

Hit the Save Button on Learning: Using Dopamine to Boost Learning



Have you ever had a student raise their hand asking you to explain something that you explained in length just a day or two ago?

You find yourself questioning whether that particular student was present on the day you gave what you felt was a very organized and clear presentation of the content. You realize that the student was in fact there and you even remember making eye contact with them as you moved across the front of the room lecturing that very topic in detail.

So why does it appear that just a few short days later, they seem not to have absorbed any of the information that they were present for? What is it that makes students lock on to the content that we teach? In discovering the answer, we must take our focus off of what we are teaching and shift it to what and how students are actually learning.

Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that plays a critical role in higher levels of learning as it allows the brain not only to pick up information but to retain it. The absence of it leads to the inability to concentrate so that we can recall it later on. Dopamine is closely tied to the feelings of falling in love as well as the “rush” one feels when they are taking risks or winning. Dopamine is responsible for the thrill behind new experiences. It is also to blame for the addictive nature of drugs as the brain is flooded with dopamine in cases of substance abuse.

Because dopamine is responsible for our brain’s reward system, some students will retain new information better because they are excited to learn. To these students, acquiring knowledge is

thrilling, and an adventure and with that, the levels of dopamine is increased and released enabling them to stay focused.

What does this mean for the student who despite being present in your class seemed to absorb nothing? Scientifically speaking, that student wasn't excited to learn. They were physically present but lacked the motivation thus resulting in the absence of dopamine being released in their brain to help them concentrate.

As teachers, how can we ensure that dopamine is present so that we can hit that "save button" in our students' brains?

If dopamine thrives on excitement, then we need to make learning thrilling and as novel as a new adventure. This allows us the opportunity to present the content in an innovative way thus also enhancing our own dopamine levels. When we are excited to teach, they will be excited to learn. Rely on technology and new textbooks if you are fortunate to have them to put a spin on the way you would traditionally teach.

Make lessons fun by turning traditional review activities and memorization drills into games. Create special flashcards that will take no time at all and turn the exercise into a game of Jeopardy. And instead of quizzes on paper, turn the lesson into a competitive quiz game as you as the quizmaster and the students broken into teams who are asked questions based on the topic. Instead of announcing the upcoming assessment, get your students excited about demonstrating their knowledge.

Make learning exciting by getting your students involved! Get the students to develop and lead the game with you, the teacher, as a participant! When the students feel how empowering it is to ask questions they know the answer to, they will be driven by the excitement. Dopamine is also released when the brain is challenged. And what could be more challenging than stumping the teacher!

Recalling the effects that drugs have on the brain's dopamine levels, it is studied that children and adults alike find compliments and praise addictive. Ask a simple question that you know most of your students would know the answer to someone who ordinarily doesn't participate. Guide them to the answer and praise them in front of the class. This will boost the dopamine in their brain, reinforcing their desire to answer correctly the next time they are asked.

Allow yourself this opportunity to explore alternative ways to present your class the content that is new and exciting for everyone. Both you and your students will benefit from the rush of dopamine to your brains!

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