Improving memory strategies by using the method of loci

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Student Success 100
Studying mind psychology in Dr. Sara’s classroom, I became acquainted with a particular mnemonic called the method of loci. The teacher gave an example of the method, by giving us a grocery list of approximately 20 items on it, and then asked us how many we could recall. The teacher then gave us a different grocery list by way of telling us some really weird story about pork chops soaking in the bathtub, ice cream in the fireplace, and sugar in the carpet. Not only did I remember a much higher percentage of the list, I was still able to remember the list 2 weeks later. Looking at the history, various studies, and the method itself, we can determine how the loci method can improve our memory. By implementing the method of loci as a study technique, we can improve our long-term memory retention.

The term loci: derived from the Latin word locus, means “place” (Fleet et al, 1999). The method of loci uses mental imagination to encode and retrieve a list of words from your memory in serial order, by associating words with places. A comparison study was done over a 16-month timeframe between younger (18-30 Years) and older (65-80 Years) adults to determine their ability to use the method of loci, and their overall memory retention. The results were phenomenal. Although the older adults preformed at a lower level than the younger adults, the older adults found they were able to retain the information they were given (Baltes and Klieval, 1992).

Sinclair, Healy, and Bourne (1989) did a study in 1983 to determine how logical and illogical pauses in sentences affected our recollection of the sentence. Sinclair, Healy, and Bourne hypothesized that memory retention should be the same, but during experimentation found that the opposite was true. We tend to try to think logically, and regardless of what mnemonic associations we use to retrieve the data, we need to be able to visualize the data
(Sinclair et al, 1989). When our teacher told us that ice cream was in the fireplace in our walk around the house, we could fathom it because even though it made no sense, our minds were able to visualize it and therefore (our minds) found it plausible. “An analysis of variance was preformed on proportion of correct responses with the between-subjects of display duration (250 ms, 150 ms per word) and the within-subject factors of pause condition (meaningful, no pause plus time, and word pause), and question type (general, specific). The analysis yielded a significant main effect” “with a higher proportion of correct responses for the specific questions.” (Sinclair et al, 1989)

As a student, we can use this mnemonic to further our ability in our studies and improve our test results. For example: a psychology student familiar with the Southern Ontario area needed to know Albert Ellis’s 7 irrational beliefs. This person could remember the key words (loved, competent, wicked, avoid, past, “not the way”, and externally) by remembering the following 7 cities: London, Cambridge, Waterloo, Amherstburg, Petersburg, Niagara, & Exeter (Fleet et al, 1999). Because the first letters are the same, there is a logical agreement in our minds. As we are familiar with the area, we are able to retrieve the information easily. Therefore, our minds will not have difficulty making the association between Exeter & Externally or the other associations, as they are very similar in nature.

Learning and understanding the principals of loci, I decided to perform a little science experiment. I got a friend of mine to pick up a list of about 10 items, and told her what they were. An hour later, my subject phoned me asking me what four of the items on the list were. The next day, I gave her the same task again (with different items on the list), but through a short casual conversation, made her visualize going into the “places” that she needed to go and the route to take through town to determine whether she would associate
the place with the item(s) that she needed to acquire. She got all the items on the list without needing to phone. Obviously, our experiment was a success.

Why does the method of loci work? Freud argues that our unconscious acts as a repository from our past (Olick and Robbins, 1998). When I remember a conversation that I have incurred, I tend to associate the conversation with where the conversation took place. By using this strategy when trying to learn new material, we are able to make mind associations that are otherwise illogical appear logical in our minds. This being the case, by associating the present to events (places) from the past, we are able to improve our short and long term memory retention.

