
Book Review: Make it Stick – The Science of Successful Learning

(by Peter C. Brown, Henry L. Roediger III and Mark A. McDaniel – Harvard University Press, 2014)

By: Andrey Schmidt (with Michael Armstrong and David Papau)

Rating: Five stars – 5/5

As investment advisors, lifelong learning and self-improvement are critical to our success. Make it Stick is a valuable book because it teaches us how to learn more productively. It gets a 5 star rating, primarily because of the importance of its message, and also because it is engaging and accessible. Anyone who is a “knowledge worker” whose livelihood depends on the ability to learn should find some time to read this book.

Some of the book’s key points are:

- 1) the most popular study strategies, such as rereading text and cramming, are among the least effective;
- 2) as an alternative, we should spend a substantial portion of our study time practicing retrieval of what we have learned by recalling concepts from memory;
- 3) retrieval practice is most effective when it is spaced out over time and varied to include two or more subjects;
- 4) in the classroom setting, retrieval practice should be built into lessons, especially through regular low-stakes testing;
- 5) the more effort required to retrieve information from memory, the better it is learned;
- 6) determination to learn counts for a lot. Learning can be a struggle that often involves making errors. We should view mistakes not as failures but as lessons. A fear of failure can poison learning, but struggling to learn actually helps us retain information; and
- 7) our efforts to learn physically change the brain (neuroplasticity). Our intellectual ability lies to a large degree within our own control, rather than being fixed from birth.

Personally, the biggest practical change I will be making after reading this book is to spend more time attempting to retrieve information from memory and less time rereading text. The studies this book cites clearly indicate that is the more efficient and productive learning strategy.

For me, the most interesting content in this book is the discussion of neuroplasticity – our ability to physically change our brains by learning and thinking, even at an advanced age. For example, when we practice a skill, it builds and strengthens pathways through our brains, improving strength and speed of electrical signals, and as a result, performance. Another example of neuroplasticity is the discovery by scientists that the hippocampus, where we consolidate learning and memory, is able to generate new neurons throughout our life, a phenomenon called neurogenesis. The proven phenomenon of neuroplasticity should give all of us a sense of optimism about our ability to achieve learning goals at any age.

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