A TEACH BIG ARTICLE

Once Learned, Always Used

The Teach BIG Philosophy of
Long-Term Learning

Part One

Prepared by Randi Whitney

TEACH BIG

ONCE LEARNED, ALWAYS USED

Long-Term Learning, Part One

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This is Part One of a two-part article on the Teach BIG philosophy of long-term learning. It draws on the Brain Brags teacher and curriculum guide, and it keeps the research references for every study it cites.

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THE TEACH BIG PHILOSOPHY OF LONG-TERM LEARNING

Once learned, always used.

Once learned, always used is a commitment we make in our planning, not a hope we hold about memory. Teaching the story element of setting in September should prepare students to understand characters in October, explain an event in November, revise a story in February, and interpret an unfamiliar text in May. That promise is why Brain Brags exist, and it is the heart of how we think about long-term learning.

The goal is usable knowledge. Students can explain an idea accurately, remember relevant details, distinguish it from related ideas, and decide when it will help. “We learned that once” becomes “I can explain it and use it now.”

Brain Brags give students regular opportunities to bring important learning back from memory and put it to work. They make yesterday’s lesson, last week’s understanding, and last month’s concepts active parts of today’s classroom.

The work of remembering

A Brain Brag begins with fresh retrieval. A student recalls previously taught information without consulting notes, a textbook, an answer display, or another person. The student might explain, write, sketch, or demonstrate what they remember. Checking, discussion, and correction follow the independent attempt.

The word fresh describes the independent act of retrieving. It does not mean the information is new. Fresh retrieval is our classroom name for unaided recall of a specified learning target. A question identifies what to retrieve without supplying the answer.

Three time windows keep the work honest: yesterday, last week, and last month. These are windows in time, not rankings of student ability or levels of difficulty. Any window can hold a simple fact, an explanation, or a thoughtful connection, and each one serves a different purpose in keeping learning available.

YESTERDAY *Learning from the previous instructional day*	LAST WEEK *Learning from the previous week*	LAST MONTH *A concept from roughly a month ago*
Strengthen recent learning and uncover early misunderstandings.	Check whether understanding survives beyond the original lesson.	Keep earlier learning available and connect it to current work.

Yesterday reaches back to the previous instructional day. It strengthens recent learning and uncovers early misunderstandings. Last week checks whether understanding survives beyond the original lesson. Last month keeps earlier learning available and connects it to current work.

Why retrieval across time matters

Retrieving is part of learning, not a pause from it. In experiments with prose passages, Roediger and Karpicke found that students who practiced recalling information retained more on delayed tests than students who repeatedly studied it. Immediate performance and confidence did not tell the whole story. That finding supports making room for students to produce knowledge from memory before the teacher reviews it.

Spacing gives learning a longer life. Distributed practice, also called spaced practice, spreads learning opportunities across time. Cepeda and colleagues found that effective spacing depended on how long information needed to be retained. Yesterday, last week, and last month offer a manageable classroom rhythm. They are not a scientifically prescribed schedule for every learner or concept. Shorten a gap when recall breaks down, and extend it as accurate retrieval becomes more reliable.

The forgetting curve belongs in this conversation too, with care. Ebbinghaus investigated forgetting experimentally, and the forgetting curve is a research finding rather than simply a philosophy. His work showed substantial early loss followed by slower decline under his study conditions. A later replication reproduced the broad pattern using one participant learning and relearning lists. Those findings do not establish a universal percentage that every student forgets each day. Brain Brags respond to the practical problem: material that was learned once may become difficult to retrieve without further use.

We also owe students an accurate explanation of the brain. Learning involves physical changes in neural connections, and consolidation changes how brain networks support memory. Information is not simply moved into a separate “quick retrieval location” because the brain decides it is important. Memory depends on distributed systems and remains reconstructive. A useful classroom explanation is this: “When you bring learning back and use it again, you practice making that knowledge available when you need it.”

A rhythm, not a formula

A workable starting rhythm is simple. After initial instruction, schedule an independent return on the next instructional day, another about a week later, and another about a month later. Add intervening teaching or practice when needed. Continue revisiting older concepts throughout the year. The last month window should not cause learning from two or three months ago to disappear.

The class can sample all three windows in one short opening routine. On a crowded day, place yesterday’s question at arrival, last week’s at a transition, and last month’s before the lesson it supports. Record actual dates so a recently practiced concept is not mistaken for one that has gone untouched for a month.

The calendar gives us consistency. Classroom evidence guides the adjustments. Select the concept because it matters to upcoming learning, and select the next interval using what students show us.

A curriculum map becomes stronger when each important concept includes both an initial teaching point and planned returns. Choose a small set of durable ideas and procedures. Record when each was taught, when it was last retrieved, what students showed, and where it will be used next.

Check, repair, and use

A Brain Brag provides feedback without making every attempt a grade. It is a short period in which every student does the remembering, followed by clear feedback and a purposeful opportunity to use the learning. The same sequence can take three minutes for one question or six to eight minutes for three brief questions.

> *“We learned that once” becomes “I can explain it and use it now.”*

Students attempt first. Then we reveal the model or permit the relevant reference, and students compare for accuracy, add missing details in a second color or label them added, and explain one correction. A copied correction shows exposure to feedback. A later independent attempt is needed to check retrieval.

Feedback helps students correct errors. In a study of multiple-choice testing, feedback improved later correct responses and reduced the carryover of incorrect answer choices. That is why checking and repair belong inside the routine.

The content of the questions matters too. Retrieval research has found benefits for inference and comprehension questions in science learning, as well as for factual recall. Classroom studies have also found benefits from low-stakes quizzing in middle school social studies. Brain Brags should therefore include relationships and explanations as well as names, terms, and rules.

Then students use what they recovered. Ask them to connect the remembered idea to today's work. Schedule another retrieval rather than assuming the correction will stay available. When a student needs a hint or a model, name that phase supported practice and plan a later fresh attempt.

Make it safe to brag

The word brag can sound like a contest. In our classrooms it means something else: pride in developing knowledge. We celebrate accurate remembering, useful connections, honest uncertainty, and repaired misunderstandings. We avoid public rankings, elimination, and rewarding only rapid answers. Everyone gets private think time before we invite volunteers. Students should experience brag as confidence in their own growing knowledge, not pressure to prove they are smarter than a classmate.

A blank or partial response is useful information, not a reason for public embarrassment. Offer oral responses, drawing with labels, a neutral scribe, accessible technology, or additional processing time when appropriate. If the learning target is subject understanding rather than English proficiency, allow an appropriate home-language response and teach the English vocabulary separately. Honor required accommodations. If a support provides the information being checked, describe the result as supported retrieval and use another appropriate opportunity to understand independent recall.

The routine should not require withholding a student's needed access. Access and honesty can live in the same classroom.

A curriculum that returns

A curriculum coordinator's work is to make cumulative learning visible in planning, instruction, and follow-up. Teachers need a system that connects to the curriculum they already teach and produces information they can use.

Start with a small set of lasting learning. During collaborative planning, identify the concepts, vocabulary, relationships, and procedures students will need again. Select them because they support later learning, not only because they appear on an assessment. Add retrieval to the curriculum map with the original teaching date, a next-day return, an approximate weekly return, an approximate monthly return, and a later application.

Agree on a few shared expectations. Every student attempts the retrieval before answers, partner contributions, or reteaching are provided. Teachers deliberately include yesterday, last week, and last month

while continuing to sample older learning. Feedback leads to correction, and important gaps lead to a planned later check. Questions include meaning, relationships, and use as well as terminology.

Then look at the evidence together. Bring a small sample of initial responses and corrected responses to planning meetings. Discuss which concepts stayed available, which details disappeared, and which ideas students could recall but could not apply. Choose the next instructional action and the next return date. A long spreadsheet is unnecessary if it does not improve those decisions.

A gradual launch helps. In the first week, teach the routine with well-taught content and one manageable question. In the second week, establish all three time windows. In the third week, vary examples and connect learning across lessons. In the fourth week, examine response patterns, adjust intervals, and check whether older concepts are actually reappearing. This is a suggested implementation sequence, not a research-derived dosage.

Success is a curriculum in which earlier learning remains available for later thinking. A topic is no longer finished simply because its unit ended. It continues to earn its place through purposeful use.

The commitment we keep

“Once learned, always used” is an instructional commitment, not a promise of permanent memory. The studies we have cited support the ingredients of Brain Brags. They do not directly validate this named routine, its exact three windows, or a guaranteed result for every student. We hold the commitment with humility and with joy, because the work of bringing learning back is the work of making it last.

That is the Teach BIG philosophy of long-term learning in its simplest form. We teach with the return in mind. We plan the next day, the next week, and the next month. We check, we repair, and we use. And we keep the door open for every student to say, “I can explain it and use it now.”

Part Two continues the Teach BIG philosophy of long-term learning.

RESEARCH REFERENCES

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The references below support the research discussion. The classroom routines and planning ideas in this article are proposed applications of those principles. Findings from particular studies should not be interpreted as guarantees for every age, subject, or student.

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