
2008

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Recommended Citation

Baird, C. (2008). Best They Forget: Challenging Notions of Remembering and Forgetting. *International Christian Community of Teacher Educators Journal*, 4(1). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/icctej/vol4/iss1/7>

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Abstract

In Jeremiah 31:34 the LORD declares, “No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (The NIV Study Bible, 1995, p.1170). It is not the intention of this paper to enter into a theological discussion as to whether or not God is capable of forgetting; however, at very least He chooses the metaphor of forgetting to display his forgiveness for his people. This seems to conflict with a commonly held negative stigma attached to forgetting. It has long been the case, specifically in the classroom, that remembering is considered a positive activity while forgetting is considered a negative one. It is the purpose of this paper to question this assumption by consolidating research done on multiple advantages of forgetting as well as many disadvantages connected to remembering. The discussion will begin with a glimpse at the direction our world could be moving towards in terms of collected memory, an emerging world which brings with it many problems that seem to be solvable only through intentional forgetting. Keeping in mind the theoretical disadvantages of complete memory, one must also recognize the flaws of memory today as well as the possible dangers that memory poses. Last, the research will be made applicable to the classroom and methods of forgetting will be proposed in order to benefit student-learning. This discussion is leading one towards the final conclusion that, at specific times, forgetting is beneficial, ethical, and necessary for advancing student learning.

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In Jeremiah 31:34 the LORD declares, “No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (The NIV Study Bible, 1995, p.1170). It is not the intention of this paper to enter into a theological discussion as to whether or not God is capable of forgetting; however, at very least He chooses the metaphor of forgetting to display his forgiveness for his people. This seems to conflict with a commonly held negative stigma attached to forgetting. It has long been the case, specifically in the classroom, that remembering is considered a positive activity while forgetting is considered a negative one. It is the purpose of this paper to question this assumption by consolidating research done on multiple advantages of forgetting as well as many disadvantages connected to remembering. The discussion will begin with a glimpse at the direction our world could be moving towards in terms of collected memory, an emerging world which brings with it many problems that seem to be solvable only through intentional forgetting. Keeping in mind the theoretical disadvantages of complete memory, one must also recognize the flaws of memory today as well as the possible dangers that memory poses. Last, the research will be made applicable to the classroom and methods of forgetting will be proposed in order to benefit student-learning. This discussion is leading one towards the final conclusion that, at specific times, forgetting is beneficial, ethical, and necessary for advancing student learning.

Shows like Survivor, Big Brother, The Amazing Race and hundreds of other reality series have taken memory to a completely new level. The driving force being that the public can theoretically see everything that occurs. The lives of the show’s participants are totally recorded and can be re-watched at will. The Truman Show is a film which

questions what life would be like if every move we made was being watched by others, but of course this is fiction. However, a new technology called lifelogging is beginning to emerge which builds on the fascination surrounding reality T.V. by seeking to truly capture every aspect of one’s life.

In an article entitled, *Outlines of a world coming into existence: pervasive computing and the ethics of forgetting*, Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin (2007) detail some of the research that is being done in this area and question the ethics of total memory. This research imagines a world which documents not only surveillance but also sousveillance, the surveillance of the mind. They write, “a new regime of recording the past is starting to come into existence. Life-logging projects presently being developed seek to capture digitally all aspects of daily life as a permanent, archived, replayable record” (Dodge, Kitchin, p.443). They go on to imagine the effect that such technology could have writing, “In combination, surveillance and sousveillance have the potential capacity to produce a society that never forgets thin memories; that has a permanent sociospatial archive of trillions of events across a vast population, traceable through space and time; a detailed spatialisation of the history of everything, everywhere” (Dodge, Kitchin, p.443). While this concept has many appealing elements, it assuredly raises some fears in the reader. The obvious question and the question from which this paper launches in the topic of memory is this: is it best to remember everything, or are some things best forgotten.

Kitchin and Dodge argue that the fallibility of the life-log is not only necessary for the technology to bypass the scepticism of the world, but also that programming the possibility of forgetting is ethical. They write,

While building fallibility into the system seemingly undermines life-logging, it seems to us the only way to ensure that humans can forget, can rework their

past, can achieve a progressive politics based upon debate and negotiation, and can ensure that totalitarian disciplining does not occur (Dodge, Kitchin, 2007, p.444).

In other words, they recognize that building the possibility of forgetting into a system designed to remember seems counter-intuitive, but it is also the only way to avoid ethical problems such as the abolition of debate and the discipline of a totalitarian regime. The possibility of forgetting “allows humans to be fallible, to evolve their social identities, to live with their conscience, to deal with ‘their demons’, to move on from their past and build new lives, to reconcile their own paradoxes and contradictions, and to be part of society” (Dodge, Kitchen, p.444).

Of course God is fully capable of remembering completely; we know that “He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts” (1 Corinthians 4:5, The NIV Study Bible, 1995, p.1740). Beyond that 1 John 3:20 reminds us that, “God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything” (The NIV Study Bible, p.1910). However, though God is capable of far beyond what any life-logging technology has or ever will achieve, he recognizes the benefits of forgetting. The verse quoted above states that God will remember our sins no more. Regardless of the physical parameters of such forgetting, there is a recognition that God allows us to remake our identities as we move beyond sin through his power and mercy. Here one sees the ethics of forgetting being reinforced.

Up to this point the memory has been attacked in its most complete form. That is, one must conceive of memory as total and all-knowing. While conceptually and theoretically we might agree that memory of this sort would be unethical and dangerous, this, of course, is not what we live with today, nor is it easily applicable to the classroom. To adequately question the commonly held attitudes towards forgetting and remembering one must also deal with them in their present form. Virginia Woolf argues that for women to become successful writers they have to tune out and, if possible, forget everything that men are saying around them, she writes of her imagined female writer, “And as I watched her lengthening out for the test, I saw, but hoped that she did not see, the bishops and the deans, the doctors and the

professors, the patriarchs and the pedagogues all at her shouting warning and advice” (Woolf, 2007). The metaphor refers to all those who would have a say in how she should write, the only way to succeed, argues Woolf, is to tune it all out. F.T. Marinetti, in his futurist manifesto, argues that artists should have no connection to the past, that the future is all that matters and the past is irrelevant if not dangerously stagnant. He writes, “The oldest among us are not yet thirty years old: we have therefore at least ten years to accomplish our task. When we are forty let younger and stronger men than we throw us in the waste paper basket like useless manuscripts” (Marinetti, 1909)! That young men would do this is not reprehensible for Marinetti; rather, it is something to be praised. To be sure, the previously mentioned writers are a minority when it comes to the inherent views on memory, but they at least raise questions in terms of memory and its commonly held positive connotations.

Daniel Schacter (1999) raises similar questions in his article, *The Seven Sins of Memory: Insights from Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience*. He writes, “I suggest that memory’s transgressions can be divided into seven basic sins. I call them transience, absent-mindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias and persistence” (Schacter, p.182). In a different article he defines then quite concisely writing,

Transience involves decreasing accessibility of information over time; absent-mindedness entails inattentive or shallow processing that contributes to weak memories of ongoing events or forgetting to do things in the future; blocking refers to the temporary inaccessibility of information that is stored in memory...Misattribution involves attributing a recollection or idea to the wrong source; suggestibility refers to memories that are implanted at the time of retrieval; and bias involves retrospective distortions and unconscious influences that are related to current knowledge and beliefs. The seventh and final sin, persistence, refers to intrusive memories that we cannot forget, even though we wish that we could (Schacter, Dodson, 2001, p.1385).

Granted, some of the sins which Schacter introduces are, more generally, forms of forgetting. Some, however, such as misattribution, suggestibility, bias

and persistence describe legitimate downfalls of memory.

In their article entitled, *Misattribution, false recognition and the sins of memory*, Schacter and Dodson focus on the flaw of misattribution. One example they give occurs after the Oklahoma City bombing. A man was apprehended for the crime and a second man was being searched for based on the evidence of an eyewitness. After a prolonged and fruitless search it was discovered that the witness had confused the second man with a man he had seen days earlier who fit the description (Schacter, Dodson, 2001). This misattribution was not only annoying, but dangerous. Many other examples could be given but the conclusions are the same, when the mind remembers things incorrectly the results can be devastating. This is not to be confused with forgetting; rather, this is a false memory which is created based on the sins of suggestibility, misattribution and bias. An understanding of these three sins puts a huge responsibility on the shoulders of teachers to separate true memories from their biased or flawed portions. This is a process which most be happening in every classroom, everyday, both in the minds of the students as well as in the minds of the teachers. In order for this to occur, teachers need to rid themselves of any negative attitudes they may have towards forgetting.

To this point memory has been shown to be unethical in its purest form, (at least based on our human nature); a world where everything is remembered would be one in which identities would be seemingly unalterable, a world whose logical direction leads to totalitarian punishment. Furthermore, it has been shown that even in its present form memory is not simply a good concept. It has its share of vices and downfalls, but to this point there has been little mention of the positive functions of forgetting. It has been argued that God forgets our sins and of course this has positive and cosmic implications; one could even argue that being made in God's image and being Christ-like involves forgetting in a similar way. While these are valid points there is more to be said in terms of forgetting and its positive functions.

In Isaiah 43, God speaks to his people about the troubles they have gone through and the unfaithfulness they have shown, but also about the

future plans he has for them, Isaiah writes in verse 18, "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing" (The NIV Study Bible, 1995, p.1072)! This speaks to the concept of persistence mentioned by Schacter as the seventh sin of memory. Often a memory from the past can keep us from learning new things. For the Israelites, the memories of their past unfaithfulness and of the troubles they had been through were keeping them from understanding God's mercy so He asks them to forget in order to learn. Similarly, a student often must forget in order to learn. Bernhard Pastotter and Karl-Heinz Bauml (2007) in their article, *The Crucial Role of Postcue Encoding in Directed Forgetting and Context-Dependent Forgetting*, discuss the process of directed forgetting and its connection to learning. They describe their test writing,

In this paradigm, participants study two lists of items and, after the presentation of List 1, receive a cue to either forget or continue remembering this list before studying List 2. After study of List 2, a recall test is conducted in which participants are asked to recall all of the previously presented items, including both to-be-forgotten and to-be-remembered items. Compared with remember-cued participants, forget-cued participants typically show improved recall of List 2 items and impaired recall of List 1 items. (Pastotter, Bauml, p.977).

When asked to forget the first list the participants showed better recall of the second. This is largely due to the interference of the first memories when the participants attempted to recall the second. Because our mind remembers what it believes it will be asked to recall, the second list is easier to remember when one is told that they will not have to remember the first. Often it will be necessary to tell a student which information they should remember and what should be forgotten. This process of directed forgetting, as shown in the test above, is crucial to student learning. As mentioned above, it becomes the role of the teacher to differentiate between truth and falsity within their own mind and within the mind of the student. Then through the process of directed forgetting they can begin to sift through what should be remembered and what should be forgotten; only through this process can students and teachers be freed from cumbersome and flawed memories in order to learn better. One could argue

that in many cases it is best they forget. Of course this requires a mature and highly nuanced attitude towards remembering and forgetting.

Memory in its complete form carries with it ethical problems and in its present form it has flaws, some potential dangerous. Furthermore, it has been shown that forgetting is, at times, a necessary and beneficial process. If the memories in question are tainted by misattribution, suggestibility or bias, or if the memory is a persistent one that keeps one from learning new information, then forgetting is crucial to a student's continued growth. Of course, it is not the purpose of this paper, nor should it ever be assumed, that remembering is a negative concept while forgetting is a positive one; rather, in order to teach and learn effectively one must discard the notion that either remembering or forgetting is a positive or negative activity in all cases.

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