

TEACHING AND LEARNING GUIDANCE FOR PARENTS

Welcome to our monthly Learning Newsletter. These newsletters look to help you to implement tried and tested learning strategies at home, in order to benefit your child and further enhance their educational experiences in the long term.

Interleaving

In schools all over the world, subjects are often taught in the same way: one thing at a time. We first learn one concept of mathematics before moving on to the next. We take history one era at a time. The whole education system is structured around that one-at-a-time concept.

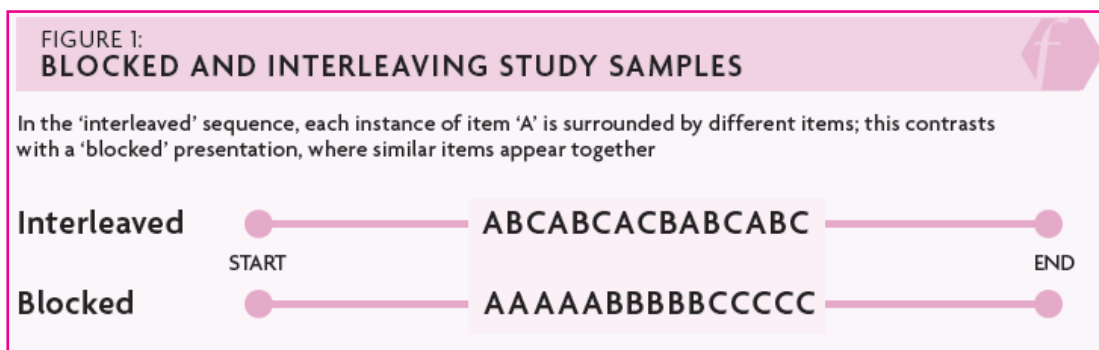
Of course, as this is the way we've learned since we were children, we naturally pick it up in all our learning from then onwards. We do the same when learning for work, when practicing instruments and sports, and everywhere else. But, an increasing number of studies suggests that this whole concept is wrong. The (better) alternative is studying a few things at a time, a process called **interleaving**.

What is interleaving?

Interleaving is the process of mixing different topics and skills together while learning.

Most often, it is either the mix of actually different topics, like mathematics and chemistry, or the mix of old and new material. In the second case, instead of studying/reviewing things in a chronological order, you mix it up to improve retention of the topic.

The opposite is blocked practice (sometimes called blocking). Blocked practice is when you practice one thing at a time, while ignoring everything else. Most often, the learner tends to practice that particular thing very thoroughly, before moving on to the next item.



Why is interleaving effective?

The first reason why interleaving works so well is that, by mixing up your learning, you make your brain understand the context better. When we spend too much time on the same thing, our brain tends to find the easy way out. It identifies patterns that emerge in the specific set of problems, and recalls these from short-term memory. Instead of actually solving the problems. On the other hand, when you utilise interleaving, your brain is forced to apply knowledge to a variety of problems, and thus it builds stronger neural connections.

What may be even more important in the process of interleaving, is the amount of retrieval (recall) necessary. As our brain constantly needs to employ different pieces of knowledge to solve the problems thrown at it, it constantly needs to retrieve stuff from the long-term memory. We've talked before about how important recall is in memorisation. Therefore, by using interleaving, you immensely improve the long-term retention of the information you learn.