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Individual Differences in Self-Referential versus Learning-Oriented Metaphors on Learning Outcomes

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Abstract

Do metaphors for learning influence how well we remember new information? We tested whether reading a learning-oriented metaphor (i.e., emphasizing learning processes and outcomes) versus a self-referential metaphor (i.e., emphasizing motivational or emotional aspects of learning) can affect how well new information is learned. Participants were randomly assigned to read either a paragraph likening learning to a long hiking tour (self-referential condition), a paragraph likening learning to expanding a library in one's mind (learning-oriented condition), or no paragraph (no metaphor condition). Then participants learned a new mnemonic technique, the Method of Loci, and had to apply it to a sentence-learning task. The effect of metaphor on sentence memory depended on participants' education level. People with college degrees learned better in the self-referential condition than the learning-oriented condition, whereas people without college degrees showed the opposite pattern. These findings identify novel individual differences in how metaphors for learning influence learning outcomes.