories will be compromised to some degree. The simple act of riding a bike, for example, is reconstructed by the brain from many different areas: the memory of how to operate the bike, of how to get from here to the end of the block, of biking safety rules, and the memory of that nervous feeling when a car veers dangerously close, all come from different areas of the brain.

Memories Are Flexible

Our memories are flexible. We can learn from, or move away from, old memories. As teachers we try to learn from our mistakes and encourage our stu-

dents to do likewise. We can rewrite information when better information comes along and update our memory banks regularly. Most of us would agree that a student's behaviour allows us to see a glimpse of their mind at that point in time. If behaviours are disrespectful and angry we can be assured the student's default memories are negative. If students, or ourselves for that matter, are distressed, whether we realize it or not, we are likely caught up in painful memories.

Dr. Jeremy Dean and memory expert, Robert Bjork, tell us that:

- Research demonstrates how sleep makes the memory stronger. During sleep the brain restructures and reorganizes our memories.
- We need to ignore stereotypes. If you think your memory will get much worse with age, then it probably will.
- People's memories are much stronger for posts on Facebook than for sentences from books, or even people's faces. Facebook posts were easier to remember because they were in an easily digestible format and written in spontaneous speech. As teachers we are trying to help each other, and our students understand how important it is to be mindful of what we write on Facebook and careful of what we choose to read.
- We can reduce the impact of troublesome memories. Studies have shown that people can crowd out painful negative memories by focusing on more positive ones. This is more likely if people can address, get help if needed, and eventually let go of hurtful memories.

Most days teachers choose an optimistic lens through which to see the world. They understand how choices can impact memory and thus behavior. We also understand how quickly that lens can change. If someone says something hurtful about another teacher and then another person adds to this unkind input, memories will be impacted regardless of reality. Even if a compassionate person walks in at this point and tries to reframe, it is likely that a negative perception will persist.

Mannie, for example, went through a hurtful divorce with a partner who was going to "make him pay". His favorite brother took sides with the former in-law, sharing gossip and acting disloyal. "Memories" were created with other family members based on one-sided perceptions and distortions. Mannie came to be seen through a muddled lens by other family members until they participated in a helpful mediation experience that facilitated a clearer understanding.

Author Tara Thean says the phenomenon of false

memories is common to everyone. Martha, for example, was sure she attended a birthday party with her friends in 1999. Her sister reminded her she had been home sick that night. Martha's friends talked about this party so often it had made its way into her memory. Accurate memory recall tends to contain detail – especially sensory detail like smell, sound, touch, sight and taste.

Nora's parents split up when she was in grade three and she and her two siblings lived away with their Mom. Three years later one of the older siblings went to live with the Dad. Twenty years later the family were all shocked that Nora had no memory of her older sibling ever living with them for the first three years after the family restructured. False memories can sometimes be a mere curiosity, but other times they have real implications and can compromise what might have been beautiful relationships.

All Behaviour Has Meaning

All behavior has meaning, and the memories of past behavior can influence future actions. When siblings share family stories they are often surprised that the stories about the same event are so different. As they talk this through they realize their relationships, and how they were thinking and feeling at the time, all had an impact on their memory.

Lawrence Patihis of the University of California, reported that researchers believe no one is immune to memory distortion – memory is fragile, malleable and prone to errors – for all of us. Memory is more efficient and accurate when we are not anxious or stressed. We need to encourage our students and each other to be mindful of the memories we create. A goal to focus on highlighting people's helpful behaviors and strengths is achievable. Participating in conversations that are necessary, helpful and respectful will also create powerful new memories of empathy and appreciation.

We can further support students and colleagues by being the catalyst to build compassionate memories and strong loyalty. Most importantly of all, we can remind our students and each other that these are the kinds of mindful memories that will give us a gentle place to rest.

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