



ALEX QUIGLEY

# TESTING, TESTING...

ENDLESS TESTS JUST GET IN THE WAY OF GOOD TEACHING AND LEARNING, RIGHT? WRONG, SAYS ALEX QUIGLEY – AND HERE'S WHY...

If I were to bring up the topic of testing in education, what would be the image first brought to your mind? Would it be a gloomy factory model, spewing out exam-battered students from gaping halls? Probably. You see, testing certainly has a bad reputation. It receives as bad a press as our argument-loving Secretary of State, Michael Gove, or even our erstwhile figure of fear and loathing, the Wizard of OFSTED. It is time for some redemption.

I don't mean some partial acceptance of testing as a necessary evil that we should all suffer with gritted teeth; I mean a complete rethink about the usefulness of testing. A rebranding of how they can be a boon for learning. Indeed, a full recognition that regular testing is integral to good learning and not the pantomime bad guy.

Testing can do more than just assess learning, it can significantly *enhance* learning. Successful revision is built upon a skilful use of testing, alongside other memorable approaches to learning the subject at hand.

Researchers of the science of learning, like Henry L. Roediger, III, and Jeffrey D. Karpicke, have called the evidence of the positive impact of tests on memory the 'testing effect'. In their cognitive psychology research they prove that testing regularly, as part of the learning process, is much more useful than restudying content in other ways. Simply rereading notes, or copying out information, doesn't work half as well. Students may enjoy daubing their notes with a pretty rainbow of highlighters, but the research of Karpicke should make us pause and consider our approach to revision and to learning.

Let's soften the terminology somewhat. What if we renamed testing as 'retrieval practice'? It sounds nicer – with a sheen of science too. This term focuses explicitly on the act of remembering for learning. If we are to remember significant chunks of knowledge then we need to transfer that information to our long-term memory.

Rather than sitting with the answers in front of us, as students sitting with a textbook for example, we must struggle to remember what those answers were in the first place. By undertaking the difficult act of remembering – or retrieving what they know – in test conditions, it strengthens the brain's ability to retain information in future.

It is about short term pain for long term gain.

So how do we ensure that testing is used as part of a balanced diet of approaches to revision



ALEX IS AN AHT AND SUBJECT LEADER OF ENGLISH AT HUNTINGTON SCHOOL, YORK. HE WRITES REGULAR BLOGS AT [HUNTINGENGLISH.COM](http://HUNTINGENGLISH.COM). HE IS DUE TO RELEASE 'TEACH NOW! ENGLISH: BECOMING A GREAT ENGLISH TEACHER' IN 2014.

and learning more generally? Here are some pointers to what the research has pin-pointed as the most effective approaches to successful test revision:

**Weekly tests:** Students need regular tests, spaced out appropriately. A test at the end of the week can provide the ideal time to reinforce what they know by forcing them to retrieve it from their short-term memory. It can simply be one question – not a whole test – if that is more fitting. Of course, students become familiar with the exam questions, timings and other useful strategies that can boost their confidence and exam skill.

**Quizzes:** Everyone loves a good quiz. They can prove quick marking fodder, but they can also provide the teacher with precise feedback on what the students know and have learnt. A quiz is a useful test and students typically love the competitive element. Testing need not be boring!

**Flashcards/cue cards:** These popular resources are proven to be an effective revision method as they ensure students have to retrieve the information from the cards. They are, in effect, micro-tests and they prove very effective. Do you remember 'look-cover-write-check' from when you first learnt new words? The same principles apply... because they work.

**Create the test:** There are few activities as useful for students when revising for an exam than devising their own test. It helps them to intimately understand the demands of the test itself, whilst providing you and the fellow students with a ready-made resource.

**Concept maps:** Think mind-map (without the awkward patenting issue), but with a more hierarchical structure. Start with a key topic at the top and work down. With no support resources, how far can they restructure what they know of the topic?

**Collaborative retrieval:** Testing need not be a deadening solo pursuit. Get student using flashcards together, form quiz terms or creating concept maps in small groups.

Of course, an education is about far more than passing tests. It is about a whole host of enriching opportunities – physical, mental, emotional, and sometimes even spiritual in nature. Only, a good education *is* about passing tests too. The better our students pass those tests the more opportunities we offer them students to seize a more enriching and fulfilling future. Testing works. Let's rebrand it as an essential tool in our teaching repertoire.

