# Mastering the Art of Learning

## Innovative strategies for retaining new information

**DEIDRE ALVES, M.ED.**
**IRWA VICE PRESIDENT, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**Why is forgetting so easy? In a recent training webinar I attended, some compelling research stated that we are actually hard-wired to forget. When we learn something new, we are actually doing hard work, consciously embedding new knowledge into a brain that is literally designed to forget it. This presents quite a challenge!**

There are many shared resources that focus on instruction and while this is vitally important, equally as important is the skill of learning and the role of the learner. Learning how to put new information into your brain and keep it there is invaluable to success.

The following are three helpful strategies that you can use to help you actively develop the critical skill of learning *how* to learn.

### An Attitude of Discovery

My wise father, an adjunct professor, told me as a little girl that "every teacher has something special to teach you, but it is your job to figure out what that is!" I carry those precious words with me whenever I am attempting to learn something new, because they enable me to have the right attitude toward learning. It is my responsibility for finding that "special something" that the educators in my life are going to teach me. So when I take a class, I am excited to figure out exactly what that is. Next time you find yourself in the fortunate role of a student, I invite you to find that "special something" too. It's there. Just keep looking!

### Memory Play

I have learned that new information is retained much longer if you can tie it to a funny image, word or story. That recently worked for me while filming a new online course, IRWA Course 105, The Uniform Act Executive Summary. The course emphasizes Acquisition, Appraisal, and Relocation as critical areas of federal regulation oversight. To remember these three important elements, forming an acronym is a helpful learning strategy. So I took the first letter of each word and formed "AAR." This immediately made me think of what a pirate would say. Silly? Maybe. But it works! I also wanted to retain what is not part of the Uniform Act, Environment and Title. Using another acronym, "ET" led me to the obvious extraterrestrial character of ET. Hard to forget, but fun to remember. Next time you are presented with unfamiliar material, try this technique and watch your retention skyrocket.

### Gap Watch

When we learn, there are natural gaps that exist between new information presented and the time it takes your brain to process that information. Suddenly, more information is presented before you have had a chance to catch up. Before you know it you are behind and overwhelmed. When this happens, slow down and breathe. Continue to be present with the new information and begin to actively observe where the gaps are. Take notes and ask yourself "Where did I become completely lost? and "What do I need repeated so that my understanding is correct?" And then, ask the questions of the instructor that will fill this gap. Or take some unrushed time at break or lunch to discuss the gap. If you are learning in an online environment, employ the same strategy, but rewind the material or schedule time to meet with the instructor during online office hours. Sounds simple right? Not so much. It is a skill that requires development and an active practice of awareness and engagement with the material. It is in knowing what to ask and where the gaps are that we can get the correct information we need. When you regulate yourself in this way, *you* are taking control of *your* learning process.

### Maximize Your Opportunities

Learning how to learn and achieve the most out of your educational experiences is your secret to success. Mastering how to put new information into your brain and keep it there will enable you to gain the leading edge in your work and in life. ✪