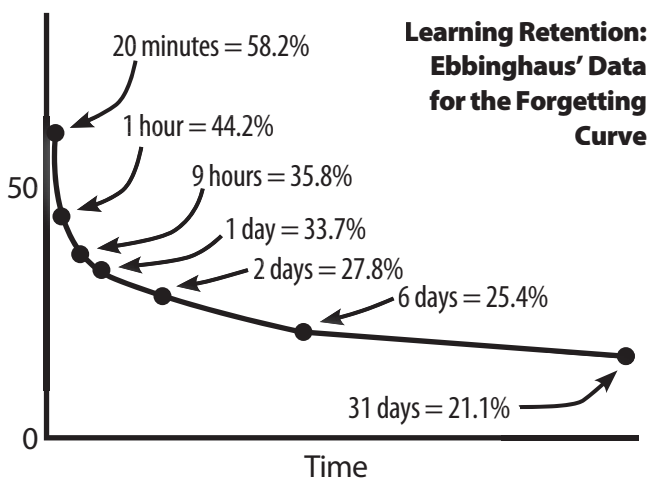




THE CHALLENGE IS TO EXTEND LEARNING INTO THE WORKPLACE

‘REAL’ LEARNING: THE ROLE OF CONTEXT

In 1885, Herman Ebbinghaus, a German psychologist, carried out an experiment that led to the formulation of the famous Ebbinghaus Forgetting Curve. Many people know of the experiment and that the Forgetting Curve suggests adults will remember less than 50 percent of what they’ve learned within an hour of learning unless they have the opportunity to reinforce and practice it during or immediately afterwards.



However, as well as providing an insight into the relative frailty of human memory Ebbinghaus’ results can tell us a lot about how we might construct environments to improve both the effectiveness and the efficiency of learning. And most of it has to do with context.

Dispelling Some ‘Learning’ Myths

Learning is best described as “the ability to acquire new ideas from experience and retain them as memories.” That’s how Eric Kandel, distinguished professor and founding director of the department of neuroscience at Columbia University, defined the term. Kandel won the Nobel Prize for his research on the physiological basis of memory storage in nerve cells. This work was fundamental to our understanding of what I call “real” learning.

Kandel wasn’t talking about the learning where we can commit something to short-term memory and retain it until we have completed the post-course assessment. He was referring to learning as behavior change.

Learning as Behavior Change

Learning is a process that changes the way we interact with the world. It may be something as simple as learning that fire is hot and touching it hurts, or something as complex as how to go about solving a quadratic equation. Either way this learning will result in behavior change. We learn, we modify our behavior in response to the learning and, as a result, our actions and performance change, usually for the better.

The “learning” by improving the score we get in post-course tests over pre-tests isn’t necessarily what I would call “real” learning. If the spacing of pre-test, course or module content, and post-test is short then what we may think is learning is more likely to be simple short-term memory retention.

Context is Critical

Only by applying newly-acquired knowledge and skill in the context of work will it become embedded in long-term memory and lead to real behavior change and performance improvement. The role of both practice and context is critical for real learning. Ebbinghaus discovered this in 1885. Many appear to have subsequently forgotten this fact.

The role of context is the most important aspect of Ebbinghaus’ work. Ebbinghaus identified his Forgetting Curve through experiments where what was being committed to memory (or learned) had no context whatsoever – in fact he set out to have meaningless strings of letters and numbers memorized. He found that humans forget very quickly without context.

This presents a challenge for training professionals. Most formal learning takes place away from where the learned knowledge and skill is to be used – in a different context. So the challenge is to extend learning into the workplace.

The Ebbinghaus experiment also explains the fact that achievement in post-course assessment doesn’t often correlate to workplace performance improvement.

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