

Book title: Why Don't Students Like School?

Author: Daniel T. Willingham

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1. What is your overall impression of the book?

The subtitle says it all: "A cognitive scientist answers questions about how the mind works and what it means for the classroom". The mind is the greatest mystery in the universe. It is the object, the reason, the pretext to persistent and consistent scientific investigations. We have learned more about how the mind works in the last 25 years than we did in the previous 25 hundred.

From that statement, we easily understand how the greater knowledge of the mind would bring out important benefits to education. Surely understanding the students' cognitive equipment would make teaching easier or more effective. However, the gap between research and practice is understandable (e.g. all the studies agree to say that repetition is a fantastic tool for learning in the classroom, but it is terrible for motivation!)

Through a list of 9 questions, the author, professor of psychology, takes us through a variety of subjects in pursuit of 2 goals: 1- to tell you how your student's mind works, 2- to clarify how to use that knowledge to be a better teacher.

2. Who do you think would benefit most from reading the book? What will they learn?

This book is widely accessible, despite the "scientific" connotation. It gives a range of ideas on how to implement teachers' work in the classroom taking into consideration the mind of your students.

Teachers but also parents, educators, carers, will learn how the mind works and will have some answers to adults' common questions, as "why does he remember everything about what he has seen on TV and nothing at school?"

3. What did you think about the quality of the writing? Please consider the tone, structure and ideas. Does it suit the audience?

The author, professor of psychology is using an accessible vocabulary. Even though he is talking about the mind, and by extension the brain, the book remains readable from a large public.

The book splits into 9 chapters, is answering 9 questions and it is easy to follow the author's explanations and experiences. He uses scientific review, analysis and experimentations to justify his saying:

1. Why don't students like school?
2. How can I teach students the skills they need when standardised tests require only facts?
3. Why do students remember everything that's on television and forget everything I say?

4. Why is it so hard for students to understand abstract ideas?
5. Is drilling worth it?
6. What's the secret to getting students to think like real scientists, mathematicians and historians?
7. How should I adjust my teaching for different types of learners?
8. How can I help slow learners?
9. What about my mind?

At the end of each chapter, the author recaps the questions of the beginning and gives a conclusion summarising his thoughts.

4. Please discuss the research used to underpin the ideas. What evidence does the author use? Is it robust and up-to-date?

Contrary to popular belief, the brain is not designed for thinking. It's designed to save you from having to think: thinking is slow and unreliable. "People are naturally curious, but we are not naturally good thinkers; unless the cognitive conditions are right, we will avoid thinking".

Knowing that, teachers should reconsider how they encourage their students to think. We don't think, we rely on memory. Most of the problems we face are ones we've solved before. We normally think of memory as storing personal events (memories of my wedding), facts (George Washington was the 1st president of the US), strategies to guide what we should do (where to turn when driving home, how to handle a minor dispute,...)

But despite all, we like challenging our mind, we like to solve problems. So in the classroom, and from a cognitive perspective, what can teachers do to ensure that each student gets that pleasure?

- Be sure that there are problems to be solved
- Respect students' cognitive limits (prior knowledge/facts)
- Clarifying problems to be solved
- Change the pace

5. What did you learn from reading the book? What ideas/approaches/practice will you change or adopt as a result of reading this book?

If factual knowledge makes cognitive processes work better, the obvious implication is that we must help children learn background knowledge. HOW?

- Be sure that the knowledge base is mostly in place when critical thinking is required

- Shallow knowledge is better than no knowledge#
- Do whatever you can to get kids to read
- Knowledge must be meaningful

Why do students remember everything that is on TV? We remember things that bring about some emotional reactions, so make things interesting (style of teaching the content), power of stories.

6. Could you share a quote from the book that particularly resonated with you?

“Imagination is more important than knowledge. Einstein was wrong. Knowledge is more important because it’s a prerequisite for imagination, or at least for the sort of imagination that leads to problem solving, decision making and creativity.”