



ECHOES BY
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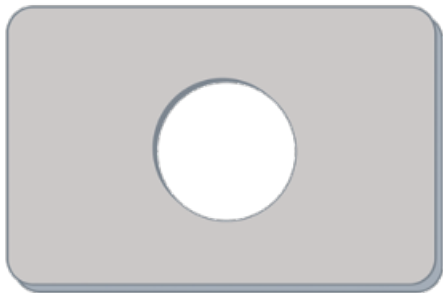
IT WAS EASY THEN, BUT NOT NOW

Hindsight bias in learning

I
 “Anything seems commonplace once explained,” Dr Watson once said to Sherlock Holmes. After an event happens, it seems more inevitable we had always known its outcome. This is the *hindsight bias*. The bias has many dimensions, but we’ll look at how it affects learning. Let’s start with a principle from physics.

II
 The Charles’ Law (1787) states: the volume of matter is directly proportional to its absolute temperature. This means, when heated, molecules in matter will expand. Simple. Let’s see a practical example of Eric Mazur, physicist and educator at Harvard.

Look at the image provided with the ar-



ticle. A rectangular metal plate with a circle cut in the centre. The metal plate is heated up. What will happen to the circle? Read the choices and think.

- A. The circle gets larger
- B. The circle gets smaller
- C. The circle stays the same size

If you’re guessing, the correct answer is Option A. The entire plate and the circle gets larger because the molecules of the circle and the plate expand when heated. Are you telling yourself, now that it’s explained, it seemed commonplace from the beginning like Dr Watson’s statement?

III
 What has hindsight bias got to do with learning?

When we learn a new subject, we learn many new concepts. When you watch your professor explain, you think, that was easy. When you sit for homework, how many times do you knock your friends in Messenger asking, “Did you understand what the professor said today? I forgot everything.”

You didn’t forget. You overestimated what you learned. That’s the essence of the hindsight bias. We tend to overestimate

the outcome of an event or the validity of a statement only after the event happens, or we know the facts. Look at the following.

IV
 In an election, candidate X is the incumbent. Candidate Y is the challenger and the underdog. The media is tilted towards X. Just before the election, X makes a mistake; candidate Y is the victor. The same pundits who had no idea that Y may win, now see with a perfect 20-20 eyesight looking back, where X made mistakes. Everything becomes clear now. These pundits overestimate the past only after they know the outcome of the event.

Coming back to learning. When you face trouble doing homework although you thought you understood in class, you overestimated what you learned in the class. If you think you tend to overestimate what you learn in class after it ends, what do you do?

This time, Sherlock Holmes comes to the rescue. “Elementary, my dear Watson.”

V
 If overestimation is the bottleneck, be skeptical about learning. We forget a first impression not because we can’t remem-

ber. We forget because our brain is wired not to perfectly remember an initial judgement. Underestimate what you learned saying, “Let me read the topic again” or “Let me ask my friends what they think.” When you see the same thing a second time, you start with the knowledge of what you gained the first time and build on it. Thus, second time round, chances are high, you see the same concept with more clarity. This is where “revision” and “practice” come in.

Remember the men’s 2019 Cricket World Cup Final between England and New Zealand? Before Archer’s last delivery, it was impossible to predict what the outcome would be. Now that the game is over, doesn’t the plot England was destined to win, seem more inevitable?

However, by now, you should have appreciated, it’s easy to explain something once it happens or we know the facts.

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What it’s like being the teacher’s kid

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Do you know what it feels like to be yelled at by your teacher? Do you know how it feels if that teacher also happens to be your mom?

Growing up, either you or your friend has had their mom or dad teach at the same school that you are enrolled in. And sometimes, that results in them teaching one of your classes. Our friends think that this is the dream and us, well, we have a different take.

YOU ARE ALL-KNOWING

You’re the first of your friends to know of all decisions made by the school. For you, it’s as easy as having a nice chat with your mom after a day of work. It’ll all come tumbling out as she tells you of the discussion at work. And bam! You know about the holidays and you can let your friends know before the notice is out.

The best part is, you also tend to overhear a lot of the gossip about the other teachers which you can then share with your friends. Don’t lie, you’ve done it. **MOM’S FRIEND GROUP IS A NIGHTMARE**

This can be both an advantage and a disadvantage. The benefit is that any confusion you have about homework or tests can be



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

sorted out with a phone call from your mom to your teacher. Where, among all the gossip and laughter, she can expertly extract the information you need.

It also means that whenever mom’s friends are over, you have to hide out in your room because let’s face it, it’s horribly awkward to meet your teacher

outside of school.

NO CREDIT

For those who work hard to earn a good grade, then have to face this cheeky comment, “Well, of course you did well. She’s your mom!”

This is by far the biggest disadvantage, because no matter how hard you study,

you rarely get credit for doing well. People always think you had the upper hand, whereas you were held up in your room studying just as hard as everyone else.

THERE IS NO ESCAPE

Since your mom is your teacher, this means lectures and corrections are all done right at home. The fine line between being a teacher and a mother often blurs when the teacher lives with you. You’ll be called to her room on the weekends so she can point out your mistake on the test you sat for last week.

DOUBLE TROUBLE

Your friends keep secrets from you because you’re the teacher’s kid. And you have to play both the roles. Your life becomes a revolving door of when to act like your mom’s kid and when to act like a friend. You create two versions of yourselves to deal with different circumstances.

There’s a lot to learn from being the teacher’s kid. You learn how to balance two sides to your life and maintain drastically different relationships. This will come in handy when you’re older. Until then, enjoy the perks!

Syeda Erum Noor is dangerously oblivious and has no sense of time. Send help at erum.noor1998@gmail.com