Test practice

Academic Reading

You should spend about 20 minutes on questions 1–12, which are based on the reading passage.

Storytelling

Dr Tom Sjöblom, University of Helsinki, explores the link between narratives and memories.

Storytelling seems to be a fundamental feature of human existence. In a recent article, Paul Hernadi points out that storytelling and narratives are such widespread phenomena that they could justifiably be included in the list of human universals (Hernadi, 2001). But, our craving for narratives, or stories, goes deeper than this. It is embedded in our mental images of whatever happens around us (Boyer, 2001). In other words, creating narratives is our way of connecting and interacting with our environment (Mink, 1978).

As a species, we humans appear to have a much more active attitude towards our environment than any other species. Our bodies and minds not only adapt to the surrounding world, but we actively shape and construct our environment to better suit our needs (Plotkin, 1993). From this perspective, culture is nothing more than an environment that we create ourselves. Culture is not something in opposition to nature. Instead it is a part of it, it is – in a way – nature modified to better suit the requirements of the human life form. Thus, culture and all aspects of it are basically products of natural selection and, more specifically, the evolution of the human mind (Boyer, 2001).

Between 60,000 and 20,000 years ago the first signs of art and religion appeared and humans started to build houses and invent more sophisticated tools and weapons, such as bows and arrows. This period has been called the 'big bang' of human culture. There is still much controversy over how to explain this period of innovation, but a growing consensus connects the greater cultural energy and innovation of the period to the emergence of individuals as creative beings (Mellars, 1994).

The archaeologist Steven Mithen has suggested that this creativity can be explained by the emergence of a 'cognitively fluid' mentality, in other words, an ability to link together information from different areas of our life. Cognitive fluidity makes it possible for human beings to emerge from the concrete situational present and to adopt a more general and abstract approach (Mithen, 1996). As Gerald Edelman puts it: 'With that ability come the abilities to model the world, to make explicit comparisons and to weigh outcomes; through such comparisons comes the possibility of reorganizing plans.' (Edelman, 1992)

Edelman goes further than this and argues that it is the flexibility of our memory system which is the key for understanding how cognitive fluidity affects our ability to learn new things in general (Edelman, 1992). The basic idea here is that our memory does not really represent the past as it happened. In most of the cases it does not even represent it as it is stored and coded into our brains. Instead, our memory prefers creating the past from the perspective of how relevant it is to our present situation. Striving for this kind of coherence, our mind combines stored representations and blends information stored in them (Holyoak & Thagard, 1995). Thus, all things being equal, we do not remember the past, we create it.

LIVEWORKSHEETS

The medieval art of memory, known as *memoria*, has interested historians for a long time, but seldom from a psychological or cognitive perspective. Recently, this has been changed through the work of Mary Carruthers. According to Carruthers, *memoria* was the reason why literature, in a fundamental sense, existed in medieval Europe. It was the process by which a work of literature became both institutionalised by the group and learned by its individual members (Carruthers, 1990).

For those medieval experts who were educated in the art of memory there were two principal strategies for achieving their goal. The first and older of these strategies, attributed to Aristotle, relied on the concept of 'mental images'. Supporters of this strategy argued that remembering was to see mental pictures, which are firmly imprinted upon the memory. Thus, the best way to memorise narratives is to stimulate the act of memorising by using visual aids such as emotion-provoking representations, or so-called 'word pictures'. Descriptive language can also be used to create a kind of mental painting, although no actual pictures are present (Carruthers, 1990). As Albertus Magnus (1193–1280) puts it: 'something is not secure enough by hearing, but it is made firm by seeing' (Albertus I.1. II. 6–7).

The second, and more popular, strategy for memorising narratives was by rote learning. This was achieved by the frequent repetition of a text until it was accurately memorised. In this case, the process of memorising was aided by the use of rhythmic and/or formulaic expressions, and by breaking longer texts into numbered segments and then memorising them one by one (Carruthers, 1990).

The followers of this strategy criticised the use of visual imagery because of its inaccuracy. It was argued that the use of visual aids was marginally helpful at best, providing cues for recollection, but could not in itself guarantee the accuracy of the memorising process (Carruthers, 1990). The latter countered the criticism by arguing that, while in ordinary circumstances the accuracy of visual imagery could not be trusted, this problem would disappear if the visual imagery was strong enough to make a person emotionally engaged with the text. Indeed, they argued, it is the creation of strong emotional responses that makes the use of visual images such a powerful tool for memory creation (Carruthers, 1990).

Questions 1–8

Look at the following theories (questions 1–8) and the list of people below.
Match each person with the correct theory.
Write the correct letter (A–H) next to questions 1–8.

1 Early European storytelling came about because of a traditional form of memorising. .....

2 Cognitive fluidity allowed early humans to make and change arrangements. .....

3 Telling stories allows us to relate to our surroundings. .....

4 The brain changes our recollection of past events to match our current circumstances. .....

5 Telling stories is a trait which is common to all nations. .....

6 Early humans became more inventive when they were able to make a connection between different ideas. .....

7 Your memory of something will be improved if you visualise it rather than just listen to it. .....

8 Humans adjust to their surroundings as well as changing them. .....

LIVEWORKSHEETS

List of people

A	Hernadi	**E**	Edelman
B	Mink	**F**	Holyoak & Thagard
C	Plotkin	**G**	Carruthers
D	Mithen	**H**	Albertus

Questions 9–12

Complete each sentence with the correct ending **A–F** from the box.
Write the correct letter **(A–F)** next to questions 9–12.

9 Those who memorised using Aristotle's theory were helped by .....

10 The experts who used rote learning were helped by .....

11 Those who supported rote learning believed that .....

12 Supporters of Aristotle's method of memorising believed that .....

A ...writing down their stories.
B ...using paintings aided the memory.
C ...visual aids were of limited help when memorising text.
D ...if images evoked a passionate response then the memory would be more accurate.
E ...creating a vivid image in their mind.
F ...turning a long text into a series of short parts.

LIVEWORKSHEETS