

Learn How To Study The Right Amount

The student has accomplished much when he has discovered some of the closer relations that a topic bears to life; when he has supplemented the thought of the author; when he has determined the relative importance of different parts and given them a corresponding organization; when he has passed judgment on their soundness and general worth; and when, finally, he has gone through whatever drill is necessary to fix the ideas firmly in his memory.

Is he then through with a topic, or is more work to be done? Digestion of food is likewise a long process, the food having to be acted upon in various ways in the mouth, the stomach, and the intestines. But with food there is always a certain end to be reached, called assimilation, which is the actual changing of its nutriment into the solids and liquids of our bodies. Is there a similarly definite end to be reached in the study process?

It must be admitted that while we can define this end somewhat sharply in words, it is very difficult to know when it has been actually reached. Many a business man has felt convinced that he understood a certain business project perfectly, until the outcome has proved the contrary. Business failures are largely due to such deception. Even highly educated men are often surprised at their want of mastery of questions that they had supposed to be fully within their grasp.

Socrates spent much of his time bringing such surprises to the promising but overconfident young men of Athens. Robert Y. Hayne, the distinguished champion of nullification, no doubt experienced such a surprise when Webster delivered his great speech on that subject. The actual mastery of subjects is perhaps never complete; it is only relative. Even a child may have as good a grasp of one subject as a philosopher has of another, and each may be deceived in regard to the extent of his understanding.

The common ignorance as to how much study is necessary for the mastery of knowledge is suggested by the common ignorance as to how much work is necessary for the assimilation of food. It takes from three to five hours for food that has been eaten to get beyond the stomach, and people ordinarily assume that the assimilative process is pretty well completed by that time.

The fact is, however, that it is then only well begun; for it requires from ten to twelve hours to dispose fully of a meal, and most of the work of digestion takes place after the food leaves the stomach. "While the assimilation of knowledge is what the student is supposed to aim at, how much that involves is even less understood.

In the digestion of food our organisms provide for themselves, so that we do not need to worry greatly over some ignorance of the process. But our responsibility in the assimilation of knowledge is much greater, for that does not go on uninterruptedly even while we sleep; it will possibly be carried only so far as we have the energy and insight to take it.

That being the case, it is very easy for one to stop too soon in the study of a topic. For instance, when a lesson in history has been only memorized, the digestive process has been carried little further than physical digestion has been taken when food reaches the stomach. That is, it is barely begun. Yet very many young people stop near this point, and they sometimes even take credit to themselves for getting so far.

We might add comprehension of the thought to the work of memorizing and still be far from the end. We can have comprehended and memorized the Beatitudes, for example, and be as free from any effect from them as the proverbial duck's back is from the effect of water. We can pass good examinations in psychology and logic with the same absence of influence. That certainly does not signify assimilation. Assimilation means the spiritual nourishment that is received by making new thought homogeneous with one's own thought, by making it an integral part of one's self.

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