THE UNIVERSITY of NORTH CAROLINA GREENSBORO
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# A Diction Teacher's Journey to Bring Learning Science into the Classroom

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## INTRODUCTION

As singers and teachers of singing, our focused work in the voice studio and classroom affords us few opportunities to learn about how our human brains work and to study discoveries in learning theory; we often leave this research to our colleagues in the music education field. However, a 2014 book that provides an accessible and practical summary of recent important and often counterintuitive findings about learning offers us just such an opportunity. *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning* by Peter C. Brown, Henry L. Roediger III, and Mark A. McDaniel changed how I thought about learning – both my students' and my own – and caused me to restructure my teaching in the diction classroom to employ learning theory to help my students succeed.

## FAST FACTS ABOUT LEARNING

***A Summary of Key Ideas in Make It Stick***

- As humans, our greatest barriers to learning are our own beliefs about learning itself, not genetically predetermined factors.
- Good, true learning requires effort, sometimes referred to as "desirable difficulties."
- Durable, lasting learning is best created by practice that involves testing, variation, and space.
- Students must be taught how to study and learn.
- Research shows that the best method for learning materials is "retrieval practice" with interleaved subjects and sufficient time between sessions for some forgetting to occur.
- Generative learning – struggling with a problem before being shown how to solve it – produces stronger learning.
- Counterintuitively, errors made in early learning are not retained when corrective feedback is given. In fact, errors made in early learning may even produce better learning.
- Stronger learning also requires placing knowledge in a meaningful context.
- Peer instruction is an effective way to allow students to generate their own answers, creating longer lasting learning.
- Learning requires a "growth mindset;" teaching this to our students will allow them to increase their own abilities and achieve learning previously inaccessible to them.

## BRINGING *MAKE IT STICK* INTO THE DICTION CLASSROOM

### • EXPLAIN TO STUDENTS HOW LEARNING WORKS

I begin by introducing ideas about learning in the first week of class: while discussing the usual policies in the syllabus, I share with students that research shows that one of the first steps in learning is believing that one is capable of learning.

### • TEACH STUDENTS HOW TO STUDY

To teach students how to study, I explain to them that simply rereading a list of rules in a textbook, a common "study" method, will not help them learn those rules effectively. Instead, diction is a perfect subject for the simplest form of retrieval practice: flashcards. I develop IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) word lists for each unit, including "cue" words illustrating rules as well as exceptions if appropriate to the language. From these lists, I create a bank with these words on Quizlet, a free online flashcard site. Students can then use the Quizlet app or website to access the digital flashcards and engage in retrieval practice.

### • CREATE DESIRABLE DIFFICULTIES

To create desirable difficulties, the students have brief quizzes during every class session that account for a small percentage of their overall grade. Each quiz requires students to provide IPA transcriptions for 15 to 20 words from the word bank, a sufficiently difficult task to help solidify their learning.

### • ALLOW OPPORTUNITIES FOR ERRORS

Students grade their own quizzes in-class, providing feedback and an opportunity to correct their own mistakes. This low- (but not no-) stakes situation provides students with a testing opportunity before they completely master new concepts, giving them a chance to solidify their learning by making an error and having it corrected.

### • TEST MATERIAL MULTIPLE TIMES

In order to encourage spaced retrieval – continued engagement with a subject over time – I add new words to the word bank after each class without removing the old ones, allowing words to accumulate throughout the semester. All quizzes include both old and new material.

### • INCORPORATE PEER INSTRUCTION

I incorporate peer instruction into the classroom by having students correct their homework (graded only for completion) in small groups composed of students with varying natural aptitudes for diction. In this way, students work together towards right answers, correcting their own mistakes and hearing ideas and memory tips from their colleagues. (This method also vastly reduces the amount of time spent in class reviewing homework!)

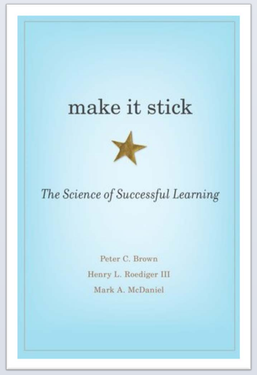
### • PROVIDE A MEANINGFUL CONTEXT

To provide a meaningful context for lyric diction in the classroom, we listen to song literature in the language we are studying. Instead of merely analyzing a performer's diction in a recorded song, we read and briefly discuss the translated poetry and also take time to enjoy the beauty of the music, the communicative art that drives us to study countless rules of pronunciation. In a German Diction course, this greater context culminated in a final sung exam of an intimate Lieder concert in the recital hall, allowing students to share their newfound diction skills in the beautiful songs of Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, and others.

## CONCLUSIONS

Lyric diction courses do not lend themselves to the scientific study of learning theory: the idea of a randomized study of student learning of diction before and after I made these changes in my teaching is, unfortunately, a bit impossible given the small available sample size. Anecdotally, my students have retained more of their learning from my classes after I incorporated these new ideas into my teaching, and I hope they have also taken what they learned about the process of learning into their other studies.

As teachers whose charge and passion is to help students learn, we would be remiss to ignore the overwhelming data available from learning theory and not to attempt to bring it into our own classrooms and studios.




## WORK CITED

Brown, Peter C., Henry L. Roediger, and Mark A. McDaniel. *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning*. Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard, 2014.

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