The Pyramid of Learning

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The Learning Pyramid: Separating Fact from Fiction

The learning pyramid is an arrangement of [instructional strategies](#) according to the average retention rate. It consists of the following: lecture (5%), reading (10%), audio-visual (20%), demonstration (30%), discussion group (50%), practice by doing (75%), and immediate use of learning/teaching others (90%). This diagram was created by Edgar Dale from the National Training Laboratories (NTL) for Applied Behavioral Science in Bethel, Maine in 1946.

In 1954, a similar pyramid — but one with different numbers — were mentioned in the book "Audio-Visual Methods in Teaching." This was called

"cone of experience" and had the following figures: reading (10%), hearing words (20%), looking at images/pictures (30%), seeing and hearing (50%), discussing or giving a talk (70%), saying and doing something such as simulating experiences, performing, and giving a dramatic presentation (90%). The structure progresses from most concrete/active at the bottom to most abstract/passive at the peak. Since then, numerous versions of the pyramid have appeared in various sources.

The Learning Pyramid Hoax

Although many educators consult the learning pyramid research, there are some who question its validity. For example, Valerie Strauss reports in a Washington Post article that cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham thinks that it is unreliable.

Willingham argues in his blog that it's not possible to give specific percentages to how much a person is able to recall something. Memory retrieval involves numerous variables that were not considered in the pyramid, such as the age of the participants, what they were asked to do, the type of material they were supposed to remember, how the memory was checked, what they already know about the topic, and the delay between learning the information and testing it.

There are also some papers that discredit the learning pyramid or learning cone, such as the "The Learning Pyramid: Does It Point Teachers in the Right Direction?" by James P. Lilly and Robert H. Miller. The authors pointed out that there is no research that supports the information presented in the pyramid. However, they add that there are studies that confirm the importance of each level of the pyramid, since each helps in retention, but none of them were better than the others.

Another paper criticizing the concept is titled "Cone of Experience" by Michael Molenda of Indiana University. He concludes that the cone visually encapsulates the idea that learning activities can be categorized based on concrete real-life experiences. He also thinks that it does not push for the selection of certain teaching methods over others, as some claim. He comments that Dale's explanations are too vague. In addition, he quotes F.M. Dwyer's remarks about how hard it is to verify and interpret the percentages without specifying how they are measured.

The Truth about the Learning Pyramid Theory

To summarize, the learning pyramid or cone of experience may not be statistically accurate, but they are still proven useful in enumerating effective means of recalling learned material. Educators may disregard the hierarchy of learning pyramid levels and consider them all as equal. They should not limit teaching methods to a few options but only give suggestions on what to use.

Perhaps the main flaw of this pyramid is its unsupported percentages. In comparison, learning food pyramid percentages involved extensive research by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). On the other hand, the motivation pyramid by Abraham Maslow does not include percentages but only a hierarchy of needs, which allows room for error.

If you're interested in learning more about this, you have more luck searching for "the learning pyramid pdf" rather than "learning pyramid Wikipedia" since there is no entry for it in Wiki at the moment. If you searched for the former, you will obtain in-depth studies of it.