



How to Improve Learning by Connecting the Dots

by Michael Dean, Ph.D., TFS Author

Even in college, students are often asked to memorize details for exams that seem (to the students) to have little connection to anything. The students memorize the details, regurgitate them for a test and then move on to the next set of mindless facts, forgetting the previously learned information. Understanding and retention of material are important issues, especially when the information may show up on a preliminary exam for a student entering graduate school.



In my classes, I attack this problem by ensuring that my students understand how information they learn fits into the larger scheme of things, i.e. see the big picture and connect the dots.

For example, in music history I emphasize a basic outline of the major periods in music history (Baroque, Classical, Romantic, etc.) and then show the students the specific details. It's easier to see and remember the significance of the programmatic style of Beethoven's 6th Symphony (the "Pastoral") when it is understood that Beethoven was a transitional figure (both timeline-wise as well as musically) between the absolute music of the Classical era of Mozart and Haydn and the programmaticism of Romantic era composers such as Berlioz and Liszt.

I have also found this approach effective in private lessons, music-appreciation classes, and other teaching situations. So, be sure to let your students see the big picture.