Easy ways to improve our memory

There are various ways in which we can organise our thinking. These can be helpful when we are trying to improve our memory or when trying to recall things from the past. The three ways I am about to explain are all similar in the way we organise our thinking, and can be a powerful aid to our memory. Each point is backed up with evidence to support this. One of the ways we organise our thinking is by using mental images. By forming a mental image, we are thinking about something by constructing a mental picture of it in our mind.

There are various ways of constructing mental images which can lead to better recall when trying to remember things. The mental image will give us a cue when we come to recalling the information. We will have spent time and effort studying the information previously and formed an image which we will have fixed in our memory. This will then help us to recall the information more easily. One technique for improving memory would be by using Mnemonics, which are based on the construction of mental images.

An example of a mnemonic would be ‘ Never Eat Shredded Wheat’ which would help us to remember ‘ North, East, South and West’ in the right order. Another technique for improving memory would be the key word technique. The key word technique is useful when trying to learn a foreign language. To form the key word, you would find an English word or words that sound like the foreign word. Then you would make a mental image of the key word, along with the English translation, and this would be the key word technique.

To prove that this technique is successful, Michael Raugh and Richard Atkinson (1975) carried out an experiment on two groups of participants using the key word technique. The participants were asked to memorise

sixty Spanish words, but only one group were taught to use the key word technique. The participants using the key word technique scored much higher than the participants that did not use it. Another way we can organise our thinking is by forming concepts. A concept formation is a way of organising our thoughts by putting them into categories.

One example of this would be ‘ food’ which is a concept that has sub-concepts, such as fruit, meat and vegetables. We could then divide these sub-concepts into further sub-concepts; for example, fruit would be divided into pears, grapes, bananas, apples, etc. The use of concepts can improve memory by helping us when recalling information by putting them into categories. Take a practical situation for example, such as finding an item in a messy drawer. Trying to extract the item from the drawer would prove difficult and would take quite some time to find.

However if this drawer was organised into different sections, then it would be a lot easier to find what you are looking for. We develop the same system when using concepts to organise our thinking when recalling information, thus improving our memory. An experiment to prove how concepts can improve our recall was developed by Weston Bousfield (1953). Participants were asked to learn sixty words that could be placed into four categories. The words were mixed up, but the participants seemed to remember the words more easily when knowing they could be grouped with other words in the same category.

So taking the word cat, they would remember the words dog, mouse and rabbit. In similar experiments, by being given the category headings, most participants find that this gives them a cue to access more words. Finally, we

can organise our thinking by using schemas. A schema is a mental framework of knowledge about certain situations, objects, people, places and even yourself. Schemas are developed as a result of your experiences of the world and how you think about certain things. For example, if you were to think of the word ‘ hospital’, your schema would include a list of everything you associate with a hospital.

For example, hospital beds, the smell of cleaning fluids, ambulance sirens, doctors and nurses, etc. Schemas can help provide a cue to prompt our memory when coming to recalling information. We will have stored the information in a specific category so that it can be recalled more easily. One example of this is shown in an experiment carried out by John Bransford and Marcia Johnson (1972). Participants were read a passage which described in detail the process of washing clothes, however they were not told that the title was ‘ washing clothes’.

Many of the participants found that they had difficulty in understanding the passage and were unable to recall the details. However once the participants were given the title to the passage, this provided the schema which helped them to recall the information more easily. Although schemas are an efficient way of helping us to organise our thinking by providing a cue when recalling information, they can also distort our recall and lead us astray. Evidence to prove this was carried out in a study by William Brewer (1981) to prove the distorting effects of schemas on memory.

The participants were taken into an office and asked to wait for 35 seconds. They were then taken into another room and asked to recall the contents that they had seen in the office. Participants recalled the items that are

fitting with a typical office schema; however they had failed to notice other objects in the room such as a brick and a pair of pliers, even recalling items such as a telephone which were not in the office. This study shows that we often adjust our recalled information so that it is in fitting with our existing schemas.

In some cases this could have a detrimental effect, especially if you have witnessed a crime and need to be called to give an eye witness testimony. When coming to recalling events that happened in the past, there is a chance that the gaps in your memory will be unconsciously filled by inferences. In conclusion, mental images can improve our memory by forming a mental image in our mind, concepts by organising our thoughts and putting them into categories and schemas by developing a mental framework of our knowledge of our experiences.

Each of these ways can give us a cue when we come to recalling information, thus improving our memory. However, although these ideas of organising our thinking may help us to improve our memory, they can also distort our recall and lead us astray.

Word count = 1, 095 References Spoors, P. , Dyer, E. , Finlay, L. and Marsh, G. (2011) starting withpsychology, Milton Keynes, The Open University.