

# Effects of cramming for examinations education essay



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Cramming is an ineffective learning strategy adopted by a majority of students in higher educational institutes because it causes negative psychological and physical effects. R. Sommer (1968) defined cramming as a “ period of neglect of study followed by a concentrated burst of studying immediately before an exam” (p. 104). In this definition, ‘ concentrated burst of studying’ refers to a study strategy which involve studying for consecutive hours with or without short rest on the eve of examinations. Cramming or ‘ massed practice’ is, therefore, an intensive and quick study of subject contents for the sole purpose of passing examinations. Students who procrastinate by habits are more likely to delay tests preparation and indulge in valueless cramming. The purpose of this paper is to address the widespread practice of cramming and its ineffectiveness with regards to its negative effects on students.

Researchers in the field of psychology and education have argued for decades on the goals of education and student’s learning experiences. In today’s complex and challenging environments, change is imperative. P. Ramsden (1998) argued that learning is interpreting and understanding of reality in a different way to facilitate a student to comprehend the world by reinterpreting knowledge. Learning by students should be viewed as a constructive, self-regulated and goal-oriented individual process so that they can construct meanings from knowledge (de Corte, 2000, p. 254). Towards this end, graduate students are expected to have developed a fair expertise in critical thinking skills to help them adapt to participate in economic, political and scientific issues of the world. Educational pedagogy must enable students to analyze, theorize and intellectually engage with each other and

with the world around them. Despite teachers' repeated intervention to teach students appropriate learning strategies, most students still widely adopt 'surface learning' approaches to learning in contrast to 'deep learning' approach. P. Ramsden in his book, *Learning to Lead in Higher Education* (1998), has described "surface approaches lead at best to the ability to retain unrelated details, often for a short period. They are related to lower levels of academic performance and more limited development of generic skills" (p. 48). Such kind of approach entails the use of rote-memorization, 'chunking of factual knowledge', an inability to understand context from a deeper perspective, learning to achieve a minimal pass in the examinations and most importantly, students are driven by extrinsic motivation to achieve passing grades and obtain qualifications. The question arises: why do educational psychologists and teachers encourage students to take up a deep learning approach for examination purpose? The next part of this paper contains a discussion of the question and highlights the negative effects of cramming for examinations.

Today's observation of societies around the world reflects a dearth of intellectual persons with true and acquired individuality. The societies around us reflect individuals who are not faithful or devoted to their administrative tasks whether as public servants or politicians of a country. Harold E. Gorst in his book, *The Curse of Education* (1901), implicitly stated that progress means development of ideas and mediocre individuals do not engage in such ideas which are progressive to a country. He further states that "as long as education is synonymous with cramming on an organized plan, it will continue to produce mediocrity" (p. 6). Gorst's statement

resonates the fact that cramming or the vast accumulation of factual and superficial knowledge, which has been forced upon the students, are partly the results of improper teaching, learning and assessment methods (examinations) of educational systems and partly the results of students' learning strategies. Consequently, the achievement outcome of such educational systems which crams students to follow rigid pedagogical approach is at a higher level but it produces the biggest ill effect of this type of cramming system of education: the failure of adequate personality and intellectual development of students who are capable of thinking for themselves as well graduates who regard the goal of learning as a process 'in itself' and 'an end product'. Such students outshine in the knowledge domain only, but their cognitive domains (intellectual reasoning) along with his affective domains (concepts of self esteem, emotional development) are rapidly halted.

In order to understand what is learning, it is very important to view learning in its specific contexts. For example, in the early systems of Japan and Hong Kong, learning was viewed as a process to attain knowledge and then an assessment of the knowledge. With an end to the learning process, the whole ensured meaning of learning was lost. In these countries, educational systems were dictated by higher authorities as a means to deliver fast paced teaching and to prepare students for higher education entrance examinations. The result was that competitive examinations were seen by junior and high school students as a measure to show their knowledge, memory and problem-solving skills rather than their intellectual reasoning and capacity building skills. However, still today, most parents and students

in Taiwan still believe cram schooling have positive effects on students' learning achievement (Chen, S. Y. & Lu, L. 2009). But the same study concludes that the time spent in cram schools negatively affected the psychological well being of students and made them prone to depressive symptoms. The next part of the paper concentrates on the negative impacts of cramming on those students who cram by choice rather than necessity.

Students who cram out of choice and habits are usually adept at the art of cramming and often pass their examinations. They have come to envisage the purpose of education to attain knowledge through learning of subject content. The aim is targeted towards attaining only extrinsic rewards: achieving good grades and qualifications. Driven by extrinsic motivation, with a surface approach to memorizing factual knowledge in the spurt of hours before examinations, these students are putting themselves into states of sleep deprivation and stress disorders. Students claim that they recall materials better when learnt hours prior to examinations and feel less stressed. But, according to a research published in the newsletter, Monitor on Psychology (2001) of American Psychological Association, lack of sufficient sleep is a widespread problem among teens and adolescents are at high risk for cognitive and emotional difficulties, poor school performance, accidents and psychopathology. Several scientific researches has also concluded that young people need adequate amount of sleep and resting periods to allow regeneration of the brain cells called neurons. Continued exertion of the brain leads to lesser regeneration of new memories and decreased brain activities in the cerebral cortex, the part of brain responsible for cognitive functioning. Limited cognitive abilities lead to poor memory

retention, concentration and attention to details (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, 2007). From these evidences, lack of sleep and intense brain activities without rest causes fatigue and stress in these students.

Stress can produce a long term effect which causes many students to develop further psychological and behavioural disorders ranging from anxiety, guilt and attention deficit disorders to patterns of irritability and aggression. Contrary to these research findings, students who cram often become adept at it, and use these strategies over again with few changes in their habits. Therefore, it is very crucial to raise awareness of the negative effects of massed practice on sleep patterns, stress and physiological derangement in the forms of chronic diabetes, obesity and hormones disturbance. Moreover, psychologists are in agreement, that ' spaced' or ' distributed practice' over consecutive days to achieve learning is more beneficial in terms of the physical and psychological well being of students.

## **Conclusion**

The preceding parts of the paper have provided evidences of the negative effects of cramming on students. The goal of education and learning is in complete contrast to the outcomes produced by cramming practice. It is fair to assume that students, who adopt surface learning strategies with a cynical view of education, cannot get far in terms of longevity since his intellectual and psychological development is incomplete. Being equipped with an extrinsic motivation to performance, the need of today's times is for graduates to learn continuously with intrinsically driven motives. In view of

the ill-effects of cramming, it can be fairly said that cramming is an ineffective learning strategy, and produces mediocre individuals.