

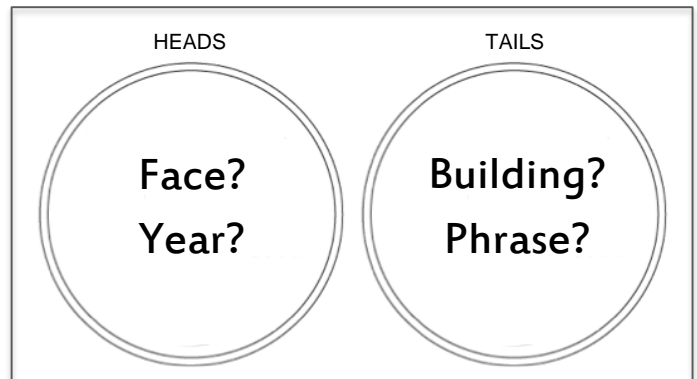
A Penny for Your Thoughts

Demonstrating the Importance of Meaning

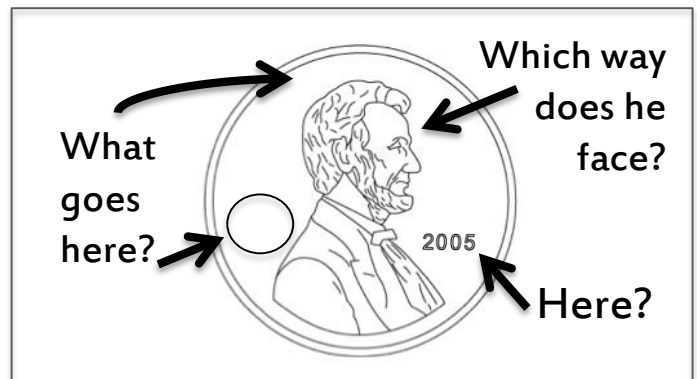
Students often read material once and expect it to be filed away in their memory.

This demonstration shows how significant meaning and context are to remembering material, and that simply reading it won't guarantee learning.

1. Instruct students to draw two circles on a notecard.
2. Give them two minutes to draw both sides of a penny, the left circle "heads" and the right "tails."
3. The objective is not for artistic ability, but for accuracy in replicating the information.



Even seeing something as simple as a penny one thousand times will not enable them to recreate it from memory perfectly.



If they can't do this, how will they ever remember material from the class?

By making the material matter.

Connecting it to other topics, putting it in context, and looking at it from different angles.

See the answers to this activity and read the in-class results at
oakland.edu/teachingtips

A Penny for Your Thoughts - Demonstrating the Importance of Meaning

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Students often read material once and expect it to be filed away in their memory. This is a demonstration that shows how significant meaning and context are to remembering material, and that simply reading it won't guarantee the student is learning it.

Activity

Give the students a blank 3" x 5" card and instruct them to draw two circles on one side of the card. The circles should be quite large, taking up most of the card (an example card is useful). Have them put away their laptops, phones...and pocket change.

Using the two circles, now instruct the students that they will have one to two minutes to draw both sides of a penny. Tell them the left circle is to be "heads" and then imagine that they flip the penny over horizontally and the circle on the right is "tails." The objective is not for artistic ability, but for accuracy in replicating the information.

Don't make the mistake of providing examples that give away information, such as "which side is the date on?" or "which side is the head facing, right or left?" Give them time to do their best and then when time is up have them switch with their neighbor. If you're daring, attempt this yourself before looking at the answers below.

It's easiest to project the image of both sides of a penny, annotated with the criteria we will be looking for. There are essentially ten items they should have been able to correctly identify:

"Heads" side

- 1) A profile of a man
- 2) The profile facing to the right
- 3) "Liberty" to the left of the profile
- 4) A date to the right of the profile
- 5) "In God We Trust" above the profile
- 6) A letter below the date to indicate the mint mark

"Tails" side

(Revised in 2010 but effectively changing the Lincoln memorial to a shield will suffice)

- 7) Lincoln memorial in the center
- 8) "One Cent" below the monument
- 9) "United States of America" is at the very top
- 10) "E Pluribus Unum" is below "United States of America," but above the monument

Bonus point

- 11) Noting that if the penny is flipped horizontally the "tails" side will be upside down

Ask the class if anyone is holding a "10," in my experience (with a class of nearly 90) there wasn't a single perfect card. The highest might be 7 or 8. The students are not currently holding their own card, so hopefully they won't be anxious to respond.

Finally, it's important to present the underlying meaning of this activity. If a student is 20 years old, they may have been handling money for ten years. If they handled money once per week, and each time there was two pennies, this is over a thousand times they will have seen a penny.

Surely it's more, we see them on the ground, in cup holders—they're ubiquitous. But even if we are very conservative in the estimate, seeing something as simple as a penny one thousand times did not enable them to recreate it from memory. If they can't do this, how will they ever remember material from the class? By making the material matter. Connecting it to other topics, putting it in context, and looking at it from different angles.

Reference

This demonstration was created for the orientation of first year pharmacy students within a study skills prep session. Inspiration for this exercise came from *Why Don't Students Like School* by Daniel T. Willingham. A figure in the book presents the "heads" side of a penny with twenty different variations. It then asks the reader to pick out the correct penny.