Cramming is not learning

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If the license to practise meant the completion of his education how sad it would be for the practitioner, how distressing to his patients! More clearly than others the physician should illustrate the truth of Plato's saying—that education is a life-long process.¹

— Sir William Osler, 1900

Trainees in thoracic surgery are challenged by the plethora of educational resources available across different platforms along with ever-present time constraints. There has been an emphasis over the past decade on how best to train adult learners to most efficiently acquire the required knowledge and to develop lifelong learning strategies. The national web-based Thoracic Surgery Curriculum (TSC) has been 1 such effort aimed specifically at thoracic surgery trainees.² In contrast to Plato's philosophical open-air school in the grove of Academus, the TSC is electronic and standardized. Although it has its critics, it is comprehensive and currently the gold standard in North America.

Luc and colleagues³ set out to characterize study habits of thoracic surgery trainees and examine the relationship between TSC login frequency and improvement on the thoracic surgery in-training examination (TSITE). Cramming (ie, more frequent logins) did not improve TSITE scores in the overall cohort; however, individual trainees with the highest use during the month leading up to the TSITE improved relative to their own cohort. Similarly, the report by Giordano and colleagues⁴ on a predictive model for performance on the US Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) Step 1 showed no statistically significant relationship between the number of weeks spent studying and USMLE Step 1 score. They did find a trend of increasing scores in a cohort of students who had not obtained straight A's during the first 2 years of medical school if they had studied longer than 6 weeks.⁴ The study by Giordano and colleagues⁴ supports the findings of Luc and colleagues³: Intensification of study habits has some value to some learners in test preparation, especially those for whom a wider knowledge gap exists.

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Central Message

Cramming, while effective for some learners in test preparation, does not address the ideal of lifelong learning.

See Article page 922.

Editors of the TSC, like one of the authors (N.A.M.), consider any measure of increased curriculum use to be a success! Surely the report by Luc and colleagues³ reflects well on the nationwide and sustained effort needed to create the TSC, and validates the use of the curriculum in TSITE preparation. However, as educators we should limit our enthusiasm. Other elements of the TSC, such as quiz performance (and frequency), offline studying, and group studying could not be measured by the existing software platform. Nor is there a measure of lifelong learning principles, such as repetition, critical thinking, case review, or formative feedback. This is the next frontier in our assessment of the TSC, and may be more deliverable with the transition in software platform. Ideally, we would be able to demonstrate that the TSC is not only a tool for preparation for exams like the TSITE but also, more importantly, a vehicle for lifelong learning. Like Osler,¹ we hope to propagate Plato's philosophy.

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